

Date: 04/08/2012

Text: Mark 16:1-8

Title: Celebration of an Empty Tomb

Theme: The Resurrection power can overcome the confusion in life.

Introduction:

(Slide 1) Let's look at this checklist. Going home to an empty house/apartment is not good; an empty stomach is not good. On the other hand, a full wallet is good; a full rice container is good; a full tank of gas is good (but ouch, expensive); a full scholarship is good; a full refrigerator is good; so is a full bank account. Then, an empty grave is definitely bad. When we visit our loved ones' grave, we expect their coffins or urns to be there. It will cause an uproar if for some reason we find out they were gone, if they were empty. In general, we prefer full more than empty.

On Christmas we come to the infant Jesus; but on this Easter morning, Christians around the world would come to an empty tomb. The place where Jesus was buried, but three days later, it was empty; it was an empty tomb. There is something about emptiness that we can relate to.

There are some among us who may have that empty feeling because of the loss of someone close to us. There is that empty feeling that comes with depression. We may feel empty when our health is fading, or because of unanswered prayers, or facing uncertain futures or a struggling marriage. If you feel this way, then you have come to the right place.

This morning, we will visit the Easter story as told by Mark. It is widely recognized that the original text ended at vs.8 (Slide 2). This narrative ends with these words, 'for they were afraid'. It is a very unusual way to end a story. Maybe for this

reason, we like the ending of other gospels. After the empty tomb, there was the reunion with the disciples, the restoration of Peter and the great commission. A far better ending. Because of the way Mark ended this gospel; 'for they were afraid', then the readers are left to ask: now what? What will happen from now on? This is how readers are being drawn into the story.

Let us briefly review the story as told in these 8 verses. (Slide 3 1-3). On the third day after Jesus was buried, three women came to the tomb to anoint Jesus with spices. We know earlier that Mary had poured a bottle of expensive perfume over Jesus and He explained that this was an anointment for his burial. If so, then there might still be a slight chance of hope of divine intervention that Jesus would not die. But now, he was dead and buried, all hopes were gone. On the way to the tomb the women wondered who would help them to remove the huge stone sealing the tomb's entrance.

(Slide 4) Having arrived, they saw that the stone had already been removed, and they went inside (4-5). They were alarmed, afraid when they saw an angel sitting there. Mark then write what the angel said to them. (Slide 5) Vs. 6-7, "And he said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. ⁷ But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you." These two sentences were later found in one of the earlier Christian creeds. Compare this with the familiar passage in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 (PPT 6).

Mark appeared to be more interested in pointing out how Jesus' earlier statements came true than providing a proof of the resurrection. (Slide 7) 10:34, "And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise." 14:28,

“But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.” Mark was simply writing the fulfillment of what Jesus said about himself. He was repeating Jesus’ words. In doing so, he made no attempt to offer any kind of proof that Jesus has risen.

Now, seeing the empty tomb and hearing the angel’s simple and terse proclamation, what was the women’s response? (Slide 8) We find these words describing them: alarmed, trembling, astonishment, fled and said nothing to anyone (8). It is as if the women were paralyzed by fear. This is understandable, right? When God speaks, who can speak? When God appears, who can stand still? When God reveals his power, who can stay put and not run away? Mark’s gospel is full of people’s reaction to God’s act. The disciples were filled with great fear when they saw Jesus calming the storm. (4:41). People were afraid when they saw Jesus cast out demons from a man (5:15). When a woman realized that she was healed by touching Jesus, responded with fear and trembling (5:33). The disciples were filled with fear when they saw Jesus walking on the water (6:50). When they saw Jesus going towards Jerusalem, they were amazed and afraid (10:32). Therefore facing this tremendous, or out of this world’s display of God’s power, their fear, trembling and silence is certainly understandable. Wouldn’t we feel the same when we face God’s words and power? When we saw the destructive power of the tornados that swept northern Dallas this past week, we were left speechless fear.

Now, what do these mean to us? Mark, by ending his writing in vs.8, is really trying to draw the readers into this story. By stopping at the empty tomb, hearing how the women were paralyzed by fear, we, like the first century readers will ask: what happened, what will happen now?

(Slide 9) First, from this story we know that there is room for ambiguity in the

shadow of resurrection. The women were simply given a report that Jesus is not here, for he has risen. There is no proof and they had to take this angel's words. They left the tomb fleeing, seized with fear and astonishment. They were speechless. In Luke's account of the Easter morning story, on the road to Emmaus, the two disciples could not recognize that it was Jesus walking beside them. In John's story, Mary Magdalene could not recognize Jesus and confused him with the gardener. Thomas was absent when Jesus appeared to the other disciples and he refused to believe unless he saw with his own eyes. These accounts point to the reality that even after the resurrection, there is room for bewilderment and confusion.

In certain Christian circles, doubts, fear, and questions are considered unspiritual. People of faith should not be afraid but always courageous. In the 70's, Os Guinness wrote a book called, "In Two Minds". A book affirming that it is ok to ask questions. It is ok to have doubts and confusion when facing the uncertain future. It is ok to feel empty after losing a loved one, or lacking direction and motivation in life. From Mark's ending of this gospel we can know with certainty that even in the shadow of the Resurrection, there is room for fear and sometimes even in ambiguity.

(Slide 10) Secondly, in the midst of fear and astonishment, simple obedience to God can overcome our doubts and confusion. The angel told the women "he, Jesus is going before you to Galilee." This going before you grammatically means he is leading, taking you there. Mark is almost like saying, here is a report and without proof of what happened. Now, if you are to see Jesus first hand, you have to be obedient; go, as he has told you. To be freed from the grip of fear, the women would have had to return to the basics, be submissive and follow Jesus. For those of us who continue to read the rest of

the NT, we know that these women did obey Christ, and were later freed from the grip of fear. They were reunited with the Risen lord and the disciples. They were filled with joy and did not stop telling others what they heard and saw. In the midst of their confusion and fear, they listened and obeyed.

This also tells us that to get out of this fear and bewilderment in life, we too, simply have to listen and follow him. The women listened to the Angel's instruction that led them to Galilee. We are to listen to what God has to tell us in the scriptures and to obey.

(Slide 11) Thirdly, facing this empty tomb with fear, confusion and trembling, also helps us to understand that God's power transcends human weaknesses and dysfunctions. For those who come after Mark, including us, we know how God transformed the disciples resulting in the gospel message of resurrection being proclaimed from one person to another, from one house to another and from one nation to another. In other words, the message of Easter, the advancement of God's kingdom, the success of the gospel, is not dependent on human performance. What an encouragement and relief to us. Yes, there is the human responsibility, yet never forget God or underestimate His power.

(Slide 12) Then finally, facing the empty tomb, give us the hope for the present and the future. In these short 8 verses, Mark was basically repeating what he wrote in the other 15 chapters. One of his emphases in chapter 16 is that what Jesus had set out to do was now fulfilled. His predictions and promises about the arrest, trial, suffering, death on the cross, resurrection and meeting the disciples in Galilee have and will be fulfilled. The implication is that his other promises will also be fulfilled.

Jesus had said that he is the ransom for many. This means that when we put our

faith in him, our sins are forgiven and we are saved from the wrath of God. Jesus had declared that he is the light of the world, those that follow him will no longer walk in darkness. If the tomb was not empty, then these words will be meaningless. However, since the tomb is empty, it means that even as we follow him today, his promises will come true and there will be direction and purpose in life as we follow him. .

Above all, he has proclaimed, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.” (John 11:25) The tomb was empty, because he has risen. You see, if Jesus’ body was still there as expected by the women, if he died and remained dead, then this statement will be meaningless. Death will be like the Buddhist saying, “Death is like extinguishing the candle (死如燈滅)。” When one dies, one simply disappears, disintegrates. But no, that is not true. For those of us who have buried our believing loved ones this past year, have the certainty that they are in the presence of the Lord. And one day, their physical body will be resurrected, reunited with their soul and spend eternity with God. There is no need for us to be afraid of death. Because of the empty tomb, we also have the full assurance that death is not annihilation. But the door through which our souls are ushered into God’s presence. And when Christ returns, our decayed body will be resurrected, joined with our soul and be transformed into a glorious body. This is the ultimate hope that we believers possess. It is this hope that will give us the strength in times of trials. It is this hope that will help us to endure and overcome the fear and uncertainties in life.

You see, for those of us who have read the rest of the Bible, we know that those fears, uncertainty, alarms, astonishment and silence did not stay for long. The empty tomb was just the beginning, not the end. The story of the empty tomb then continues to

move on to Galilee, to the reunion of the Savior and disciples. And the reality and power of the resurrection transformed the followers into a group of men and women with courage, courage and proclaiming the message of kingdom wherever they went. They were silent no more.

Conclusion:

In 1815, in the Battle of New Orleans, General Andrew Jackson led his troops in a bitter half-hour battle that turned back a British invasion. What Jackson and the British commander did not know was that two weeks prior, in the far off Belgium, a peace treaty was signed. In reality, the war was over before the Battle of New Orleans even began.

Isn't this true also with life? I guess that even on this Easter Sunday, many of us have come with all kinds of worries, fears and discouragements in life. We may be wondering how will that big stone in our life be removed? We live as if Jesus were still in the tomb; as if the angel told the women, come see, he is here. No, the angel said, come see, he is not here, he has risen. Because he has risen, so today, in grace and mercy, we can live with hope and strength. We don't have to live as if he were still in the tomb. The tomb is empty!

Mark's account of the Easter story, like many other NT stories seem incomplete. One main reason is waiting for the readers, including you and me to continue and to complete. Standing in front of the empty tomb, are we willing to go back to the basics, simply be obedient and follow Jesus' leading? You know, as we follow, we will also begin to experience the joy and power of this miraculous resurrection.