

## **“THE FRIGHTENING AND UNBELIEVABLE RESURRECTION.”**

**Rev. Robert T. Woodyard**

**First Christian Reformed Church**

**April 20, 2014, 10:30AM**

**Scripture Text: Mark 16:1-11**

### **Introduction.**

We have finally arrived at Mark 16 the end of Mark’s Gospel, but not the end of the Gospel. Heaven forbid that the gospel of Jesus Christ should ever come to an end. In fact the words, “the first day of the week” indicate a beginning, not an ending.

On Good Friday Jesus said on the cross, “It is finished.” The work He came to do was finished. On the seventh day Jesus rested. The eighth day is the first day of the new week, the first day of the new creation. And for two thousand years we have been celebrating the resurrection on the first day of the week.

We turn this morning to the chapter in Mark that gives the ground of all our hope as Christians. As Paul says in I Corinthians 15, if this is not true then we are most to be pitied.

But the first resurrection Sunday didn’t start out anything like today. No organ preludes, no lilies, no people dressed up in their Sunday finest, and no joy or hallelujahs.

It started out in fear and unbelief, in doubt and anxiety, in despair and sadness. We know the whole story too well to be able to put ourselves in their sandals, so let’s look more closely at this familiar story but from a different perspective for what God would say to us this morning.

### **The good news of the resurrection was first told to women and by women.**

I didn’t have time to point this out last week, but Mark does something in his telling of the crucifixion and here in his telling of the resurrection that is both rare and remarkable. Mark rarely in his Gospel gives proper names. But three times he lists the names of the women attending the crucifixion, the burial and the empty tomb.

Not only is it rare for him, but it’s also remarkable because in Jewish culture the opinion of women was not positive, especially when dealing with religious matters, and it’s remarkable because women were not considered reliable witnesses and couldn’t testify in court.

**Mark 15:40-41** There were also women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. 41 When he

was in Galilee, they followed him and ministered to him, and there were also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem.

**Mark 15:46-47** And Joseph ... laid him in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock. And he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. 47 Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid.

**Mark 16:1** When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.

We are told there were many women at the cross, Mark names three of them. At least two of them saw where he was buried. And the same three are named going to the tomb.

Mary Magdalene, meaning Mary from Magdala in Galilee.

Mary the mother of James and Joseph, also known as Joseph.

Salome, possibly the mother of the sons of Zebedee, James and John.

Luke adds Johanna, whose husband worked for Herod Antipas.

Notice the very human mix of faith and unbelief, strength and weakness in these women.

The women were the last to leave on Friday and the first to show up on Sunday morning, but their purpose in showing up was to anoint a dead body. Their faith, loyalty and love are seen in that they came to honor Jesus, for this they are way ahead of the disciples and to be commended.

But like the disciples they have no expectation Jesus would rise from the dead. We are told of no one in any of the Gospels who expected Jesus to rise from the dead as He promised.

The only question in the women's minds was who they could get to roll away the stone for them, especially since all the men they know were in hiding and in the depth of depression.

Because of their faithfulness, weak as it may be at the moment, because of their loyalty and love, God honors them with the privilege of being the first witnesses of the reality of the resurrection and the ones to tell the apostles the good news.

Let me point out something here that's easy to miss given our lack of knowledge of first century Jewish culture. The fact that women are included as witnesses is a powerful proof of the historical accuracy of the resurrection.

There were many who said the news of the resurrection was a lie, a "cleverly devised myth" as Peter puts it (II Peter 1:16). But if the resurrection story was a fabrication of early Christians, as some suggest, I can almost guarantee you that they would never have considered putting women in as the first witnesses. That would not have lent credibility to their lie.

If women had not actually been present at the tomb that morning, the early church given its Jewish context, would not have accepted this testimony.

But this is how God is pleased to operate. This is completely in His character. Those who are discounted by society are the first to be included in God's purposes and plans. God is constantly turning the world upside down showing us His ways are not our ways.

Remember what Paul says?

**I Corinthians 1:27-28** God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29 so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

The message of Scripture is constantly one of laying aside our pride and our boasting. There is also here a rebuke of the apostles who were all in hiding. They should have been the ones leading the way. How often does God use women to rebuke men who fail in their calling?

I want to linger here for just a moment longer and bring to our minds another truth taught by these women. I am not aware of a single instance in any of the Gospels of a woman who denied or rejected or mocked Jesus.

We should consider how women frequently are the first to follow Jesus, the first to believe, the first to see clearly, the first to get it. Who are the ones remembered in history as the most faithful followers to the very end?

We all should give thanks to God for the grandmothers, mothers, sisters, wives and daughters around us who have put their faith in Jesus, who have been examples to us of obedience and submission and faith and loyalty and love.

**The resurrection is first good news for people like Mary and Peter.**

That Christ should appear first of all to Mary is a singular act of great kindness. Of all of the fallen race of humanity, Mary was granted the privilege of being the first to see the risen Lord.

Mary, the one out of whom Jesus had cast seven demons. A woman who was certainly a chief among sinners, to her Jesus showed Himself to be alive and victorious.

When the angel tells the women to go tell the disciples he specifically names Peter. This is clearly a direct reference to Peter's denial. All had deserted Jesus, but Peter had denied Jesus and

not once but three times. Peter is singled out as one who had sinned in a particularly grievous manner.

Jesus wants to comfort Peter with the news of His resurrection and reach out to Peter who probably felt like he was no longer qualified to be a disciple, no longer worth of God's kingdom.

This great kindness of Christ toward Mary and Peter should be a comfort to all repentant believers. Those who have fallen into the greatest excesses of sin can have this confidence, assurance and peace, that if they truly repent and believe in Jesus as their only hope and Savior from sin, they will receive full pardon and reconciliation with the Father.

Though our sins be like scarlet, the blood of Jesus makes us completely clean.

Always remember that God delights in giving mercy and grace. God loves to glorify Himself by generously giving forgiveness to all who repent. God is exceedingly generous and willing to save sinners and set them free from their bondage of guilt and shame.

Desertion and denial are not the last word. Human failure doesn't tie the hands of God or derail His plans and purposes. The church includes sinners like Mary and Peter.

### **The Resurrection is good news for those who have weak faith.**

The strongest emotion expressed in the resurrection story is fear, trepidation, weak faith.

We are the most dull when it comes to spiritual things. We are most sensitive to our physical, mental and emotional needs and circumstances. Food, shelter, clothing, security, these are the needs and wants that occupy most of our lives. We are dull to our spiritual needs. What does it take to open our blind eyes to our spiritual needs and our weak faith?

A slight sense of our spiritual poverty will produce a slight sense of gratitude.  
An overwhelming sense of debt will produce an overwhelming sense of gratitude.

Scripture says that he who is forgiven little, loves little and he who is forgiven much, loves much (Luke 7:47). That's what motivated the women that morning.

But there is hope and good news for those with weak faith. God still wants you. Just like He still wanted the disciples even though none of them believed and they were all in hiding. The church started out with weak faith.

May the good news of the resurrection stir us up to a stronger faith.

### **The good news of the resurrection helps us face our greatest difficulties, trials or afflictions.**

The women walked to the tomb that morning talking about the difficult that faced them, a massive stone covering the entrance to the tomb. They had great concern about how they could possibly deal with this problem. They were expecting trouble, they were anticipating the worst.

We are good at this. We can generate a great deal of worry about seemingly insurmountable problems. Sometimes it causes us to do nothing. It's too big or too hard, it can't be fixed.

They expected a big problem and it wasn't there when they got there. Their fears were unfounded. They looked up and saw the stone had been rolled away.

How many times have our worst fears and greatest anxieties turned out not to be as bad as we expected? How many of the things we are anxious about never happen? How many times in the face of a great need has God met us and provided what we need?

We are all gifted at conjuring up all kinds of possible problems or obstacles or reason why something is going to turn out poorly. We borrow tomorrow's trouble and transport them into today.

Remember what Jesus said, "Oh, you of little faith. Why are you anxious over so many things. Your Father in Heaven knows what you need."

**Matthew 6:33-34** But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. 34 "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

When Paul wrote about his crushing burdens and of despairing of life itself, he said,

**II Corinthians 1:9** ... that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.

There are two ways the resurrection is a comfort to us in the face of our worst suffering. First, a God who can raise the dead back to life can deliver us from our severest trials. He can heal our diseases, He can restore our marriages, He can reconcile our relationships, He can break the cycle of lusts and addictions. A God who can bring dead people back to life can do anything.

The second comfort we have from the resurrection is that the God who brought Jesus back from the dead promises to raise us up from the dead and give us eternal life with Jesus.

God can answer our prayers and deliver us in this life, or He can answer our prayers and give us eternal life and a new body free from every sin and bondage and trouble. He is our only comfort in life and in death.

May the truth of the resurrection stir us up to a more practical faith, and faith that is real, a faith that works, a faith that helps us in our trials and fears.

**The good news of the resurrection is cause for great worship that God is able to bring so much good out of so much evil.**

The greatest sin, the greatest evil every committed on the face of the earth, the killing of the Son of God, is the source of the atonement of our sin, the justification of sinners, the eternal salvation of our souls.

By the wicked action of those who killed the Son of God, they accomplished the salvation of the world. Their malice was the instrument God used to save me and you.

And ever since then evil men have destroyed and killed Christianity in countless places and in countless ways. But every time Christianity has died it has risen again because we serve a God who knows the way out of the grave.

Christianity came out of an empty tomb. This is the central reality that we must pass on to our children and grandchildren. Resurrections are real.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

**Prayer:**

Holy Father let the comfort and challenge of the resurrection calm and confront us.

The comfort that Christ is on the throne and in control, the challenge to go and tell others.

The comfort that Christ reconciles us to you, the challenge to live as peacemakers in our world.

The comfort that all our sins are forgiven, the challenge to forgive those who sin against us.

The comfort that we need not be anxious, the challenge to be a non-anxious presence in an anxiety filled world.

Enable us to live with resurrection power not just for a day or a week but always and to say with the saints in heaven:

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” ... “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” (Revelation 5:12-13).