

### Mark 16:1-8 (ESV)

<sup>1</sup> When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. <sup>2</sup> And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. <sup>3</sup> And they were saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?” <sup>4</sup> And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—it was very large. <sup>5</sup> And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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.” <sup>8</sup> And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

### Seeking Solidarity with the Holy Women

This morning we gather to celebrate Jesus and that as both son of God and son of Man - God taken on human flesh - He defeated death the grave could not hold Him. Resurrection Sunday - or Easter - marks the most life-altering incident in the history of humankind. And yet, I'm not so sure it has been world-altering; at least not yet. In many ways the world - humanity - has remained the same. In other words, despite the life-altering *potential* of Jesus' death and resurrection, in many ways the world - humanity - is certainly still fallen; that's not changed. And in many ways is not *appreciably* any better than before, at least on the whole, and at least not to the level that perhaps one might expect if God himself came to earth to rescue humankind from sin. And so this morning I want to consider why that is? Because there is good reason, that in no way detracts from the glory of Jesus' victory that Easter morn or its significance for us. #

I want to begin by noting that in Mark's description of how it came to be known that Jesus had risen, which we just read, we learn that the empty tomb was discovered by three women: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome (sa-lo-mee). These three have become known as the “Holy Women”; but we have seen them before.

Last week, when we read how Jesus was tortured and executed from chapter 15 of Mark, he told us that these three women had helplessly stood by (v42) and then watched where Jesus was buried.<sup>1</sup> And we noted how the powerlessness of these women reflected the weak position of all women in both the Jewish and Roman societies of the first century. And we talked about them in contrast to variety of male characters in the story - Peter, Judas, Simon of Cyrene, the Centurion, and Joseph of Arimathea - each of whom enjoyed a greater level of power and authority than these women in that day - simply by being men. However, they failed to exercise it in a manner that was faithful to Chrsit, which made them (to varying degrees) *complicit* in his death.

<sup>1</sup> Mk 15: <sup>39</sup> And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way (Jesus) breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!”

<sup>40</sup> There were also women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome. <sup>41</sup> 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.

<sup>42</sup> And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, <sup>43</sup> Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. <sup>44</sup> Pilate was surprised to hear that he should have already died. And summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he was already dead. <sup>45</sup> And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the corpse to Joseph. <sup>46</sup> And Joseph bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock. And he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. <sup>47</sup> Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid.

But today's reading picks up a few days later - three to be precise. Well, two in the way that we would count it, but when the ancient Jews counted days they included their current day; and remember, a new day for them began at sundown. So Jesus died Friday afternoon (day 1), a new day - the Sabbath - began Friday at sundown, and then our Mark passage opens saying that the Sabbath had passed - so anytime after sundown Saturday was day three.

But verse 2 says they waited until the sun had risen to see their way to the tomb where they had watched Jesus be buried. Verse 1 says their intention was to anoint Jesus' body with spices. And this was something that was not necessarily done for everyone, but reserved for honoring special persons. So clearly these women remained devoted to Jesus even in his death. And this is in contrast to the men. Verse 3 says the women "were saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?'" as it would've required several strong men to roll back the disk-shaped stone in front of the tomb. And yet, *we know* that *they know* at least eleven capable guys - the twelve disciples minus Judas. But presumably because the men were reeling and perhaps even despondent over the death of the man they'd given up their whole lives to follow, the women seem to assume that *asking them* for help is not a viable option. So, at this point, the level of these women's devotion to Jesus seems to exceed that of the men. And why would this be? Well, perhaps the dignity that Jesus had treated them with was unlike anything they'd ever experienced before. Jesus had probably been the first man who treated these women as equally valuable as men - as bearing just as much of the image of God as men do. Yes, Jesus had chosen twelve male disciples, but that was as a symbolic continuity fulfillment of the twelve tribes of Israel.<sup>2</sup> As R.T. France writes, "In the cultural context of the time it was perhaps inevitable that men should form the inner circle around Jesus, but (the scriptures suggest that in practice) that inner circle was not very sharply distinguished...from the wider group of companions," whom the gospel writers also refer to as disciples and "among whom women were prominent."<sup>3</sup>

And now, *even in his resurrection*, God in Christ not only dignifies these women, he privileges them, by revealing his resurrection to them *FIRST*, before any man. Verse 4 says that when the three women arrived at the tomb,

"looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—it was very large.<sup>5</sup> And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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."

God, through this angel, entrusts these women with the life-altering good news that Jesus has risen.

And throughout history *some* of the Church has grasped the implications of the Lord doing this, how it is indicative of their equal standing in God's kingdom. A thousand years later, St. Bernard of Clairvaux would call Mary Magdalene "the Apostle to the Apostles" because John's gospel tells us she was the first to actually encounter the risen Lord and tell the disciples about it.<sup>4</sup> But on the whole the Church has largely missed this because of ways we continue to be beholden to worldly mentalities of

<sup>2</sup> William Witt, as pointed out by Lucy Peppiatt in *Rediscovering Scripture's Vision for Women*, chapter 1.

<sup>3</sup> Lucy Peppiatt, *Rediscovering Scripture's Vision for Women*, chapter 2.

<sup>4</sup> John 20:11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. <sup>12</sup> And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. <sup>13</sup> They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." <sup>14</sup> Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup> Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." <sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup> Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" <sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"—and that he had said these things to her.

power and toward women. And just one small anecdotal example of this is the hymn we processed in to this morning “Jesus Christ is Risen Today”, which we sing every year to begin our Easter worship. This hymn was made famous by Charles Wesley, who in the late 18th century penned the popular version that has since been included in more than a thousand hymnals and that we - like most Churches in the English speaking world - have sung every year. But what you probably *didn't* know - and I didn't until recently - was that this was originally a medieval hymn from the 1400s, which was adapted to English in 1708, but about fifty years after that English version and before the version that Wesley made popular, the lines highlighting the role of women were taken out.<sup>5</sup> So this morning, I took the liberty of putting (modernized versions of) those verses back in. #

But returning to that first easter Sunday, the angel commissions these women to go and tell the eleven male disciples. And this is significant because in the misogyny of that culture a woman's word was viewed as next to useless. From a legal standpoint, women had no standing as witnesses. In fact, a century later, a Greek philosopher named Celsus who was an opponent of Christianity would mock the notion of Mary Magdalene as an alleged resurrection witness, referring to her as a "hysterical female".<sup>6</sup> (I can see some of the women rolling their eyes behind their masks... as they should.) Now, the risen Jesus, of course, would appear to both women and men in the subsequent days before His ascension. But that the initial witnesses of the empty tomb were women is actually now considered one of the greatest *evidences* that the resurrection really happened, that it wasn't contrived, because if anyone were making up such a story, they certainly wouldn't have decided to make women as the ones who made the initial discovery.

Having women as the first witnesses wasn't a good way for the gospel to *take off* in those days from a credibility standpoint. But God didn't care, because as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, the Lord chooses what the world calls 'foolish' to shame the 'wise', those the world calls 'weak' to shame the 'strong'; God chooses what is low and despised in the world,<sup>7</sup> because they are precious in his sight. And the kingdom He established through the death & resurrection of Christ is one where the first shall be last and the last shall be first.<sup>8</sup>

But because the Kingdom of God operates in this upside-down manner - at least in comparison to the ways of the world - a truth related to this is that those who enjoy less privileges in this world can more easily receive the kingdom of God. Why? Because living in the kingdom of God requires first counting the world as loss.<sup>9</sup> As Paul writes in our second lesson today, in verse 3 he reminds the Colossian Christians, “<sup>3</sup> For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” And going backwards from verse 3 to 1: “<sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.” Now, counting the world as loss doesn't mean we can't enjoy life in God's creation, but it means that we recognize the futility - and ultimately emptiness - that would come from enjoying it apart from God and in ways that He has taught are glorifying to Him. That's what Paul means when he says in verse 1: “<sup>1</sup> If

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2017/04/gone-girl-disappearing-women-favorite-easter-hymn/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/women-leaders/2016/march/easter-is-good-news-for-women-leaders.html>

<sup>7</sup> 1 Cor 1: <sup>26</sup> For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup> But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; <sup>28</sup> God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. <sup>30</sup> And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, <sup>31</sup> so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 20:16

<sup>9</sup> Philippians 3:<sup>8</sup> Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— <sup>10</sup> that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death...

then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.”

And so, to begin to answer the question I posed at the outset - why humanity as a whole does not appear to be all that better off *after* Jesus’ resurrection than it was before, why Jesus’ resurrection hasn’t moved the needle as it were to the level one might hope - **it’s not any deficiency in Jesus**; rather it is because despite all of the Lord’s goodness to us - which we can only receive by faith and not by sight - despite that, the false gospels of this world remain intoxicating to us as humans. These false gospels of empire and mammon insist that the good life apart from God, through wealth, family, power, notoriety or worldly pleasures; none of which requires we put our confidence in anything unseen. But Jesus taught this is all a lie. He said those who want to save their life will lose it; but whoever is willing to lose their life for His sake will find true life. He asked, “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?”<sup>10</sup> But He didn’t *just teach* that there is a better path than this wide one that most of the world is on; he showed it was better with his life. His going to the cross proved that he had counted this world a loss in the ultimate way, but that God also vindicated and honored that sacrificial faith in the ultimate way by raising him to new life. And He holds out the same promise to us, not just that we who are in Christ will be raised from death to eternity with him. As if that wasn’t great enough, to the extent that we are willing to follow the Lord in his ways in this life, we will be so much more fulfilled - life will be so much more full and *real* - than the world’s intoxications and empty temptations can ever offer. And, indeed, the scriptures taught that whether this is the path we seek in this life is not unrelated from that promise of our eternal destiny, for if we say we are people of faith but our lives don’t indicate that - don’t show evidence of any willingness to sacrifice for God - then *do we really believe?*

To put this another way: receiving salvation - that is, beginning to enjoy the eternal life Jesus offers - doesn’t come from simply believing things *about* Jesus, even from believing in the miracle that He rose from the dead. The salvation Jesus offers can only be received insofar as we are born again to a new way of living, where the Lord is in charge, rather than us.

And as our gospel passage, ~~and the way it~~ presents the women’s devotion to Jesus after His death *far exceeding* that of His male disciples, we’re reminded of how much easier it is someone to count the world loss, if the world barely counts them at all. This is why those who enjoy less privileges in this world are in a better position to receive this Salvation. can more easily receive the kingdom of God. As Jesus will tell the rich young man in Matthew 19, “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”<sup>11</sup> The privileges of the world are an obstacle - a stumbling block - to living under Christ’s rule. It’s not that it’s impossible; Jesus will say in the next breath that “nothing is impossible with God”. But if we feel like the world’s sorta workin’ for us - or we’re workin’ it - apart from any real reliance upon God; it’s gonna be hard to count that as loss! To the extent that any of us were born with silver spoons, it takes a lot of faith - and courage - not to continue trusting in them. And this is why those who enjoy privilege - so those who are male, or have power, the rich, the beautiful - they are going to be more hindered from the life of the kingdom, because it requires that we count the world as loss.<sup>12</sup> Whereas, it’s going to be easier for those who enjoy less privilege - “the least of these”, as Jesus calls them - because it’s easier to count the world loss if the world barely counts you

<sup>10</sup> Mt 16:24-25

<sup>11</sup> Mt 19:<sup>23</sup> And Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>24</sup> Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” <sup>25</sup> When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, “Who then can be saved?” <sup>26</sup> But Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

<sup>12</sup> Philippians 3:<sup>8</sup> Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— <sup>10</sup> that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,

at all. Therefore, Jesus said in Luke chapter 6, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (v20).

And this isn't to say that all of the underprivileged or poor or minorities ALL turn to God; of course not! Not at all! Following God is *still* the narrow path of the few from every walk of life. But this **is why**, for example, there are more women in church than men - and there's countless women who are trying to drag their husbands to church. I know every situation is unique, but generally speaking the world offers women less privilege; so it is easier to admit they need a savior, that they can't do life well apart from God's help. As we said, the world hadn't treated these three women in Mark's gospel with anywhere near the dignity and worth they'd received from Jesus.

And so, the path Jesus calls each of us onto - whether we're man or woman; rich or poor; white, brown or black - is perhaps surprisingly to identify with these who are the least, with those whom the world might pity for one reason or another, with these three first century women who were under no illusions about being able to make it in this world *on their own*, which enabled them to recognize the false gospel of worldly privilege for what it is and “seek the things that are above, where Christ is.” #

However, when I say that it was easier for the two Mary's and Salome to remain devoted to Jesus than it was for the male disciples, I should clarify that I only mean a *little easier*. I'm not meaning to divinize these women or exaggerate their valor or make light of their pain and the disadvantages that may have come from that. No, these women were still quite human, as we can see. After their encounter with this angel at the empty tomb, their initial response, well it's *not great*. He had asked them to go and tell the disciples. But in verse 8, Mark says, “they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to *anyone*, for they were *afraid*.” And this is actually believed to be when the Gospel of Mark first ended. Scholars are close to unanimous that the remaining verses of this final chapter - verses 9 to 20 - were added on at a later time. And if that is the case, if the whole gospel of Mark ends at verse 8, then it ends with these women failing to act boldly and courageously.

And as to the reason for that, scholar Mary Ann Tolbert suggests this may be because these particular women actually did enjoy some modicum of privilege themselves. You see, despite being women, the way their names are mentioned - no the fact that their names are mentioned at all - in those days would've indicated that they had at least some status and may have found themselves stricken with fear about what might become of it if they were to follow through on what the angel had asked them to do

And this serves as a sobering reminder to us that *all of us* remain sinners, that even the least among us by worldly standards has no shortage of inordinate attachments to the idols of this world.

And so the question posed to each one of us by the resurrection of Jesus is “So what?” What are we gonna do about it? Because believing Jesus is Risen means being willing to partner with God in putting to death that which is earthly in us, so that the reign of Jesus might begin to make more of a difference - if not in the rest of the world - at least in our lives and in this Church. To believe Jesus is risen - to be a Christian not just in name, but in practice - we must begin to learn from Him how to live like He is risen.

So who's in?

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.