

Notes from Sermon given by Ian Stackhouse –April 12th 2009 Easter Sunday Mark 16:1-8 He has Risen!

Ian believes that the stillness of the early morning is very conducive to prayer. However the darkness of that time of day can mean that you get lost or walk into things that you just don't see. In this passage Mark is very careful to say that it was after sunrise that the women headed off to Jesus' tomb, so that we know that they were able to see their way to the right tomb. Mary, Salome and Mary Magdalene make their way to the tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea, and although they are not quite sure about being able to roll the stone away, they are resolute and intent on anointing Jesus' dead body. This was not embalming as the Jews did not do that, but a simple act of devotion, which incidentally added some nice smells. They would be pronouncing the last rites, and bringing closure on a tragic event.

When they arrive and see the stone rolled aside, they walk in to see a young man who says 'he is not here, he has been raised.' They cannot hear it, they are spiritually dull, and they flee at the message of the Resurrection. Frankly it's not surprising as unbelief is our middle name – unless something conforms to our understanding, our way of measuring, then it cannot be true.

'Who is it you are looking for?' says the young man, and uses the same word for 'looking for' as is used throughout Mark's gospel when describing the attempts of human beings to constrain Jesus. cf Mark 3:32; 8:11; 14:11 when Judas looked for an opportunity to hand Jesus over; 14:55 when the Sanhedrin were looking for evidence to execute Jesus. It's as if Jesus is someone we can somehow control, locked safely in a tomb, in a tradition, or even in a text. We are all guilty of this kind of wistfulness that has a 'form of religion, but denies its power.' But the irony is that the living ones, Mary and the others, are consumed with death, while the crucified one is consumed with life!

If we are ever really to get into Christianity we have to lose control, let Jesus be who he is, not what we would make him. He's not just some rabbi, or prophet, though he is these things, but he's a crucified saviour.

It doesn't mean that we have no questions or problems – we still suffer, face tragedies, grieve our losses. Resurrection does not cancel out our emotions. However we do not grieve as those who have no hope. Easter Sunday tells us that the world is not a tragedy but a comedy in the true sense of the word, not determined by the cruel fates, but by hope.

We confess the resurrection, not simply because the tomb was empty, but also because the tomb affirms the physicality of the resurrection in that it was his body that was raised, not a phantom. Oh, we may not have an Easter feeling, but we believe it. The women fled from the tomb, but Mark is asking if we believe it.

The present Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright, has written a wonderful book on the Resurrection where he makes the point that the only reason that the early disciples proclaimed the bodily resurrection of Jesus was because they had seen him. After all there was nothing in their understanding that anticipated the resurrection. If you were part of a Messianic movement and your leader was killed either you packed up and went home, or you found another leader. No-one said that the dead leader was resurrected! Do you believe this? We need to believe in order to understand. You must trust, and have faith in and loyalty to the crucified risen Jesus.

These women who arrived at the tomb actually failed to do what had already been done earlier as a prophetic sign of his death. They flee, but the angel tells them to go to Peter and tell the disciples that Jesus is going ahead of them into Galilee. Go out into the cold northern air, the world of cynicism and unbelief and he will be there. Just say that to yourself next time you are going to work, or to hospital. He is going ahead of you, he will be there, just as he said.