



YOUR RESPONSE – FEAR OR FAITH
Mark 16:1-8

Were you as surprised as I was to see that Mark concludes his marvelous gospel account with the words, “Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.” Mr. Peterson in **THE MESSAGE** is even more descriptive: “They got out as fast as they could – beside themselves, their heads swimming. Stunned, they said nothing to anyone.” (**THE MESSAGE**, Mark 16:8.)

We know from personal experience that fear is not always a negative response – but to end a gospel in this way almost seems out of place. However, it is not God’s response to the resurrection that Mark is being honest about – it is our response – the human response. No two people respond to the power and purpose of the resurrection in the same way or time.

However, if you read the four gospel accounts – fear is shared six times as the human response. In the Hebrews scriptures the word ‘fear’ is often used in a way that means far more than being scared. It often means we don’t know what’s going to happen yet. It can mean – we don’t know it all. It can mean we have entered a deep, deep mystery. It can also describe a sense of reverent joy.¹

As we read of the initial response of the women and the disciples to that first Easter Sunday, we are struck with the thought that the whole episode is somewhat incredible. To begin with, notice how totally unexpected the event of the resurrection was to those who experienced it. We know this by the question the women asked, “**Who will roll away the stone from the tomb for us?**”

You can see they were not exactly expecting a miracle to take place. Even when they see that Jesus is not there, they must be instructed by the angel to leave the tomb with the Good News. They were like Flip Wilson who said, “I am not a Jehovah’s Witness. I am a Jehovah’s bystander. I am not sure I want to get involved.” It was necessary for the messenger to commission them to be a witness, not a bystander to what God had done in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. So as we open our lesson today – the disciples are not exactly singing the **Hallelujah Chorus** or a Southern gospel number in 4 part harmony.

We know that Mark's gospel was written at a time in the history of our faith when the church was under great persecution from Nero's Rome. Both Peter and Paul were probably martyred for their faith by this time. Mark is reminding the Christian community that the gospel was birthed in the midst of fear – doubt – and persecution. He is reminding the Christian community that - while Peter's first response to the resurrection was that of fear as well – he did find his voice and witness to the resurrection power of Jesus Christ. Peter, Paul, and many others as well came to know what the resurrection meant for them. They – along with others – both received and participated in the gift of the resurrection. Fear and failure were not the last words and defining legacy of their lives. They gave their lives in ministry and mission to the resurrection.

I agree that the way that Mark ends his gospel is a little under-whelming. However, this is why I know the story and account is real and true. It says to me that “recognition and confession were not forced. Jesus did not use his resurrection to bully people into worship or discipleship.”²

The element of faith and belief is always required and it must come from deep within if it is to have any lasting value and meaning.

Yes, Mark's gospel ends at **verse 8** – but it is not the end of the story. As the hymn writer Natalie Sleeth shares:

“In our end – is our beginning
in our time – infinity
in our doubt – there is believing
in our life – eternity
In our death – a resurrection
at the last – a victory!
Unrevealed until its season
something God alone can see.”³

So, what transformed these scared – frightened men and women into renewed and rededicated servants of God? Only the resurrection!

I want to share 4 insights for your consideration today about what happened that first Easter morning - and what a difference the resurrection can make in your life.

EASTER DAY MAKES THE DIFFERENCE BECAUSE IT DECLARES THAT GOD ALWAYS HAS THE LAST WORD, NOT SATAN.

There is a legend about a dramatic painting of Goethe's Faust. Faust is seated at a table engaged in a competitive game of chess. And at first glance, it looks like Faust is losing. His opponent in the chess game is Satan. The devil

sits there grinning smugly. He thinks he has the victory in hand. He is pointing at the chessboard with an evil leer and he is gloating.

As you look at the painting, you can almost hear the devil shouting: “Checkmate! Game’s over! I win!” However, a person with a keen eye who knows the game of chess can see that the match is not over at all. As a matter of fact, just a few years ago, an internationally famous chess player was admiring the painting when all of a sudden he lunged forward and exclaimed: “Wait a minute! Look! Faust has another move and that move will give him the victory!”

The painting is something of a parable for us Christians, because here we see symbolized the good news of Easter. Think of it. When we look at the cross on Good Friday, it looks (at first glance) like evil has won. It looks like the defeat of righteousness. It looks like goodness is dead and buried forever. It looks like Christ has been silenced and conquered. But then, Easter Sunday morning reveals God’s move, the greatest checkmate move of all time.⁴ Christ comes out of the grave and into our lives with power and victory.

When the disciples discover that truth opened up their lives from the gripping power of fear and resignation, it propelled them to make a witness now armed with the power of faith and confidence in the risen Christ. God has opened up a whole new horizon for them. It transformed them from closet agoraphobic – into men and women who turned the mighty Roman Empire upside down for Christ. It was Christ – and not Caesar – who ruled the day! Yes, Christ meets us in Galilee and everywhere we humans open up our lives to his truth and way.

SECONDLY, THE RESURRECTION DECLARES OUR FAILURES ARE NOT FATAL.

The Bible shares how Jesus went to all the disciples for a period of forty days and ministered personally to them all. Jesus came to them – to heal them of their failures – and never to hammer them into further humiliation.

In one of the churches I served – a young man of the congregation invited me to attend an AA meeting with him. Pastors are always invited to attend with a parishioner. He said he needed some spiritual support that night. I went. What a blessing I received! A dear woman got up and gave her testimony. She shared of her lifelong battle with alcoholism. She shared how late one night she knelt by her bed in a detoxification center – and surrendered her life to Jesus Christ. She shared the victory over this power that had brought her spiritual death and moral failure. She had changed her middle name – to honor the victory she experienced in Jesus – and in the power of his resurrection. She responded no longer in fear – but in faith – and how God waited for her all those years. I have often wondered what would happen in churches all across America – if we stopped whining about what kind of bulletins we use, whether we sing this kind of music, or if the heat is turned up – and simply focused on what God in Christ has

done for us – and how we can respond to it. Christ met her in ‘Galilee’ and her life is the evidence of it.

I don’t know what you might be struggling with today and what is causing spiritual defeat and failure in your lives. I only know they are no match for the transforming power of the resurrection. The famous preacher, Dr. Spurgeon, once said, “There may be some sins of which a person is reluctant to speak, but there is no sin which the blood of Christ cannot wash away.” Charles Wesley said it best when he wrote,

**“He breaks the power of cancelled sin,
He sets the prisoner free,
His blood can make the foulest clean,
His blood availed for me.”**

THE RESURRECTION PROVIDES A NEW WAY TO LIVE LIFE.

Many of you know of my fondness for the ministry of Dr. William Willimon, who served as the chaplain of the Duke Chapel and is now a Bishop in our denomination. One day after a chapel service in which he spoke, a young man asked Dr. Willimon if he could schedule a luncheon meeting with him. The young man shared with Dr. Willimon that he had really done some bizarre things in his life. His family did not go to church. He never really saw any purpose for his life. As a teenager, he got caught up in drugs and it was all downhill from there. He shared how he stole from family and friends to finance his drug habit. He even became a male prostitute. However, he finally got caught stealing and was sentenced to jail.

In prison, he found himself in a cell with an older man who was illiterate. The man was trying to teach himself to read by reading the New Testament given to him by a prison chaplain. The young man shared – to relieve his boredom – he actually began to read and teach the words of the New Testament to his cellmate. One night they were reading from the gospel according to St. Luke and came across the story of the prodigal son. Later that night he awoke and found himself weeping uncontrollably in his prison cell.

The young man shared that that story was his story. He was dead – but he wanted to be alive. He learned that God was more interested in his future than in his past. He continued to read the New Testament with a profound new interest. He finished up his sentence and decided he would go to school to learn to teach people how to read. He had found his purpose for life. He now found himself going to church every Sunday.⁵ The young man learned that the resurrection account was more than words on a piece of paper – but a new way to live one’s life. Yes, this young man’s life was not futile. He was not dead. When he energized and engaged life with the power of the resurrection – he found a power and a purpose for his life. That is exactly what happened to the disciples and to many of us sitting in this sanctuary today.

LASTLY, THE RESURRECTION DEFEATS THE GREATEST FEAR OF ALL – THE POWER OF DEATH.

It is often shared that the 2 greatest fears in life are the fear of dying and the fear of living. We've already seen how Christ gives us our meaning and purpose for living. In **I Corinthians 15:54-55** it shares, "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O Death, is your victory? Where, O Death, is your sting?" Mr. Peterson expresses it this way, "Death swallowed by triumphant life! Who got the last word, Oh Death? Oh, Death, who's afraid of you now?"

I remember so well being appointed as a student pastor August 1st, 1977, to serve the Weatherly and Beaver Meadows congregations outside of Hazleton, Pennsylvania. I was only in town 3 days when the funeral director called. I had to officiate at my first funeral.

We had to go to Fort Indian Town Gap for the interment service. I rode with the family to the cemetery. On the way one of the family members shared with me her great fear of death.

At that time I was reading one of the great spiritual classics for an upcoming class entitled **PILGRIM'S PROGRESS** by John Bunyan. In the book John Bunyan shares how the character Christian was walking down a road when – to his great horror – he noticed ferocious lions standing in his way. He looked around and discovered that there was no way that he could get around them. He had to literally walk through them. So he went on by faith. As he continued his walk, he discovered – much to his great relief – that the lions had been chained to a metal post. Someone had gone on before him and brought the lions under control. Someone had taken away their ability to harm him. I shared with the family member that Jesus Christ – our great High Priest – has gone on before us in death. He has walked through the valley of the shadow of death. Christ had taken death's great power and fear away from us. I shared that Christianity was not the denial of death – but the victory of Christ over death and the greater gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ. Christ bore the scars of the great battle – but he won the battle and the scars were proof of it. Yes, because of Christ we shall get home safely some day - and the way home is by the way of the cross and resurrection of Christ

The day – the night – or the moment you fully believe in the Resurrection is the day you change your life. The resurrection changes the way we see and live life now and for eternity. It is God's victory over death and for our life.

If your response – like Peter's and the other followers in our story today – has been one of silence or fear – I plead with you to stay with the story.

May the truth of this day lead you from fear to faith in Jesus Christ.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz

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ENDNOTES

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, **LIVING THE RESURRECTION**, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2006, pages 28-29. This paragraph is indebted to Eugene Peterson.

² Ibid, Peterson, page 75.

³ **“The United Methodist Hymn, Hymn No 707, Hymn of Promise”**, The United Methodist Publishing House, Nashville, TN, 1993, third stanza.

⁴ Thanks to Dr. James W. Moore for this illustration.

⁵ This story comes from the preaching ministry of Bishop Willimon and this is my version of it from an account in **“Pulpit Resource.”**