**Where is Jesus of Nazareth?**  9/4/23 dkm

Read: Mark 16, 1Corinthians 15:1-18

Text: Mark 16:1-8

Psalms: 23old, 16:7-11, 49:1-9, 72old

Years ago I heard a story that illustrates faith. A tight rope walker strung a wire across Niagara Falls and proceeded to walk across the wire. The crowd watching this feat gave him a rousing applause. ‘Do you think I can do it again, this time pushing a wheelbarrow?’ he asked, and they shouted, ‘Yes’, Yes’. So he put the wheelbarrow on the wire and pushed it across the tight rope above the falls. They applauded him loudly. They saw with their own eyes what this man could do. When the man come back across the wire with his wheelbarrow he asked, ‘Do you think I can push a person across in this wheelbarrow?’ And they all shouted, ‘Yes’, ‘Yes’. He called for a volunteer and they all went quiet, keeping their hands tightly in their pockets. They had seen what the man could do but when it came to stepping into the wheelbarrow, they hesitated. They did not have the faith to act upon what they said they believed.

There are some who question the historical accuracy of the NT, despite the fact that we have four different gospels telling the same story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. But most people believe this man existed and that he was crucified by the Romans some two thousand years ago; history shows that the Romans executed many people by crucifixion, so Jesus of Nazareth was probably one such person. This method of execution was meant to deter people from breaking the law, but bodies were eventually taken down and buried.

We are asking, ‘Where is the body of Jesus of Nazareth?’ It is clear that he no longer hangs on a cross. Yet this is what many in the church portray of Jesus, a man nailed to a cross; they carry a crucifix or kiss a crucifix. Jesus was hung on a cross and died on a cross, but his body was taken down by friends and put in a new tomb. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record these events, with Mark writing just thirty years after the event. Mark was a young man who heard firsthand accounts and maybe even saw Jesus.

So Jesus is no longer on the cross. Is his body still in the grave? The brief answer is, ‘No’. People have been looking for the body of Jesus of Nazareth without success ever since it was first reported missing from the tomb where he was buried. Archaeologists have found bodies of Pharaoh’s and other ancients but nothing of Jesus; there is an ancient burial cloth called the ‘shroud of Turin’ that some think belonged to Jesus.

If the gospel writers were accurate in recording the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, should we not believe what they say about the empty tomb, and indeed the resurrection appearances of Jesus? And if we believe that Jesus is risen, as the angel told the women, does this mean anything beyond historical fact? Remember what John writes: ‘These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name’ (John 20:31). Remember the story of the tight rope walker; believing the facts is not the same as getting in the wheelbarrow, or in this case, believing in Jesus as your Saviour and Lord. As the women looked at the empty tomb they were alarmed and amazed. What effect does looking at the cross and at the empty tomb have on you today?

**1. Awake early**

The women who watched Jesus die on the cross also saw Joseph and Nicodemus bury his body in a new tomb, and roll a stone across the entrance. These women are named as Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome (John’s mother). They were women who loved Jesus and devoted their lives to serving him. His death was a terrible shock but they resolved to give him a proper Jewish burial; this meant anointing the dead body with ointments and spices. They did not have time to do this on the Friday, and waited patiently until the Sabbath was over before setting out for the tomb of Jesus. The Sabbath day ended at sunset so they had to wait until dawn the next day, the first day of the week.

The early hours of the morning are when we are most alert and functioning at our best- after a brief wash of the face and cup of coffee maybe! Do you find early morning the best time to read your Bible and pray? Many do. These women were alert. They knew where they were going and what they had to do, although they had omitted one small detail from their plan, namely, who would move the huge stone which sealed the tomb? They had probably seen a number of men roll it into place. In the meantime the Jews had secured the tomb and got the Romans to post a guard (Mat 27:66). In their haste, and their focus on the body of their beloved master, the women neglected to bring some ‘stone-rollers’ with them.

**2. Already moved**

The women did not need to worry about moving the ‘very large’ stone because when they looked up they saw that it had already been rolled away (16:4). Who had done this? This is an important question for some but the women were more focussed on what was in the tomb than on who moved the stone. They were there very early so it was unlikely that grave robbers got there before them. Besides, the Romans had sealed the tomb and posted a guard. Matthew writes of a great earthquake and an angel of the Lord coming from heaven to roll back the stone (Mat 28:2). Mark simply tells us that the women entered the tomb and saw a young man in a long white robe sitting there (16:5); Luke has two men in dazzling apparel (Luke 24:4). We get the picture, do we not?

**3. Alarmed**

The women certainly got the picture! When they saw this man in a dazzling white robe ‘they were alarmed’ (16:5). Being among tombs would be scary at the best of times, but seeing a tomb opened and a figure dressed in white was a shock, an alarming shock. It was almost as if he was waiting for them. They bowed their heads in fear as the man spoke to them. The figure was startling, but the fact that he spoke to them was even more amazing and alarming. Matthew says this figure was an angel, an angel of the Lord (Mat 28:2). And it is natural for human beings, like Mary and Zachariah, to fall down in fear before an angel- but not in worship.

The first words of the angel to the women were, ‘Do not be alarmed’ (16:6); to Mary and Zachariah the angel said, ‘Do not be afraid’ (Luke 1:13, 20). In each of these cases the angel had good news, so if you see an angel remember it will be bringing good news! We have all the good news we need here in the Bible of course, and this book is a completed book.

The women came to the tomb of Jesus to anoint his dead body. They expected nothing more, despite the fact that Jesus had told his disciples that, ‘They would kill him and the third day he would be raised up’ (Mat 16:21, 17, and 23). But there was no body in the tomb. The stone had been rolled away and there was an angel in the tomb. Although Mark refers to a ‘young man in a long white robe’, no human being would say what this ‘young man’ said. After calming the women, he went on to acknowledge that they were looking for ‘Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified’ (16:6).

I have been using the name ‘Jesus of Nazareth’ because that is what we read here. There were probably many men with the Greek name ‘Jesus’, or ‘Joshua’ in Hebrew, in those days, but only one ‘Jesus of Nazareth’. There was no mistaking who the women were looking for or whose tomb they were in. But his tomb was empty, apart from an angel, when the women went in. The angel pointed to ‘the place where they laid Him’ but he was no longer there (16:6). They did not refute what he said because the body of Jesus was no longer in the tomb. Peter and John later confirmed this fact, and no doubt lots of other people came and saw the empty tomb. Mary Magdalene assumed someone had taken the body; how else to explain the empty tomb (John 20:2). And the Jews started a rumour that the disciples had stolen the body of Jesus (Mat 28:13).

The young man, or angel, sitting in the tomb had another explanation for the empty tomb: ‘He is risen!’ (16:6). John writes of the risen Jesus appearing to Mary just outside the tomb (John 20:14). John also tells of how he and Peter went to the tomb and saw only grave clothes; John went into the tomb and believed. Just a few days before, Peter had denied knowing Jesus. Peter’s preaching, as we understand, was the main source of Mark’s gospel. It is interesting that Peter gets special mention by Mark in verse 7.

**4. Sent away**

Having announced that Jesus is risen, the angel told the women what they must now do. They would have continued mourning the loss of their beloved master, but there was no dead body, and this ‘stranger’ had told them Jesus is risen. What were they to make of all this? They were perplexed, they were alarmed yet amazed at what they saw and heard. How would you have felt or reacted if you had been in their shoes? This was not the world they were used to. A dead body had disappeared from a grave, and the explanation they were given was, ‘He is risen!’ If a man had said this he would have been certified mad! But there was no body, and a heavenly visitor gave this explanation.

The angel went on to give these women the task of telling the disciples of Jesus, and Peter, that, ‘He is going before you into Galilee and there you will see Him’ (16:7). Who would believe such a story! The disciples were huddled together in fear in a room in the city. John tells us that he and Peter ran to the tomb to check the women’s story but they did not see the angel. They had to believe what the women said about Jesus being risen. They did have the words of Jesus himself to reflect upon, how he told them he must die and be raised on the third day.

Moreover, Jesus had told them that after he was raised he would go before them into Galilee (14:28). It was Peter who boldly claimed he would not stumble when Jesus was arrested, but then did. In refuting the prediction of Jesus, he and the others failed to hear Jesus’ words about being raised and meeting them in Galilee. When the women relayed the message of the angel they may have remembered what Jesus had said in the very same room just a few days before.

Trembling and amazed, the women fled the empty tomb and its environs to tell the disciples what they had seen, and not seen, and give them the message of the angel (Mat 28:8). Apart from the disciples, they did not tell anyone of what they had seen and heard at the tomb of Jesus of Nazareth very early that morning of the first day of the week- our Sunday. Do you think you would have gone down the streets of the city telling everyone, ‘Jesus is risen!’? Not even the disciples were ready to do this. But they did meet the risen Jesus in Galilee, and before this in the upper room.

It was not until the Holy Spirit was given to them at Pentecost that they went into the streets proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ, proclaiming, ‘This Jesus whom you crucified, but whom God raised from the dead, is both Lord and Christ’ (Acts 2:23,24). Peter told the Pentecost crowd to, ‘Repent and believe for the forgiveness of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’.

The women and the disciples did not say anything because they had not received the Holy Spirit. But you who have repented and believed have received the Holy Spirit, so let us be out there preaching this glorious gospel of Jesus Christ, that included the cross and the resurrection, and indeed the ascension of Jesus Christ to the right hand of God in heaven (Acts 16:19).

Jesus is no longer on the cross outside Jerusalem. Jesus is no longer in the tomb nearby. Jesus is risen! Jesus appeared to many people before ascending to heaven. Jesus is now on the throne in heaven, ready to return. In returning he will bring this present world to an end and usher in the kingdom of God. Seeing angels will be normal, and seeing the risen Jesus will be normal also. Some will see him only briefly before he casts them into the lake of fire, but you who believe he died for your sins will see his face and will be transformed into his likeness.