

Mark 16:1–8 (Common English Bible)

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they could go and anoint Jesus' dead body. ²Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they came to the tomb. ³They were saying to each other, "Who's going to roll the stone away from the entrance for us?" ⁴When they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away. (And it was a very large stone!) ⁵Going into the tomb, they saw a young man in a white robe seated on the right side; and they were startled. ⁶But he said to them, "Don't be alarmed! You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He isn't here. Look, here's the place where they laid him. ⁷Go, tell his disciples, especially Peter, that he is going ahead of you into Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you." ⁸Overcome with terror and dread, they fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

Colossians 3:1–4 (CEB)

Therefore, if you were raised with Christ, look for the things that are above where Christ is sitting at God's right side. ²Think about the things above and not things on earth. ³You died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ, who is your life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

1 Corinthians 15:57–58 (CEB)

⁵⁷Thanks be to God, who gives us this victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! ⁵⁸As a result of all this, my loved brothers and sisters, you must stand firm, unshakable, excelling in the work of the Lord as always, because you know that your labor isn't going to be for nothing in the Lord.

Alleluia!! Christ is risen! Our kingdom work is never done in vain.

Alarmed. Terrified. Amazed. Afraid. Those are the words that Mark uses to describe the reaction of the women to the empty tomb. Terror? You betcha. I'm sure that Salome and the two Marys would have had trouble putting their frightful surprise into words. Some surprises are clearly occasions for joy, others for sadness. But sometimes, like the women's surprise on that Sunday morning, there is only confusion and anxiety and even fear.

Frankly, at first glance, none of this makes sense to us. We think to ourselves, it's Easter morning! Christ is risen! Alleluia! How could alarm and terror characterize the women's experience? Doesn't an angel even show up to explain to them what has happened?

To understand their fear, there are a few things we need to keep in mind:

- Among first-century Jews, there was no expectation of a suffering, much less crucified, Messiah. The Messiah was to arrive in power and might and wonder and glory to cleanse the temple, expel the pagans, and restore God's kingdom. The fact that Jesus ends up dead on a cross could only mean that he wasn't the Messiah. Wonderful and beloved rabbi, yes. Prophet, yes. But the Messiah could never meet such an end . . . or so everyone believed.
- And if there was no expectation of a dead Messiah, there couldn't be any expectation of a resurrected Messiah, or for that matter the resurrection of any single person until all were resurrected on the Day of the Lord. The ancients knew what we know; namely, until that day comes, the dead stay dead.
- Thus, when the three women arrive and find the stone rolled away, their only thought would be that someone had beaten them to the tomb, either to take Jesus' body or to desecrate it.

To reiterate, they do not arrive at the tomb hoping to find that Jesus had been resurrected. Instead, they don't know what to make of the empty tomb . . . and then an angel shows up!

You might think that the angel's arrival would be comforting to them. But, invariably, the first words out of an angel's mouth are something like "Don't be afraid." I don't know

about you, but that makes sense to me. I imagine that if an angel ever appeared to me, I too would be amazed and afraid.

How can we be "raised with Christ"?
Colossians 3:1

Paul's reference to Christians being raised with Christ¹ can be read as soaring, but empty, rhetoric. How can we be resurrected with Jesus when we haven't even died yet? Good question.

But he means exactly what he says. For Paul, it is as real as the chair you are sitting in. But how can something have happened already, if it hasn't happened yet. How could it have happened and yet still be coming?

We have a bit of experience with such a notion. We once spoke of marriages as being consummated. Though the bridal couple might be pronounced husband and wife at 3pm, the marriage wasn't "official" until it had been consummated later by the couple's sexual union. If there was no such union, then there had been no marriage; the couple's subsequent separation wouldn't be a divorce but an annulment, which is the recognition that there never had been a marriage.

Thus, if you asked the couple at their reception immediately after the wedding, "Are you married?" They could legitimately reply "yes" and "not yet." Until the consummation, the couple would be in a kind of "in between" time.

Now, that illustration is a mere shadow of what Paul claims. With the death and resurrection of Jesus, God's kingdom, his new world, has come *already*, but *not yet*. Though the consummation (our own bodily resurrection) lies yet ahead, God's people are *already* part of this new world. What is true of Jesus, is true of us. As Tom Wright puts it in his commentary on Colossians, "You died with the Messiah, so you don't belong in the old world any more . . . You were raised with the Messiah, so you possess a true life in God's new world."²

Granted, we don't feel like it much of the time, but believing something that is true even when you don't *feel* like it is faith. My wife, Patti, may not always feel like I love her, but I do. You are a new person in Christ, even if you don't feel like it or have much to show for it yet. Paul knows this, which is why in today's passage from Colossians he goes on to talk about shedding our old selves and clothing ourselves with that which belongs to God's new world.

1. When Paul says "if," he means if you are a Christian, as all those with faith in Christ have been raised with Christ. It would be better translated as "Since you have been raised . . ."

2. from Wright's *Paul for Everyone* commentary on Colossians which is in the St. Andrew library.

Raised with Christ

Though the women leave the tomb too shocked to even speak, they later found their voice, telling Peter and the whole world of an empty tomb and a visiting angel. They would learn that as Jesus had been raised, in a very real sense, so had they. By virtue of their faith, they had participated in both Jesus' death and his resurrection.

Paul expresses this early Christian understanding in his letter to the Colossians, using the imaginative wardrobe metaphor of 3:1-14. Because we have been raised with Christ to new life, he writes, we are to take off our old clothes of anger, slander, wrath, lying, and the rest. We are to don a new wardrobe of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, and, foremost, love. Off with the old; on with the new.

Yet, this is no mere admonition or hope. Paul writes, "you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self" (v. 9) Notice that he uses the past tense. We are already new selves. Now, we must live as the people into whom God has made us. We are to be who we really are, not who we once were.

This transformation encompasses our whole being. Intellectually, we believe things that we didn't before, about ourselves, this world, about our purpose in life, and so on. Morally, we gain a different sense of right and wrong, of good and evil. Behaviors, thoughts, even TV shows and movies which once seemed harmless, no longer do. Emotionally, we love differently. We lavish less love upon ourselves and pour out our love upon God and one another. We become spiritually open to God, but also to the spiritual needs of others. We see the image of God in those whom we once ignored, or worse, oppressed.¹ Truly, the old has gone, the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17).

This is Easter . . . Alleluia!

¹I've paraphrased some of this from John Stackhouse's book, *Humble Apologetics*, Oxford press, 2002.

The Basics of Jesus' Burial and Resurrection

When we come to the stories of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection we tend to read them from within our own experience. For example, for much of my life when I read of Jesus' burial, I assumed his body was placed six-feet-under. After all, that is how we bury people now. What did I make of the stone being rolled away? I never thought much about it – just more of that weird Bible stuff. But, as outlined below, the Jews in Jesus' day didn't bury people in the ground!

Burial practices in Jesus' day

A close reading of the various gospel accounts of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection can often be confusing to us because we don't know the basics of first-century Jewish burial practices. For example, did you ever wonder exactly what they were doing when they "buried" Jesus on Friday? Is there a six-foot deep grave waiting for Jesus' body? Why are the women there on Sunday? Why is there a stone than can be rolled away?

Here's the big surprise: the Jews of Jesus' day practiced a two-stage burial. When a person died, family members would wrap the body in cloth and place it on a ledge in a cave or a man-made family tomb. Perhaps a year or so later, when the body had decomposed, the family would return to the tomb and place the loved one's bones in a box. The "bone box," called an ossuary, would then be labeled and stored in a crypt along with the bone boxes of other family members.

As for Jesus, he was crucified and died on Friday afternoon. Because Jews could not touch a dead body on the Sabbath, which began at sundown on Friday, Mary and the others had to move quickly. Jesus' body was taken down from the cross, quickly wrapped in some linen, and then carried to an unused tomb that belonged to Joseph of Arimethea. Like most such tombs, a round stone was used to block to the entrance. The stone would keep animals out but still enable the family to come and go as they tended to the bodies and bones. There, Jesus' wrapped body was laid on a stone slab. The women planned to return at dawn on Sunday, after resting on the Sabbath, to finish preparing Jesus' body for the year or more it would lie in the tomb. Why women? Because dead bodies were seen as "unclean" by the Jews, handling them was left to the women, who were second-class citizens in the patriarchal cultures of the ancient world.

Resurrection, not resuscitation!

At dawn on Sunday, the women returned to the tomb in which they had laid Jesus' body. There, they discovered that the stone had been rolled away and the tomb emptied! As we'd expect, the women were fearful and perplexed. They would naturally assume that Jesus' body had been taken. After all, they knew, as do we, that death is a one-way street. Surely, they thought to themselves, if Jesus' body was gone then someone had to have taken it. There was simply no notion of a crucified Messiah, much less a resurrected one. Messiahs didn't get themselves killed and the dead stay dead.

Yet, amazingly, an angel tells the women, "He is not here, for he has been raised." Jesus had passed through death to life-after-death and through that to "life after life-after-death" – to resurrection. We need to be clear about this. Jesus' followers would not go on to claim that Jesus had been resuscitated; i.e., merely restored to a mortal life. Jesus had brought Lazarus back to life (John 11), as if he had resuscitated him on an operating table. Lazarus was brought back to life, but he went home to his family, lived many years and then died. Lazarus had been resuscitated by Jesus, but not resurrected. The words simply didn't mean the same thing then, just as they don't mean the same thing now.

Having been visited by the risen Jesus in the weeks after his resurrection, his followers would proclaim that in Jesus, God had begun the great resurrection of all people. Twenty-five years later, Paul would call Jesus the "first-fruits" of this great bodily resurrection of the dead. Jesus was first and one day, upon his return, we shall all be resurrected to new embodied life. Just as Jesus was raised, so shall we all be raised.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. We struggle for words when it comes to Easter, or at least we should. Easter is BIG. It is public. It matters for the whole world. It is about God's victory over sin and death, a victory won on the cross. It is about the God who keeps faith with his creation. It is about the arrival of God's kingdom and the beginning of God's new creation. When we pray "your kingdom come" in the Lord's Prayer, we are not praying for its arrival but for its fulfillment, that what was begun in Jesus' death and resurrection will be consummated. How does the understanding of Easter that I've tried to convey in this brief study differ from your own, from what you were taught, or from what you've read? Why does it matter? What makes Jesus' resurrection the linchpin on which Christianity stands or falls?
2. God's work of new creation goes on still. Paul wrote, "If anyone is in Christ – New Creation! The old has gone, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). What evidence do you see in our world of God's work of new creation? Where do you see glimpses of God's kingdom in the world around us? If we are to build for God's kingdom, to what work God called you?

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Sermon Notes
