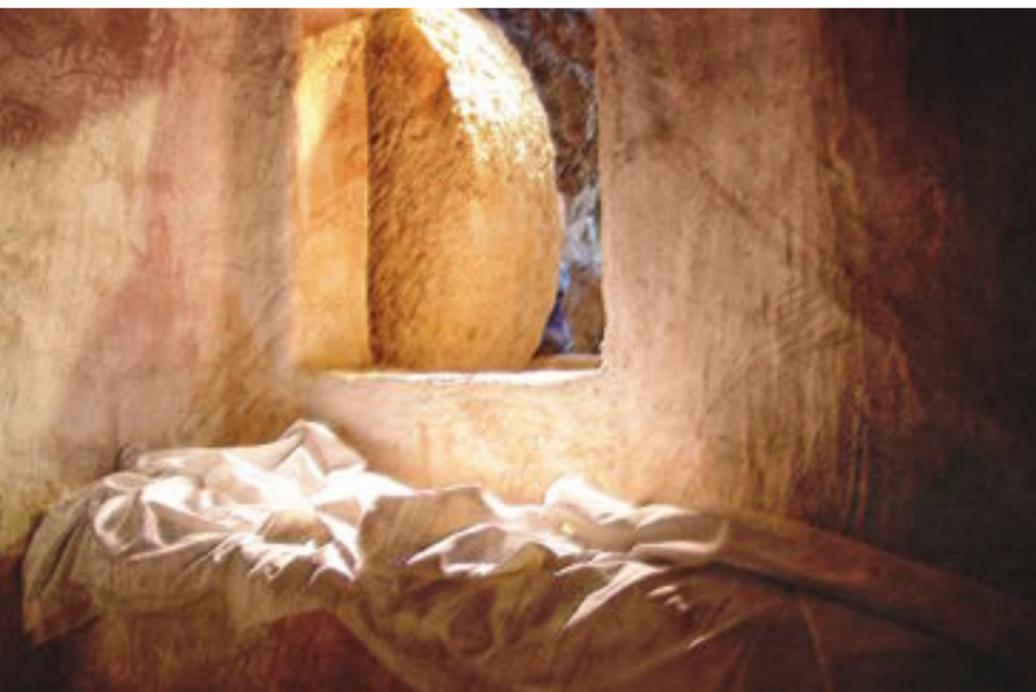


A RUMOR of HOPE

The Good News of Easter



Ray Stedman



introduction

A Rumor of Hope

The Good News
of Easter

Some people try to have Christianity without the cross, because the cross is bloody and offensive. Others try to have Christianity without the resurrection, because the resurrection is mysterious and supernatural and can't be scientifically explained. It violates our

rationalist sensibilities, and surely no educated person believes in such things anymore.

But the fact is that Christianity without a cross and an empty tomb is not Christianity. It is mere pabulum dispensed in the vain hope that we will all become better people. It is mere moral teaching. The problem with mere moral teaching is that it is impossible to live by. People don't need to be told what to do and how to live.

What we need is not moral teaching but transformation. We need to be changed at the core of our being.

The good news is that the power of evil and sin has been shattered by the cross, and the power of death has been broken by the empty tomb. The Lord is alive, and he lives in us and through us, giving us the power to truly live.

Ray Stedman

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one

A View from the Cross

Mark 15:21–47

In the heart of the Hawaiian Islands is the island of Molokai. Today that island is a paradise, but during the 1800s it was an island of horrors. In 1848, an outbreak of leprosy (Hansen's disease) occurred in Hawaii. By the 1860s, the outbreak had become a terrifying epidemic. The Hawaiian government rounded up everyone infected with the disease and quarantined them on Molokai.

The leper colony was located on Kalaupapa Peninsula,

which was cut off from the rest of Molokai by a sixteen-hundred-foot cliff. There was no dock or harbor, so the ships would drop anchor offshore, and the lepers would be made to jump overboard and swim to the rocky shore. The government did not provide shelter, drinking water, or amenities. Those who survived found what shelter they could in caves or rude shacks made of leaves and branches. Occasionally supply ships would toss crates of food into the water; if the currents were favorable, the crates would reach the jagged shore, where the lepers could retrieve them.

The Kalaupapa leprosy colony existed for seven years before Father Damien[➤] arrived in 1873. His skills ranged from carpentry (for building houses and churches and caskets) to medicine (for treating wounds, bandaging sores, and amputating diseased limbs). For years he lived among the lepers. He taught his skills to them, constructed buildings, cared for the living, buried the dead, and encouraged them through his prayers and preaching.

➤ **Father Damien de Veuster** was a Belgian priest who volunteered for service among the lepers at Kalaupapa.

One evening, Father Damien filled a basin with boiling water, preparing to wash his feet. It was his custom to mix hot and cold water to a bearable temperature before putting his feet in the basin. This night, he forgot the cold water, but when he put his feet in the boiled water, he felt no pain.

That was in 1885. After twelve years living among the lepers, Father Damien had taken their disease into himself. The following Sunday, he stood before his congregation in the simple wooden church he had built and began his sermon with the words "We lepers." Four years later, he was dead at the age of forty-nine.

The life of Father Damien reminds us of the one who came among us while we were isolated and condemned by sin, castaways without any hope. He came as a carpenter, a healer, and a teacher. He encouraged us with his prayers and preaching. And in the end, he took our disease into himself, giving his life for us. He was the one of whom Isaiah prophesied:



In the end, he [Jesus] took our disease into himself, giving his life for us.

Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.

But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all (ISAIAH 53:4–6).

We come to the moment that Isaiah spoke of, when Jesus was pierced for us, when he was crushed for us and our sin was laid on him as he hung on the cross. As we glimpse something of the awful penalty that Jesus paid on our behalf, may we understand that we are not merely witnessing the tragic martyrdom of a religious idealist. We are watching as a ransom payment is made for our souls.



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“And They Crucified Him”

Mark’s account of the crucifixion is different in tone and detail from that of the other three gospels.

Mark leaves out a number of details that other gospel writers include. For example, Mark includes only one sentence spoken by Jesus. The description of Jesus’s actions and words that Mark records are limited to three short passages. Here is the first passage: “They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means ‘the place of the skull’). Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified him” (MARK 15:22–24).

↪ *In all, the four Gospels record seven statements of Jesus on the cross, the well-known **seven words of the cross**.*

Before the crucifixion began, one of the soldiers offered Jesus wine mingled with myrrh, a bitter gum resin that was believed to have a narcotic effect. The Romans commonly drugged crucifixion victims to make it easier to drive the nails through their hands and feet. Jesus probably refused the drink because he had no intention of struggling or making the task difficult for his executioners. This is one more way we see how willingly Jesus accepted our penalty and laid down his life for us.

The gospel writers demonstrate reserve when describing the crucifixion. They do not describe the driving of the nails or the agony Jesus endured. All of the incomprehensible horror of the cross is compressed into those four stark words: "And they crucified him."

Mark passes over almost all of the first three hours on the cross. In his second passage describing the words and actions of Jesus on the cross, Mark takes us to the dark abyss of the Lord's loneliness: "At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, '*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*' (which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?')" (MARK 15:33–34).

Then there is Mark's third and final passage describing the Lord's words and actions on the cross. In that passage Mark takes us to the final moment of his earthly life.

"With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom" (MARK 15:37–38).

Mark's account of the crucifixion—of the moments when Jesus hung on the cross and gave his life for us—is

simple and concise. His focus is not on what the people in the crowd see as they gaze at the cross but what Jesus sees as he looks out on the crowd.

The View from the Cross

Gathered around the foot of the cross were a great number of individuals or groups of individuals. Mark focuses on each of them so that we might witness their reactions to the crucifixion of our Lord. Mark intended this account to contrast the mysterious workings of God and the ways and the thinking of humanity. He wants us to see that this event is truly timeless.

But first let's go back to the beginning of these events, to a point immediately following the Lord's trial before Pilate. There we find the first of these character sketches drawn by Mark. It occurred as Jesus was on his way to the cross. The Roman soldiers are taking Jesus out to crucify him. As they pass through the streets of Jerusalem, Jesus stumbles and falls. So the Roman soldiers grab a stranger from the crowd and force him to carry the cross of Jesus. "A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross" (MARK 15:21).

Simon is from Cyrene in North Africa and has come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. He has left his lodgings outside the city and has no idea that this momentous event, the crucifixion, is about to take place. Suddenly his plans for the day are interrupted by a strange procession winding through the narrow streets of the city. Before he knows what is happening, Simon is

grabbed by the rough hands of the soldiers and is pushed out into the street. The cross is placed on Simon's back, and he is ordered to carry it outside the city.

Simon was likely angered over being forced to shoulder this burden. I think we can identify, because we can recall many times when we have felt this way whenever we have felt that God was calling us to shoulder a cross. We resent it when circumstances create a burden in our lives or bring pain and suffering to our souls. This, I believe, must have been what Simon of Cyrene felt as he was forced to bear the cross of Jesus.

There is a hint in Acts that Simon of Cyrene was there on Pentecost (see Acts 2:10). Mark makes clear that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus, who are well known to the Gentile believers to whom Mark is writing. Paul, in Romans 16:13, mentions a Rufus with whom he was closely associated and whose mother had been kind to Paul. It is probably the same Rufus. So it is likely that Simon of Cyrene became a Christian as a result of this interruption of his plans. 📖

📖 *If so, then one of the Lord's statements probably had a special meaning for him throughout his life: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and **take up his cross** and follow me."*

Soldiers and Rebels

The Roman soldiers who crucified Jesus gathered around the foot of the cross. This was a time of great unrest and rebellion in Palestine, and crucifixions were common. Historians tell us that following one of these insurrections,

which took place some years before the crucifixion of Christ, two thousand Jewish dissidents were rounded up and crucified. So these Roman soldiers had a lot of experience with crucifixion. That is why they seem so callous.

Immediately after they nailed Jesus to the cross and hoisted the cross into place, these hardened soldiers got down on the ground, took out a pair of dice, and began to gamble as Jesus hung dying. Such casual indifference to human suffering and death seems unthinkable to us.

Mark next introduces us to the two rebels who were crucified with Jesus. "They crucified two rebels with him, one on his right and one on his left" (MARK 15:27). Mark adds: "Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him" (v.32). These two men were revolutionaries or terrorists who had been arrested in a violent insurrection. They were angry young men committed to the unlikely goal of overthrowing Roman rule in Palestine. In the process of carrying out their acts of murder and terror, they took what they wanted and didn't care who might get hurt in the process. They must have heard of Jesus and known of his claims of messiahship, and like the rest of the populace, they mistakenly understood that the promised Messiah would be a political and military deliverer. So now they hung on either side of the man who, a few days earlier, had been cheered by the crowds on his way into Jerusalem. He had proved a bitter disappointment as a revolutionary, so these two revolutionaries now reviled him. He was dying on a Roman cross, just as they were.

Mark's gospel doesn't tell us the full story of these two rebels. But by comparing this account with the parallel

account in Luke, we find that one of these men eventually repents of his abuse toward Jesus. Luke records:

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."

Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" (LUKE 23:39–43).

One of the most beautiful things about the story of the crucifixion is that one of these dying men realizes the truth. This crucified Jesus is in fact a king who is about to enter a kingdom where he will have full authority and power. What was it about Jesus that changed this man's heart and convinced him of who Jesus was? We are not told, but we know that there was something about the way Jesus faced death that had great power to change a man's heart.

Mockers and Priests

Mark also tells us that there were certain passersby at the foot of the



*What was it
about Jesus that
changed this man's
heart and
convinced him of
who Jesus was?*

cross. "Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!" (MARK 15:29–30).

These were just bystanders, but when they saw Jesus hanging on the cross, they remembered that he was the one who had made such great claims. So they taunted him: "You made those ridiculous claims! You said you were going to destroy the temple and raise it up again! Well, you don't look so powerful now!"

Mark illustrates the derision by telling us that they were "shaking their heads" at him. The irony is that he was in the process of fulfilling the words they flung back at him. The temple he promised to destroy was the temple of his body, and that destruction was taking place before their eyes. He had willingly placed himself there, and with every ounce of blood that drained from his veins, his temple was being destroyed. Little did they know that on the third day, the rest of his prophecy would be fulfilled.

Next Mark portrays the priests and scribes, the men who plotted the death of Jesus, as they stand at the foot of the cross. "In the same way the chief priests and the



They were "shaking their heads" at him [Jesus]. The irony is that he was in the process of fulfilling the words they flung back at him.

teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. 'He saved others,' they said, 'but he can't save himself! Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe'" (MARK 15:31–32).

These priests had been frightened and jealous of Jesus before. They had seen him teach and bless the crowds in ways they could never do. But they had plotted against him, and now they had him where they wanted him, or so it seemed. This was their moment of triumph, and they reveled in it.

Mark tells us about another man at the cross who was interested in all the proceedings. His name is not given to us, but he enters the picture when Jesus calls out to the Father, moments before Jesus dies.

When some of those standing near heard this, they said, "Listen, he's calling Elijah."

Someone ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down,"¹ he said.

With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last (MARK 15:35–37).

¹ Some people see **this man's actions** as compassionate. The wine vinegar, they assume, is intended as an anesthetic to relieve the Lord's suffering. But close examination reveals that this is not the case. The man is jeering at Jesus, even laughing at him, as he says, "Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down." He shoves the vinegar, which is spoiled wine, at Jesus to get a reaction from him.

The Centurion, the Women, and the Secret Disciple

At this point, Jesus calls out with a loud cry and breathes his last, but the story is not over. Mark has three more accounts to relate, three more individuals or groups of people to introduce to us. But these final three are of a different character from the ones we have met thus far. After the death of Jesus, there is no mention of anybody who abuses, mocks, or reviles him.

Those who hate Jesus seem to slink away, leaving only a small group of people who love him. The first person we meet after the death of Jesus is probably the last person we would expect to find among his admirers. It is the centurion who was in charge of soldiers who carried out the crucifixion. "And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, 'Surely this man was the Son of God!'" (MARK 15:39). This Roman centurion was a pagan. Given his culture, he likely believed in many gods. Yet the cross brought him to a sobering awareness of ultimate reality. To the men in his command who had carried out the crucifixion, this event had been a job, even a joke. But to this centurion, this crucifixion was a ghastly mistake, the execution of a man not only innocent but also divine. There was something about the way Jesus died that the centurion had never seen before—a dignity, a nobility, a force of personality that transcended the merely human.

Notice that the centurion speaks in the past tense:

"This man was the Son of God." There is no hope here, no glimmer of redemption or resurrection, only a sense of incalculable loss and grievous error. The centurion knows that a horrible injustice has been committed, and it can never be undone. And because of that, the centurion does not understand what this event means to his life, to his soul.

It is not enough to say, "Jesus was the Son of God." We must go further, make it personal, and say, "Jesus, please be the Lord and Savior of my life."

Next Mark introduces us to a group of women who have gathered around the cross of Jesus. "Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome. In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there" (MARK 15:40–41). Here are the women who loved Jesus, but where are the men? Where are the disciples who walked with him? Where is bold, blustering Peter? John's gospel tells us that John was at the cross with Mary, the mother of Jesus. In those first three hours, Jesus, despite his



There was something about the way Jesus died that the centurion had never seen before—a dignity, a nobility, a force of personality that transcended the merely human.

suffering, committed his mother to the care of the disciple John. But from this account in Mark it would seem that John and Mary are no longer present; perhaps John has led Mary away.

In any case, these women are the only ones who remain around the cross. They are not gathering in hope but in utter hopelessness. They do not expect a resurrection. They do not expect God to act in their hour of despair. Their love remains, but their hope and faith are gone.

Sometimes we come to the end of ourselves. We still love God, but we have no hope, no faith, that he will deliver us. We see only darkness and despair. It will be helpful, in such times, to remember that a resurrection is coming soon.

But there is one last person Mark wants us to meet. He is a faithful follower of the Lord. His name is Joseph of Arimathea.

It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath). So as evening approached, Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph. So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of

the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid (MARK 15:42–47).

Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy member of the Sanhedrin. He had believed in Jesus but was perhaps afraid to profess his belief openly. All through the record of the trial of Jesus, there is no mention of Joseph. He didn't raise his voice in the court when Jesus appeared before the Sanhedrin. He was afraid to openly voice his support of Jesus, afraid of what the others in the Sanhedrin would think or do. But after Jesus died, when his body hung lifeless on the tree, a transformation took place within Joseph. Something about the crucifixion stirred a newfound courage within this man. At long last, Joseph stood up to be counted.

If We Will Come

At the close of Mark's account, the writer confronts us with three profound and cataclysmic events, three narrative threads that combine to form one strong cord of truth. During the last three hours of Jesus's life, a mysterious and terrible darkness comes over the land. At the end of that darkness comes what has been called "Emmanuel's orphaned cry"—"*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*" ... My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

↪ In her poem "Cowper's Grave," **Elizabeth Barrett Browning** eulogizes William Cowper, who suffered from depression yet wrote some of our most memorable hymns. She penned these lines: *Yea, once, Immanuel's orphaned cry His universe hath shaken— It went up single, echoless, "My God, I am forsaken!"*

Almost immediately after that cry, Jesus dismisses his spirit. It is important to understand that he didn't simply die; he dismissed his spirit. His death was deliberate and voluntary. He wasn't a victim; he was a sacrifice.

A half-mile away, in the court of the temple, within the sacred enclosure of the holy place, something amazing happened. The great veil that enclosed the Holy of Holies was torn from top to bottom. That veil marked off a place where only the high priest was permitted to enter once a year. Now, as if by an invisible hand, that veil was split, and the Holy of Holies was exposed.

These three events are tied together to form one significant, meaningful truth. The orphan cry in the darkness of the cross, the dismissing of the spirit of Jesus, and the rending of the veil in the temple—Mark brings them all together so that we can understand their meaning.

When Jesus called out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"²⁶ bystanders must have recognized the opening words of Psalm 22. When you read through that psalm, it is as if you are reading Jesus's version of the crucifixion.



It is important to understand that he [Jesus] didn't simply die; he dismissed his spirit. His death was deliberate and voluntary. He wasn't a victim; he was a sacrifice.

↗ *There is no adequate **explanation for Jesus's question** except that which Paul gives in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."*

I don't think it's possible for us to remotely understand the depths of separation and loneliness Jesus felt at the moment he became sin for us. We cannot grasp what it means. But we can know this. The awful sense of aloneness and darkness that wrenched such a cry from the throat of Christ is what lies ahead of us if he is not our Lord and Savior. He took on himself the awful penalty that we have earned by our sin.

Then Jesus dismisses his spirit, and the veil of the temple is torn. It was God's dramatic way of saying for all time that the way into his heart is wide open. Anyone who wishes to be saved may come. The priests who plotted against Jesus, the Roman governor who signed his death warrant, the soldiers who drove the nails into his flesh, the bystanders who mocked and wagged their heads—all may come. That is what the torn veil means. The penalty has been paid for the hateful, the corrupt, the cruel, the selfish, the murderous. The price of sin has been paid in full.



For those who have had a life-changing encounter with the Lord of history, the cross is the most profound statement ever made.

For too many people, the cross is nothing but a fashion statement. But for those who have had a life-changing encounter with the Lord of history, the cross is the most profound statement ever made. The apostle Paul tells us, "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 CORINTHIANS 1:18).

The cross, once an ugly instrument of torture and death, has become the beautiful, sacred instrument of our eternal life.



two

A Rumor of Hope

Mark 16:1–8

From Despair to Ecstasy

The noted theologian Dr. Carl F. H. Henry once wrote about the resurrected Jesus: “He planted the only durable rumor of hope amid the widespread despair of a hopeless world.” A rumor of hope! That is the keynote for our study in Mark 16.

Here, at the entrance to an empty tomb, we hear the first whisperings of that wonderful rumor: “He has risen!” Soon that rumor will begin echoing through the narrow

stone-paved streets of Jerusalem: "He has risen!" Then it will be magnified and amplified across the province of Judea: "He has risen!" Ultimately it will shout, like a blast of thunder rolling across an awestruck world: "He has risen!"

But the rumor begins amid hopelessness and despair. Mark writes:

When the Sabbath[■] was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?"

But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"

Trembling and bewildered, the



Mark 16 begins with the darkest day in human history but ends with the discovery of the empty tomb.

women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid (MARK 16:1–8).

🔗 *Mark is the only one of the gospel writers who mentions the **Sabbath**. When the time came for the disciples to sit down and write their accounts, the memory of that dark Sabbath was so swallowed up by the joy of the resurrection that it was hardly worth mentioning.*

Mark 16 begins with the darkest day in human history but ends with the discovery of the empty tomb. We see the women who found the empty tomb, and they are leaving that place full of such joy and explosive hope that they dare not breathe a word to anyone. Look closely at the last two sentences of this passage: "Trembling and bewildered [Greek *ekstasis*], the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid [Greek *phobeo*]."

I have added the Greek words to these sentences so that we can see more clearly what Mark is telling us. It would be a mistake to read that last phrase, "they were afraid," in the conventional English sense that these women felt terrified, threatened, frightened, or scared. It is true that the Greek word used here for "afraid," *phobeo*, is often used in the New Testament to mean "terrified, struck with fear or alarm." But that word is also commonly used to mean "struck with awe and amazement" and even "filled with reverence, worship, and pious obedience." And the previous sentence makes the meaning clear. The Greek word that the New International Version translates as "bewildered" is *ekstasis*, from which we get our English word *ecstasy*. *Ekstasis* means "to be amazed,

to be beside oneself with profound awe (especially religious awe), to be thrown into a state of mingled startlement and wonder." So these women were not terrified or frightened, nor were they bewildered and confused. They were caught up in an ecstasy of wonder over the discovery they had made: Jesus is alive!

The Tomb and the Grave Clothes

The first thing to be examined in Mark's account of the resurrection is the stone that had sealed the body of Jesus inside the tomb.

The women came full of worry and concern over the stone that blocked the mouth of the tomb, but when they arrived, the stone was rolled away. You can visit the Garden Tomb in Jerusalem, which many scholars and historians believe was the tomb of Jesus. We can't know for certain that it is the actual tomb, but we do know that it fits the description of the gospel accounts. I believe it is the tomb of Jesus.

If you visit the Garden Tomb, you will find that the stone is no longer there. It was removed or destroyed sometime during the decades or centuries after Christ. But you can see a narrow groove carved in the stone in front of the



These women were not terrified... or bewildered.... They were caught up in an ecstasy of wonder over the discovery they had made: Jesus is alive!

empty tomb. The massive, disk-shaped stone was rolled in this groove to either seal or unseal the tomb. The entrance to the tomb is almost as tall as a man, so the stone used to cover that entrance must have weighed at least a thousand pounds. That's why these women were concerned about the stone. Unless someone moved the stone, they would not be able to anoint Jesus's body with spices and burial perfumes. When the women arrived, they were shocked to find that the stone already had been rolled back. The tomb was open.

Matthew tells us that very early, long before daybreak, an angel had come and rolled back the stone. His face was like lightning, brilliantly shining, so that he dazzled and dismayed the guards who were standing watch over the tomb. They fell to the ground as dead men. When they recovered their senses, they stumbled off in fear.

Later, when the women arrived, there was no sign of anyone outside the tomb, but the door of the tomb was open. This told them that something amazing had happened. So they crept closer, looked inside—and the body of Jesus was gone. That which they had come to anoint was no longer there. ▶

▶ *No one has ever been able to explain the **empty tomb**. If the enemies of Christianity had stolen the body, they would have readily produced it to prove Jesus was dead. And it would have been impossible for Jesus's friends and followers to steal the body, for Roman guards were stationed at the tomb, which was sealed.*

The most amazing fact of all—a fact that immediately confronted these women as they entered the tomb—was the presence of the grave clothes. The body was gone, but

the grave clothes were left behind. In Luke 24:12 and John 20:6–8, we find a description of the grave clothes. The cloth that had been around the Lord's head was neatly folded and separated from the other grave clothes. The grave clothes, the strips of linen that had been wound around the body, had not been unwrapped or unwound. They were lying in the form of a person, as though the body had vanished from inside them.

The other gospels tell us that when these women left the tomb, they ran to the disciples and told them the news; then Peter and John came running to the tomb. When Peter and John saw the grave clothes, they were convinced that Jesus had risen. The presence of the grave clothes, together with the way they were arranged, has never been explained.

The power of the evidence, including the evidence of the empty tomb, was one of the reasons Christianity spread so quickly in the early days of the church. Hundreds of eyewitnesses could confirm every detail of the gospel story. There was even physical evidence of the resurrection. No one had to question whether the tomb was truly empty or not, because the tomb was there for anyone to inspect, just beyond the walls of the city. Anyone in Jerusalem could take a fifteen-minute walk to



the tomb and see that the disciples were telling the truth.

Although skeptics and rationalists would like to dismiss the resurrection with a wave of the hand, the evidence does not allow it. The resurrection is not a legend. It is the central fact of human history.

The Message of the Angel

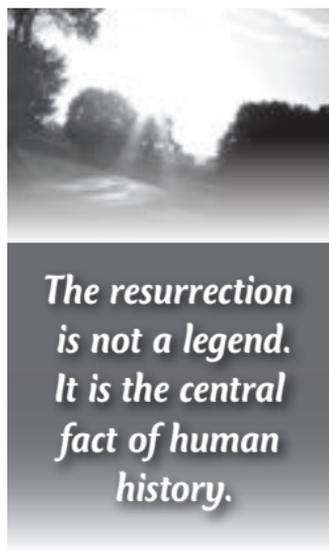
So Jesus is no longer in the tomb, but the tomb is not unoccupied. Mark records:

As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you'" (MARK 16:5-7).

The angel's message to these women contains the answer to twenty centuries of skepticism. The angel first says, "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified."

Furthermore, the angel tells them, "But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" The



*The resurrection
is not a legend.
It is the central
fact of human
history.*

angel identifies a specific geographical spot on the face of the earth as the place where Jesus will be found: Galilee. This statement underscores the claim of Scripture that Jesus is alive, that he rose bodily, and that he appeared to people at a specific juncture of time and space.

Notice also the gentle, compassionate touch in those words. The angel tells the women to give a special message of hope to Peter. The last time we saw Peter, he was standing in the courtyard of the high priest during the trial of Jesus. A servant girl was following him around, accusing him of being one of Jesus's disciples, and he was avoiding her, running from her, denying the truth, trembling in fear. But the angel says, "Tell his disciples and Peter."

The angel also said, "He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you."

Just as he told you. The resurrection should not have taken his followers by surprise, because he had already said he would be crucified, rise on the third day, and meet them. The angel's message is not a new message but a repetition of what they had already heard from the Lord's lips. Everything he said will be fulfilled.

The Rumor Spreads

The empty tomb, the empty grave clothes, and the message of the angel had a profound effect on these women. It filled them with hope, with joy, with excitement. In an instant, they were transported from the depths of despair to an ecstasy beyond our imagining. So they went out with gladness to begin spreading this rumor of hope, just as the angel had told them—the only

urable rumor of hope the world has ever known.

This glorious rumor was hastened along by the appearances of Jesus before witness after witness. The first appearance was to Mary Magdalene. John's gospel tells us that after the other women left the tomb, Mary Magdalene lingered. There, in the early morning light, Jesus appeared to her. She went running with the news, and Peter and John came to the tomb, saw the grave clothes, and were convinced.

Believing Is Seeing

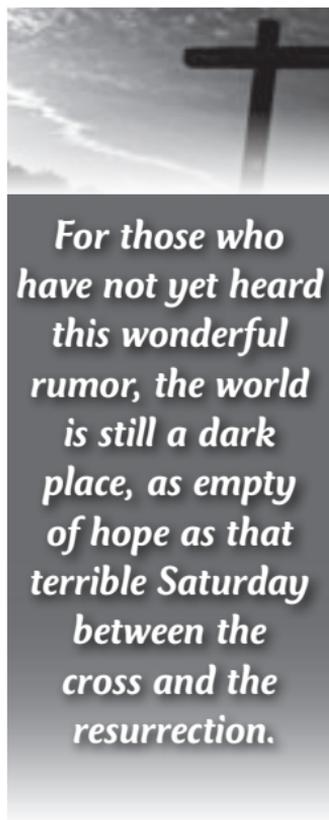
One of the powerful impressions left by Mark's account of the resurrection is this: the women believed, although they did not see. They saw an empty tomb. They saw empty grave clothes. But they did not see the Lord. Nevertheless they believed.

How wonderful it must have been to have seen the risen Lord! All those who did so were regarded with unusual respect and awe in the early Christian community. Of course, not all were privileged to do that. When Jesus appeared to Thomas and invited him to touch his wounds, Jesus told Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (JOHN 20:29).

Peter would later write, "Though you have not seen him, you love him, and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy" (1 PETER 1:8). That has been the experience of millions of believers, beginning with that first Easter morning and continuing to this day. We

have not seen the risen Lord, for he departed this realm of visible things many centuries ago. But we have the testimony. We have the evidence. As Luke writes in Acts 1:3, "He presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive." These convincing proofs are persuasive to the intellect and encouraging to the soul. They awaken hope within us, just as those women found their hope awakened by the empty tomb and the word of the angel.

Out of that hope, a rumor was born. It is the only durable rumor of hope the world has ever known. For those who have not yet heard this wonderful rumor, the world is still a dark place, as empty of hope as that terrible Saturday between the cross and the resurrection. But we have this rumor to share with the world. It is like a brilliant light at midnight. It is like food in a land of famine. It is the good news, the greatest *rumor* ever told. ☀



For those who have not yet heard this wonderful rumor, the world is still a dark place, as empty of hope as that terrible Saturday between the cross and the resurrection.



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