
He is Risen

Mark 16.1-8

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 16 2006 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

It's a very strange thing that thousands of us should gather in a university chapel to celebrate events that took place two millennia ago. It's strange because we live in a very different world from the world of our ancestors in the faith. For most of Christian history people have been obsessed about two things that don't particularly bother us today. For a start they were obsessed about the past. They took for granted that the most significant events in the world had already happened, that the Greek and Roman classical period was the summit of human achievement in general, and that the manifestation of Jesus Christ in particular was the definitive moment in history. And alongside this they were obsessed about the future. They knew that heaven and hell lasted forever, and they really didn't know which one they were going to, but there was nothing they cared about more, and they organized their lives and the whole of society around making sure they got to the right one.

Today we are different. We aren't obsessed with the past. We can't believe that people in the distant past knew better than us. When things go wrong in international affairs, in government, or even on a college campus, we scratch our heads and think surely we've progressed beyond such mistakes and setbacks. We no longer see history as an incline heading downwards from the classical era but as an incline heading upwards and us at the highest point so far. And we aren't obsessed with the future. Democracy has become so much a part of our psyche that we assume everyone must go to heaven – it's in some vague sense part of every citizen's rights under the first amendment to the Constitution. Of course heaven is very much like here.

Today we are obsessed with the present. We no longer think of heaven as lost and gone and only partially to be recovered, or as far off and only dimly to be imagined. We think of heaven as a project to be realized, a commodity to be acquired the same way we acquire other commodities – by discovery, negotiation, or purchase. Moving into an empty house 9 months ago from another country I rediscovered the commodities it seemed no sensible person could live without, and what each one represented. You need a telephone, because it makes distant people present to you. You need television and the internet, because they make the world present to you – even the parts and the people you would never talk to on the telephone. You need a full medicine cabinet, because it's safer not rely on the hospital, but to make the hospital present in your own home. Piece by piece, you surround yourself with everything you need, so that the past is present through photographs and mementos, and the uncertain future is managed through insurance policies and a sheaf of professional advisers. And this obsession with the present is not just about old fuddiduddies like me. The reason undergraduate life is so stressful is that the impulse to cram every possible ounce of experience into the present tense is physically and emotionally exhausting. However hard you read, study, play, party, make relationships, form ideas, you can't throw off the nagging anxiety that you're not cramming enough into this perpetual present tense and there's someone else who's cramming more in than you. If you think about it, every aspect of advertising is about persuading us that our lives are seriously deficient or even hopelessly inadequate without this new ingredient or experience or commodity becoming present to us.

And this obsession with the present is, I think, why we find the question of God so problematic in our era. We work so hard to have life at our fingertips, with our TV and DVD remote controls, our cell phone, land line handset, ipod and laptop all clustering on our sofa, that we are bewildered to find we can't have God at our fingertips. God remains elusive. God can't be turned into a commodity, just another way of bringing the mysterious past and the fearful future into the manageable present.

Of course all kinds of TV evangelists and self-help manuals do turn God into a gadget, a commodity that we can use as a bit of technology to acquire the goods we want. But we don't really trust such trite promises. Even so, we still struggle with the apparent absence of God, in a world that values presence so highly. We struggle with

the questions of suffering and evil because we demand that God be present to us in our times of confusion and despair. We struggle with the place of Christianity alongside other faiths because we can't see how God can be present there if he is supposed to be present here, and our democratic impulse says God must of course be evenly spread like some kind of divine peanut butter. And we struggle with the proofs of God's existence because we want something knockdown and concrete that stops all this mysterious and elusive nonsense and brings God squarely into our manageable experience.

And that brings us to Mark's account of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the oldest gospel account we have of the resurrection, but we seldom read it on Easter Day because we only see what is absent from it. There is no undisputable evidence of the resurrection. There is no straightforward account of what difference the resurrection makes to world history. There is no account of how the word got out to the male disciples, let alone the whole wide world, because it says the women remained silent. And worst of all, there is no account of an appearance of the risen Jesus. Small wonder that later editors added on to Mark's account the details we crave, details which in most bibles appear in parentheses at the end of Mark's gospel.

But I want to suggest to you that Mark's short account, these eight verses, gives us everything we need to know about the resurrection of Jesus. Not everything we *want* to know, of course. Because we want to know a host of details that will bring this story into the present tense so we can turn it into a domestic gadget that will in the end replay to us nothing but an image of ourselves. Not everything we *want* to know about Jesus' resurrection, but everything we *need* to know.

The three faithful women come to the tomb early in the morning on the first day of the week, and they find the stone rolled away. They see a young man in a white robe, and he says three things to them. The first thing he says is about the past. 'You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here'. This is telling them everything they need to know about the past. He has been raised. Of course they have a host of questions: how can this be, was he really dead, is his risen body the same as his earthly body, does this mean we shall be raised in the same way, will he forgive those who put him to death, is there anything that is impossible with God? But there is only one question, it seems, they need to know the answer to: is this a physical resurrection or just a spiritual one? And the answer is, a physical one: the young man says, 'He is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.' So this is everything we need to know about the past: Jesus has been raised, not as a ghost or a spirit, a metaphor or an idea, but as a body.

And the second thing the young man tells the women is about the present. 'He is going ahead of you to Galilee'. This is telling them everything they need to know about the present. Jesus' resurrection is not a finished thing, a completed historical event with no further implications. Jesus is doing something now. He is going ahead. He is on the move. He is leading the action of God. He is setting an example, giving direction, defining purpose, pointing the way. And the place he is going is...Galilee. It is not just that Jesus has opened the way into heaven, precious as that news would be: it is that he is opened the way back to a new life on earth, and in Galilee, the place the disciples knew best, their home, the place where they had lived all their lives before Jesus summoned them to the way of the cross. The news about the past told the women that Jesus had changed everything they took for granted about cause and effect, the disaster of the cross, and the tragedy of their own failure. Now the news about the present told them that Jesus was effecting that change in their very homes and habitat, among those they knew best and around those who lived far from the dramatic stage of Jerusalem. This is everything we need to know about the present: Jesus is on the move.

And the third thing the young man tells the women is about the future: 'There you will see him'. The young man tells the women everything they need to know about the future. Jesus' resurrection changes not just the things you thought you knew about reality, including the places and the people you thought you knew best; Jesus' resurrection is going to transform *you*. You will see him. You are going to find yourself in Jesus' presence. You are going to be his companion. This is the destiny of your life. And there isn't any other news. This is the last word. So we have to assume 'there you will see him' really is all we need to know about the future. We shall be in Jesus' company, presumably forever.

You have to admire Mark's economy of style here. Surely he knew more than he is telling us – at the very least the women must have told someone, or the story would never have reached Mark. But Mark doesn't tell us everything he knows. He just tells us everything we need to know. He doesn't tell us enough to make the resurrection of Jesus just another remote control on our sofa, just another device for giving us the world at our fingertips and bringing all human experience into our living room. We can't domesticate Mark's gospel. We'd love to have the explicit details, the biology, physics and chemistry of resurrection, the physical evidence and the full interactive DVD color package. Mark withholds all this. But look what he does tell us. He does tell us the vital information about the past – Jesus is risen; the vital information about the future – we shall see him; and the vital information about the present – we are on our way from the place of resurrection to the gate of glory.

What more do we need. These 8 short verses give us a pretty comprehensive summary. They give us the gospel – Christ is risen; they give us our hope – we shall see him; and they give us our mission – he is going ahead of you. That's Easter. That's the Christian faith. Hallelujah. Everything we need to know about the past, everything we need to know about the present, and everything we need to know about the future. I think that's more than enough, don't you?