

## “A Deeper Truth: Joy Overcoming Fear”

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 and Mark 16:1-8

Rev. Dr. Rick Russell

Easter Sunday – April 12, 2009



### **1 Corinthians 15:1-11**

*Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain. For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.*

### **Mark 16:1-8**

*When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*



“So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

Of course, they were afraid. The three women, the two Marys and Salome, had their worlds turned upside down – first by the experience of their beloved Jesus being betrayed, arrested, tortured, and executed, then, secondly, by what took place on Easter morning at the tomb, with its large stone rolled away from the entrance, the

absence of a corpse and the presence of a young man dressed in a white robe telling them a strange story of resurrection. This is scary stuff for anyone.

Bible scholars, at least the ones I listen to, say that Mark's Gospel was the first of the four gospel accounts. Even then, it is said to have been written some 40 years after Jesus died. The religious movement that was to see its dramatic center and start in Jerusalem around 30 A.D. would be shared mostly by word of mouth, by the sharing of stories and personal testimony for decades before finally being written down in a "day by day" type account. Paul's letter to the church in Corinth is closer to the actual event of Easter, perhaps written in the year 55 A.D. In his letter to that young congregation, we have Paul giving us an outline of the Easter story and what it means to him. And then, a generation later, we have Mark's written account of the Easter morning experience with the women who knew Jesus personally, who would have felt his death most grievously, and who would be shaken to their core by what they found and saw and heard at the tomb.

I find it wonderfully remarkable that this event we celebrate today, the Easter event, has so many ways it could have gone wrong and yet goes right. Human nature being what it is, I would have thought the account of that Easter morning would have found a way to highlight the power of God to the exclusion of human fear and terror. Someone in Hollywood would certainly have found a way to convince the women that Jesus was alive. But this event was not scripted in Hollywood. Instead it comes directly out of Judaism and the Mediterranean culture. The time was right for God to be recognized for who God was, and is. And this vision of God deals "head on" with fear.

A poor itinerant Jewish teacher begins describing God in ways that capture the imagination of people on the edges of society. He teaches. He heals. He reframes the message of Judaism in ways that open people's eyes and give them renewed hope. Then, in a relatively short period of time, this man travels the countryside moving closer and closer to the seat of religious and political power – the city of Jerusalem. Here the inevitable happens. His prominence and influence conflict with the power system of the Temple and the Roman occupation. He is arrested and executed. End of story, or it should have been.

But something happened. Something happened and the world was changed. The rather common Roman execution by crucifixion of a Messiah type figure – they were common, too – was not the end of the story. In Mark's account we are left with three close female friends – might they have been disciples and eaten and drunk with Jesus in that upper room? – they come to do their ritual duty, not knowing how they could possibly get past the barrier of a tremendous stone rolled in a deep set resting place outside a cave for corpses. But something happened and the world was changed.

What ever happened, according to Mark, began with devoted women who ran away from the experience terrified. They don't come off looking especially good, do they? Yet, even though Mark says that they spoke to no one, we know they did. We

know this because the story got told. And when it got told, it could not be kept quiet. It grew. And as it grew, as it traveled from Jerusalem to Antioch, from Antioch to Damascus, from Damascus to Corinth, from Corinth to Rome, from Rome to everywhere, and as it grew it did not lose its message or its power.

Did you hear? Did you hear what happened? No, tell me. It's about a man named Jesus, a Jewish rabbi. He healed people. He renewed people. He brought people back from the lives of death in which they were trapped. He loved people, all people. He touched the folks who had leprosy; he ate meals with women and with sinners. He taught that God's realm is here among us and available to everyone. The authorities killed him, of course. But his friends, they saw him, they touched him. He lives. Can you believe it? Can we believe it? What do you think this means? What if it is true?

Forty years after the first Easter, Mark writes his story of Jesus. He puts in all the important information, important to him, anyway. There is no birth narrative – no angels or shepherds or star. Nor is there a genealogy, connecting Jesus to David or Adam. Mark's story begins with this line: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." He tells us about the disciples, that raggedy band of misfits sometimes known as the church's first high school youth group. He tells us about love, love from God that is shared and shown to anyone. Mark shows Jesus teaching and healing, casting out demons that would limit the freedom of a man or woman. He shows us Jesus finding ways for the outcast to be brought into community, so that the stigma of isolation might be overcome. Mark relates the parables of Jesus, not all of them, but some pretty good ones that illustrate, by way of language about seeds, vines, lamps and plants, how God is active in seeking out a loving community and holding us all accountable for when society is unjust and cruel.

And then there is the story of betrayal and desertion by those who knew Jesus best. And so we come to our Easter story, the event of the third day after the execution brought about by the powers of the culture. Forty years later, Mark could have come up with a better ending than three devoted women fleeing the scene in terror. But he doesn't. Because this is how it must have happened. Fear is the natural response to such an event.

Fortunately, just as death is not the end of the story for Jesus, fear is not the end of the story for the women or for those with whom the women ultimately shared their experience. They must have looked back, not at the tomb, but at their lives. They must have looked back into their memories and shared what Jesus had said and done, what Jesus had meant to them and to those whom Jesus knew. Then, by looking back, by remembering the vision of God incarnate in the person Jesus, by looking back, they saw him. And they knew; he lived.

Easter is a time of joy; it is an event that has, at its core, a joyous message. But it is the more joyous because of the way in which the sadness, the anxiety, and the fear of life are transformed, are made new out of the Easter message. Fear is real; fear of

loss, of pain, of loneliness, of failure, fear of the unknown as well as the known, fear of success as it means change and involvement, fear of what God might ask of us if we really believe God is real, fear of death, and then there is that most ironic of fears, fear of love.

Jesus faced all those fears, in the story told by Mark, 40 years after the first Easter. Jesus faced these fears with a faith that bears the face of God. Is it any wonder Mark calls him God's Son? Jesus died with that faith. That is the story we have. And then, something happened. The women, after a bit, saw it. The men did, too. And so have countless others over the centuries. They looked back and saw joy through their fear and the joy overcame their fear. This was the deeper truth, beneath the surface of their anxieties, beneath the tragic death of a man anointed by God to save humanity, beneath an empty tomb. The deeper truth is God's abiding love we know in Jesus. This truth overcomes our fear to live, it takes away our fear to love, it transforms our fear with joy. And for this we say: Alleluia.

Mark wrote his gospel, his story of God's love in the person Jesus, 40 years after the Easter event. Here we are, nearly 2000 years later. We are not going to rewrite the story, but we have our own ways of responding to it. In closing, I want to share one way that Bill and Gloria Gaither chose to express their response to the gospel message. It is the chorus from their song, "Because He Lives."

*Because He lives, I can face tomorrow.  
Because He lives, All fear is gone.  
Because I know He holds the future,  
And life is worth the living just because He lives.*

Thanks be to God.

Amen.