

## Who Will Roll Away The Stone?

7 of 7 in the series: *Jesus Has Questions for You*

April 4, 2021 (Easter Sunday)

Mark 16:1-8

He is risen!

And everyone said aloud at home and in the chat: *He is risen indeed!*

You know, as followers of Jesus, we truly believe that— that the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead actually took place, and is, in fact, *the* defining event of all history.

We'll talk more about that, among other things, in this, the final message of our series *Jesus Has Questions for You*.

For the past several weeks, we've followed Jesus and his disciples through chapters 8-10 of Mark's gospel as they journeyed toward Jerusalem, where Jesus would face his cross.

Along the way, Jesus posed a series of soul-searching questions to his followers.

Today, we'll consider a final soul-searching question from Mark's gospel, which I trust will speak into your heart and life whether you've been with us throughout this series or are joining us today for the first time.

Today's question, however, does not come from Jesus. Rather, it comes from three women who came to Jesus' tomb on the first Easter morning. Let's read about it in Mark chapter 16:

Saturday evening, when the Sabbath ended, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome went out and purchased burial spices so they could anoint Jesus' body. Very early on Sunday morning, just at sunrise, they went to the tomb. On the way they were asking each other, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" But as they arrived, they looked up and saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled aside.

When they entered the tomb, they saw a young man clothed in a white robe sitting on the right side. The women were shocked, but the angel said, "Don't be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He isn't here! He is risen from the dead! Look, this is where they laid his body. Now go and tell his disciples, including Peter, that Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you before he died."

The women fled from the tomb, trembling and bewildered, and they said nothing to anyone because they were too frightened.<sup>1</sup>

The question the women ask each other in this passage is, “Who will roll away the stone?” It’s a question which turns out to be surprisingly relevant for our lives as you’ll see later in the message.

On our way to considering what that question means for you and me, we’re going to look at three facets of the passage we just read: First, there’s a challenge for your mind. Second, a grace for your heart. And third, a mission for your life.

We begin with:

### **1. A challenge for your mind.**

All four of the biblical gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—tell of women coming to Jesus’ tomb on Easter morning.

What stands out about Mark’s account is that he specifically mentions certain women by name three times in the course of just 9 short verses, starting near the end of chapter 15.<sup>2</sup>

So Mark is very careful to record, with striking repetitiveness, that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome were the first witnesses of Jesus’ empty tomb. Why does Mark write like this? Biblical scholar William Lane explains that Mark is letting us know he’s writing a historical account.<sup>3</sup>

You see, it’s easy for many people today to write off the Bible’s accounts of Jesus’ resurrection as the stuff of legend. It’s easy to say, “Well it’s a nice story and all, with meaningful symbolism about hope and new beginnings. But it didn’t actually happen. I mean, how could it have?”

But here’s the thing about that. In the decades before and after Jesus’ death, there were dozens of movements in Israel where someone would claim to be the Messiah. And in most cases, the movement’s leader would be killed, and the movement itself would collapse, and that was it. Everyone would go home.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 16:1-8 (NLT)

<sup>2</sup> See Mark 15:40, 47; 16:1

<sup>3</sup> William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark: The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 584, 589.

But when Jesus was killed, his movement didn't collapse like all the others. It exploded, to the point that within 200 years or so it essentially filled the Roman Empire and has since become the largest faith group in the world by a significant margin. How does one account for this?

The Christian church's answer is that when the leader of their movement was killed, he was raised from the dead and appeared to many of his followers. That's why the movement exploded.

Of course, skeptics will insist there's got to be some other explanation. We may not know why the Jesus movement exploded, but the reason for this cannot be that Jesus literally rose from the dead. The Easter story can't be anything more than a legend.

It's here that Mark offers a challenge for your mind. Because in naming the three women repeatedly, he's taking pains to point out that they are living eyewitnesses to the empty tomb. The two Marys and Salome would have still been alive at the time when Mark's gospel began to circulate, so Mark was essentially inviting anyone reading his account: "Go, find these women and speak with them. They can corroborate what I've written."

Not only that, if he'd been trying to write credible-sounding fake news, Mark would never have made up a story about women being the first eyewitnesses to the empty tomb. Why? Well, in that society, as has sadly been the case throughout the world for most of history, the testimony of women was considered unreliable, irrelevant.

Do you know what this means? It means that the only motive Mark could possibly have had for recording that women were the first witnesses to the empty tomb is *honesty*. He was committed to recording events as they actually happened. Mark's account doesn't at all read like the legendary writings of his time. It reads like history.

You might say, "That's all well and good, but back then, people were a lot more inclined to believe in the supernatural— in miracles, like a resurrection. But today, we know better."

Mark will challenge your mind on this as well.

Because as we've seen in this sermon series, Jesus has repeatedly told his twelve closest disciples, "I will be killed and rise on the third day."<sup>4</sup> Again and again he told them this. But it wasn't enough to convince any of the twelve to show up for a peek at the tomb Sunday morning to see if Jesus' prediction had come true. The only ones who show up are three

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<sup>4</sup> See Mark 8:31; 9:32; 10:34

female disciples and they brought very expensive *burial spices* with them. They came not to find an empty tomb but to anoint a dead body.

The point is, no one was expecting a resurrection!

Sure, some Jews anticipated a general resurrection of everybody at the end of history, but the idea of an individual person rising from the dead just wasn't on their radar. And the Greeks of the day thought salvation was to escape your body, not to have your body resurrected.

So the resurrection was just as unthinkable to people of Jesus' day as it often is to people in ours, albeit for a different set of reasons. The question is, what changed the minds of so many of them? Could it be that they had the integrity to let the evidence for Jesus' resurrection challenge and change their minds?

Do we have such integrity today? Because somehow, you have to come up with an explanation for why this group exploded and changed the world. You have to come up with an explanation for why hundreds of living witnesses claimed to see the risen Jesus,<sup>5</sup> and why they were willing to spend their lives preaching about him, and in many cases dying in the process. What gave them that kind of hope, that they could so willingly surrender their lives?

If you would like to explore the evidence for Jesus' resurrection further, I'd like to recommend this great booklet by Lee Strobel called *The Case for Easter: A Journalist Investigates the Case for the Resurrection*.

What's exciting is the [Kindle version](#) of the booklet is on sale at amazon.ca for just .99!

So in our Mark 16 passage, there's a challenge for your mind. Next, there's:

## **2. A grace for your heart.**

Listen again to the message Jesus has the angel convey to the women in verse 7:

Now go and tell his disciples, including Peter, that Jesus is going ahead of you into Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you before he died.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See 1 Corinthians 15:5-8

<sup>6</sup> Mark 16:7 (NLT)

Quite strikingly, Jesus' message is not, "Go and tell that band of faithless cowards to come find me, and maybe if they really grovel, I might just forgive and reinstate those backstabbers."

You see, Jesus knew all along that his disciples would abandon him when the heat was on, but even before he was crucified, he had already said to them in Mark 14:

But after I am raised from the dead, I will go ahead of you to Galilee and meet you there.<sup>7</sup>

I *will* go ahead of you, and meet you there. And in today's passage he says, you *will* see me there. Come to me, because no matter how badly you've messed up, I still want you to follow me and be a part of my mission.

So Jesus offers a grace for the heart— this reassuring word of forgiveness and restoration for the disciples, in spite of their royal screw-up.

But there's a greater grace in our passage still. It's found in the words "including Peter."

You see, all the disciples had abandoned Jesus, but what did Peter do? Not only did he abandon Jesus—he denied him. When the heat was on, he repeatedly swore up and down that he never even knew Jesus.<sup>8</sup>

In Mark's gospel, Peter's name hasn't even been mentioned since that shameful occasion, but here the angel conveys this message from Jesus to the women: "Go and tell the disciples, **including Peter...**" – Mark 16:7a (NLT)

If Jesus's message had been just to the disciples in general, Peter probably would have heard it and said to the others, "You guys go ahead without me. Because Jesus can't be referring to me after what I've done."

But with two grace-filled words—"including Peter"— Jesus changes all that. In spite of his catastrophic denials, Peter is not beyond redemption. Jesus is saying to him, "My death on the cross and resurrection has purchased your forgiveness, and Peter, I want you back."

And that's exactly what Jesus is saying to some of you today: "I want you back."

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<sup>7</sup> Mark 14:28 (NLT)

<sup>8</sup> See Mark 14:66-72

“Yeah, but Pastor Steve,” you might say. “You don’t know what I’ve done. You don’t know how sinful I’ve been. You don’t know how far I’ve wandered from God.”

You’re right— I don’t. But Jesus does. And his word to you this Easter Sunday is the same as it was to Peter that first Easter Sunday: “I want you back. No matter how great your failure, I have not given up on you. Going forward, I have loving plans for all my followers— including you.” Including *you*.

And those loving plans include, thirdly:

### **3. A mission for your life.**

Peter had failed, but through Jesus’ death and resurrection, he was restored. It’s hard to admit that you’ve failed, isn’t it? When you come to the realization that you are indeed a sinner in need of a Saviour, it feels like a sort of death. But as you let repentance drive you deeper into Jesus’ forgiving love for you, and his amazing his grace for you, it turns into a resurrection. It transforms you from the inside out.

You become humbler and more confident at the same time— not confident in yourself, but in Jesus and his unshakable love for you. And as you continue to grow in that kind of humility and confidence, you become freer from self-preoccupation, and therefore freer to join Jesus in his mission of loving, self-sacrificial service to others in his name, for the sake of his kingdom.

In our text, there’s a call to such a mission. We’ve heard the angel say to the women:

Now go and tell his disciples, including Peter, that Jesus is going ahead of you into **Galilee**. You will see him there, just as he told you before he died.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout Mark’s gospel, Jesus is on the move, and this continues to be the case after his resurrection. If the disciples want to see the risen Jesus, they will have to follow where he has lead—in this case, to Galilee— *which is the place where he had first called them to follow him and join his mission back in the early chapters of Mark*.

Now that he has risen from the dead, Jesus is calling them to follow him anew, and to join his mission anew.

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<sup>9</sup> Mark 16:7 (NLT)

And in our text, the two Marys and Salome are given a specific mission on Easter morning—a mission to pass Jesus' message on to the disciples. But what do they do? Mark tells us in verse 8 that:

The women fled from the tomb, trembling and bewildered, and they said nothing to anyone because they were too frightened.<sup>10</sup>

This is understandable. I mean, they were in shock. As we said earlier, they hadn't come to the tomb expecting the stone to be rolled away, or an encounter with an angel announcing Jesus' resurrection.

Still, the women's silence is incredibly ironic, because all throughout Mark, Jesus had been telling his disciples to keep his Messianic identity a secret. At the time, it was just too soon to let that cat out of the bag. But now, at the very end of the gospel, when some of Jesus' followers are finally told to go tell others about him, they say nothing.

Of course, we know that the two Marys and Salome didn't stay silent forever. We know from other New Testament books that the disciples ultimately did get the message, and they did meet Jesus in Galilee, and not only they, but the whole world would never be the same again. Nonetheless, the gospel of Mark ends in an abrupt and rather jarring way—with the women's fearful silence.

In fact, this cliff-hanger ending bothered some ancient Christian scribes to the point that they made up alternate endings to the gospel in an effort to provide some sense of resolution to the story. Your Bible is likely to contain those alternate endings, but biblical scholars are agreed they aren't authentic. That's why most Bibles include a disclaimer about those extra verses saying something to the effect of:

The earliest and most reliable manuscripts conclude with verse 8.

Which leaves us with this strange, abrupt ending to Mark's gospel. But maybe not so strange after all. Because many believe that Mark does this to draw readers like us into the story, which is supposed to continue with you and me. We are the next chapter. The abrupt ending to Mark's gospel is an invitation for us to personally respond to the call of the risen Jesus.

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<sup>10</sup> Mark 16:1-8 (NLT)

Will we confront our fears and tell others about him, or will be silent? Will we follow Jesus into Galilee, so to speak, and join him in his mission to restore this world? Bible scholar N.T. Wright puts it this way:

There is a blank at the end of the story, and we are invited to fill it in ourselves... Where is Jesus now going ahead of us? What tasks has he for us... to take the gospel of the kingdom to the ends of the earth? <sup>11</sup>

What mission does the risen Jesus have for your life?

At this time, I'd like to take you back to the question that the women asked that first Easter morning:

"Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" <sup>12</sup>

A massive stone had been rolled into a groove in front of Jesus' cave-like tomb, sealing it off. Once in place, that stone would have been incredibly difficult to move.

The women came to the tomb wondering how the stone could possibly be moved, but to their surprise, it had already been rolled away. It would take a while to sink in, soon they would come to realize that Jesus cannot be held by death, let alone a stone.

Which is why the women's question— "Who will roll away the stone?"— becomes a vital question for us all. Who will remove the obstacles that stand between us and God? Who will make a way for us when there seems to be no way?

Who will roll away the stone of our sin? Who will roll away the stone of our mortality? Who will roll away the stone of our griefs and losses? Who will roll away the stone of our fears and anxieties? Who will roll away the stone of our sicknesses, diseases and sufferings? Who will roll away the stone of our broken relationships and loneliness? And who will roll away the stone of this world's ills and injustices— the poverty, the homelessness, the inequity, the division, the racism, the violence, the exploitation of vulnerable people and also of a vulnerable planet?

The glorious, good news of Easter is that Jesus will one day roll away every stone, because he walked out of his tomb that day, very much alive, never to die again.

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<sup>11</sup> N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, 224.

<sup>12</sup> Mark 16:3b (NLT)



You see, the Bible teaches that his resurrection marks the beginning of a new creation.

One day, when he comes again, our risen Lord will usher in God's kingdom in all its fullness, and the whole world will be set right once and for all. Those who have put their faith in Jesus will be raised with glorious resurrection bodies like his own—bodies that will never perish— and we will rule and reign with him in the new heavens and the new earth, and the entire material creation will be completely healed.

In other words, Jesus, the King of kings, will one day roll away every last stone, and we will be reconciled to God, to each other, to ourselves, and to nature, forever.

And to the extent that future is real to you, it can change how you live in the present, much like it did for Jesus' first disciples. As Tim Keller puts it, it gives you freedom *from* the world, and freedom *for* the world.

It' gives you freedom *from* the world, because you know that this is not the only world you're ever going to have, this is not the only life you're ever going to have, and this is not the only body you're ever going to have. So when things get hard, when there's suffering, you can limp on with hope and joy, because the resurrection means we're going to get back the things we've lost in this life, in real, concrete terms. So instead of feeling like you have to chase all that this world has to offer, because it's now or never, you can be free from all that.

And that frees you *for* the world. It frees you to be courageous and give your life away for the sake of others in Jesus' name, because the resurrection proves God doesn't just want to save souls, but bodies. And God doesn't want to end this material world, but renew it through Christ. And therefore, God must hate poverty and disease and oppression and injustice and racism and pollution and death—and if that's the case, our mission is to join God in working against those things right here, right now, in the name of the risen Jesus, who one day will make all things new. That's our kingdom mission. That's the work, the labour in the Lord to which we are called.

And so, not surprisingly, it was at the end of his great chapter about the resurrection of Jesus—1 Corinthians 15—that the apostle Paul wrote these words:

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:58 (NIV)

Because he is risen! He is risen indeed...

In light of all we've talked about, there are a couple of opportunities we'd like to make available for you to respond to Jesus this morning.

The first would be to get baptized. To be baptized is one of the first and most fundamental steps you could take in following Jesus. To be baptized, says scripture, is to be personally identified with Jesus' death and resurrection. In Romans, the Bible says:

For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives.<sup>14</sup>

We're aiming to do our next baptisms in May, and we'll of course be doing them with utmost attention to safety in terms COVID protocols.

Is Jesus calling you to be baptized, or would you like to learn more before you decide? Just [go to the link to learn more and to sign up](#).

Another thing we invite you to do today is to give a special Easter offering to NorthWind Family Ministries. Based in Thunder Bay, NorthWind is a partner ministry of Cornerstone that serves vulnerable Indigenous families in northern Ontario. The services they provide have been recognized by their city, and they recently acquired a new building that will triple their capacity to serve families in need. NorthWind is currently raising funds to help furnish four rooms in that facility. They have needs for items ranging from \$60 to as much as \$6000 to furnish an entire youth room. Just [follow the link donate](#). It's a great way to partner with the risen Jesus in his world-restoring mission.

Well, Happy Easter, everyone. At this time, let's join our hearts, and sing praises to our risen Lord!

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<sup>14</sup> Romans 6:4 (NLT)