

A Young Man in White

A sermon on Mark 16:1-8 & Romans 6:3-11 preached by Nathan Nettleton, 15 April 2006

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Message

The death of Christ strips us bare, but in his resurrection we are clothed in Christ and become participants in his resurrection life.

Sermon

This is the night when all things are made new. This is the night when the hungry are fed and the naked are clothed. This is the night when those who have fallen away are restored to glory. No longer is the grave a prison from which no one ever escapes. The stone has rolled aside. Jesus the Messiah is risen. Death has been cut down to size. Its reign is over. Now even death has to answer to a higher power. Jesus the Messiah is risen, and all our cold hard certainties are thrown into the most wondrous confusion. Wondrous, but fearful. Those faithful women who were the first to visit the tomb on Sunday morning fled in terror; so bewildered and shaken that they said nothing to no one. And why not? Is it not always terrifying to have our certainties blown apart? Death is seldom welcome, but at least it is dependable. Who would not quake in fear when a warm breath whispers a cold dark tomb?

The three women came to embalm the dead body. They came laden down with aromatic spices to mask the smell of decaying flesh. They came to perform their last act of service for their departed mentor, to make good what had not been done in the haste to get his battered body out of sight and in the ground before the Passover festival. They knew how to handle death. They knew what had to be done, and how to do it. Death they could handle. But what confronted them was not death. The body they had come to embalm was gone without a trace. Instead, inside the tomb, where there should have been only the stillness of death, they were startled to find a young man. Not Jesus, but a perfectly alive young man, dressed in a white robe. This gospel writer doesn't describe an angel. He is simply a young man in a white robe. A young man who seems to know what is going on. "I know you are looking for Jesus who was executed," he says, "but you won't find him here. He has been raised. Go and tell the other disciples." And they flee, scared witless.

Where does this young man come from? Who is he, and what is he doing there? What does he mean? Did the women wonder for a moment whether they'd met him before? Or were they in too much of a panic to get out of there that they didn't even pause to wonder? Maybe you are getting the feeling you've met him before? Well maybe we have. The word the gospel writer uses to depict this young man is only used twice in his whole account of the gospel, and the other time, just a little while back, is also a mysterious and anonymous young man. Perhaps you remember him, we heard about him just last Sunday. When the armed mob came for Jesus in the garden, there was this young man there with him, dressed only in a towel around his waist. And when the mob closed in and everybody ran, the young man was almost caught, but he got away, losing his towel in the process and fleeing stark naked into the night. Could it be the same young man who we now meet at the empty tomb? Maybe it is, and maybe we find him a little familiar because we recognise something of ourselves in him. And maybe he has something more to tell us about what is going on here among us tonight.

Not long before the armed mob invaded the garden, the followers of Jesus had all been pretty sure of themselves. They had all sworn that, even if everybody else bailed out, they'd stick

with Jesus through thick and thin, right to the bitter end. But just an hour or so later, they all fled. It is so easy to be sure of yourself when it is time for talking. But when it is time to lay your life on the line, it's different. We're afraid of nothing when there is nothing to be afraid of. But we are all stripped naked before overwhelming brute force. When we are totally outnumbered and brutality and callous violence are closing in on us, there are very few who can maintain the purity of gracious love for one's enemies. All our good intentions, and our pious theories about the noble cause of absorbing the sting of the world's hatred and hostility, they are all stripped away in an instant. Given the chance, we run for our lives. Naked and exposed for the pretenders we really are, but out of danger at least.

The gross brutality of the lynching of Jesus strips us all naked. It exposes the ugliness smuggled in our hearts. It shines the light on the ease with which we can turn on an innocent man and join our voices to a mob baying for blood. Better that one man die than that we stand out against the crowd and become its next victims ourselves. Easier to join in the scapegoating of the Muslims or the poofers or the asylum seekers or the fundamentalists than to love courageously and make ourselves a target for the hostility and violence. When push comes to shove, we are stripped bare and flee naked into the night. God sacrifices his Son to our frenzied need to maintain control by making a victim pay, and we are shamefully exposed, and flee naked into the night.

But then comes that whispering breath from the cold sealed tomb. And then the stone rolls away and there is life — astonishing life — where the battered remains of death should have been. And here in the still of the early morning we find the stone rolled away. And behind the stone, we find the mysterious young man again. No longer is he naked. No longer is he afraid. No longer is he ashamed and despairing. Why?

He has met the risen Christ! Alleluia. He has encountered the crucified and risen Lord. And no doubt to his astonishment, he has found that Jesus does not bear him the least resentment for abandoning him. Jesus is not consumed by anger over those who fled in the night, or those who added their voices to the bloodthirsty cries of the lynch mob. The young man has met the risen Lord and been transfigured by the most astonishing grace, the most outrageous forgiveness, the most unquenchable love.

And in that love, the young man has discovered the deep mystery of the crucifixion and resurrection. He has found that in that love, the crucified Christ has gathered him up into his own death, and that the fearful and ashamed young man that he had been has been stripped away and crucified. He has found that in that love, the crucified Christ has taken the young man's shameful past with him into the grave. And now, in the early morning, he has found that he has been raised to new life with Christ, and clothed in the white robe of righteousness, the righteousness of Christ in which everything is made new.

What has the young man discovered? He has discovered that he has been baptised. That he has been stripped naked, buried with Christ, all his sins washed away in the deep waters of death, and then raised to new life and robed in the purity of Christ. And now he is a herald of the resurrection gospel, the one who passes on the good news to all who come seeking. All this is known to the baptised, for it is our story too. And tonight, we are privileged to witness another young man stripped naked (well almost!), buried with Christ in the deep waters of death, and raised to new life, robed in Christ, and commissioned to bear witness to the resurrection. What a joy! Christ is risen and we are washed clean and raised to new life. All

glory and praise to God, who has raised our crucified Lord through the power of the Holy Spirit. What a night! Praise be to God!