

This Changes Everything

A sermon on Mark 16:1-8 by Nathan Nettleton, 7 April 2012

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Message

The resurrection of Jesus is the most confronting and terrifying news imaginable, and all we can do (after trying to run) is surrender ourselves to his grace.

Sermon

This changes everything! You'd probably expect me to say something like that. After all, it's my job. It's what I'm supposed to do. Stick to the script year after year. As we heard a few minutes ago, the three women who first heard that Jesus was risen took to their heels and ran and couldn't even tell anyone because they were so terrified. But we in the churches hear the same message and yawn and organise easter egg hunts that we hope might attract a few new families to help keep things going round and round, the same as ever. What's going on?

The truth is that we are mostly not hearing the same message at all. We have been immunised against it so that even though we hear the same words, they don't get through. We don't feel the earth quaking beneath our feet. My cousin who lives in Christchurch tells me that they are getting quite blasé about earthquakes now. They know how their house behaves and which part of it to go to when the ground starts shaking, and even the big ones are really no big deal anymore. We've mostly been similarly lulled into complacency about the resurrection of Jesus. It's no big deal anymore. But until the news of the resurrection of Jesus has scared the pants of us and rocked us to the core of our being, we haven't really heard it at all. We might have heard the stories, but their meaning hasn't broken through. We haven't got it yet. When it hits home, we will be as shaken as those three women, dumbstruck and fleeing in the garden.

Why? Because everything we thought we understood and could depend on will be shattered. The ground will be ripped out from under us. All the rules we have been living by will be blown apart. The scripts will be torn up. Many Christians cling to the message of the resurrection as though it were a security blanket, a mere historical proof that things will turn out the way we hoped in the end. When we encounter the real thing, we will realise that most of what we had hoped for was pious selfish rubbish and the truth is a whole lot more earth shattering.

Often, when a loved one dies, we wish there was some way to bring them back. Of course we do, but what we are really wishing is that we could turn back time and things could all work out differently. Especially if there are regrets about things we did or didn't do, or said or didn't say, or if we were somehow responsible for the death. But however bad it is and however guilty we feel, we sort of know how to handle death. We know how to fit it into the usual story. We can go to the tomb with flowers and embalming oils like those three women did, and do what is normally done in the right way and get on with business as usual as best we can. There is a script we can follow, even if we don't much like it. And if we hold the usual religious beliefs about heaven and hell, it provides some consolation, because even though death so often looks so unfair, we can believe that things will be set right in the hereafter and the good will be vindicated and the bad will get what they deserve and so the script is able to make sense of it all in the end. Even a death like Jesus' we manage to fit into the script. Trouble makers end up with everyone turning against them and they get themselves killed, but if they were really good then God will reward them and maybe even use their death to

help make things a bit better for the rest of us and all will be well. The death is sad, perhaps even a tragic mistake on our part, but God makes good come out of bad and we are comforted and able to go on.

But the empty tomb changes everything. An earth-shattering resurrection is not something we are prepared for or can fit into the usual script. Resuscitations are not so unusual anymore, and reincarnation is a nice variation on the typical religious script about everyone getting what they deserve in the end, but a fair dinkum resurrection is a totally different ball game. In the face of the real resurrection, we would suddenly realise that if the old script is actually true, then we are in deep deep trouble. Why so?

Because the old script said that one day everything would change and God would come and deal with the world, big time. Those few righteous ones who got in through the narrow gate would be rewarded, but those who failed to get it right would cop it. And so there we stand as the risen Lord kicks open the tomb and blows normality away. There we stand, stripped of every shred of our pretentious delusions of goodness. Because there he stands, embodying everything we are afraid to face up to. There he stands saying “I was seeking asylum in your country, and I needed somewhere to live for a few months, and all you did was write a letter asking the politicians to do something. I was in prison, and you chatted with your friends over a glass of wine about how enlightened we are having got rid of the death penalty in this country, although sometimes you wonder. I was a whistleblower, and you told me you knew I was right and you were right behind me, but when the principalities and powers struck back and sought to destroy me, I discovered you were a long long way behind me, with your head down, protecting your own career prospects. And when they asked if you were one of my friends, you said you didn’t even know me.”

Write your own ticket. You know what it is you would be most terrified to see brought to light. You know what it is that you know in your head is right but somehow have never been able to stay true to under pressure. You know who it is you have let down or failed or turned your back on or betrayed. You know that every time you flick through a newspaper that Jesus could be and is among those countless statistics of deaths in Afghanistan or Somalia or Burma and you and I just dismissed him as another meaningless statistic as we turn the page and take another sip of our lattes and wonder whether maybe the news would be easier to access with an iPad instead of all this paper.

No wonder the resurrection would be the most terrifying thing we could ever imagine. Because there we would stand, face to face with the terrible consequences of every thoughtless failure of compassion and nerve and courage. There we would fall before one who had been dragged off by a lynch mob while we turned our backs and failed to notice, before one we said we didn’t know, before one whose blood the mob was baying for as we slunk away quietly. And the script says he’s coming back to take vengeance on those who turned their backs and failed him, and here he comes, with the wounds still so fresh that there is no chance he’s forgotten what we did or failed to do.

Another death we can cope with, even if it is close to home. But the resurrection of the victim of our every failure, that’s surely our most terrifying nightmare.

Unless ...

Unless the script we'd been living by was wrong all along. Unless God is not a vengeful monster just biding his time before unleashing his fury on the world. Unless Jesus was trying to tell us all along that God is not like we thought but that the God of the end of time looks exactly like the Jesus who goes to the cross offering forgiveness not only to those who slunk off and didn't look, but even to those who are driving the nails into his flesh and tossing coins for his clothes. Unless Jesus' commitment to loving enemies wasn't just a holding strategy before finally raising hell, literally, and unleashing the fiery day of judgement and vengeance. Perhaps if God is really a God of unfailing unchanging love whose love knows no bounds or borders or limits; perhaps if those wounded hands reaching out to us are not an accusation and exhibit A of the evidence against us, but a welcoming embrace of love and forgiveness and healing; perhaps, just perhaps, the resurrection need not be so terrifying after all.

And yet, in truth, we are nearly as scared of that as we are of the return of the vengeful victim, aren't we? And perhaps no wonder, because if that turns out to be the truth, the real truth, then the whole structure of our lives and our lifestyles and our culture and our world are based on a false script, and suddenly nothing makes sense any more and all bets are off. Suddenly that security blanket has been ripped out from under us, and our most cherished delusions about how we might not be perfect but at least we are a lot better than *those* people have disappeared down the hole that just opened up in the earth.

Suddenly all you can do is turn and run in terror, just like those three women in the garden. But where are you going to run to? Once you've seen that Jesus is not in the tomb, no amount of running is going to put him back and make everything normal and predictable again. Bill Bryson once said that if you meet a hungry Grizzly Bear in the woods, run, because you might as well do something with the last minute of your life. And this is a bit like that. You can't outrun this terrifying truth, but instinct kicks in and says run anyway. So run if you must, but sooner or later, you are going to run smack bang into the arms of the risen victim, and you are going to find yourself enfolded in arms of love. And when that happens ...

You know what? I'm not going to finish that sentence. I'm going to shut up, for two reasons. Firstly because the gospel of Mark leaves it unfinished, just like that. The terrified women run off and say nothing and ... Mark leaves it hanging right there, inviting us to write the rest of the story as we live it out. And secondly, I'm going to shut up because actions speak louder than words and we are about to enact the next chapter of the new script. Another woman has run into the arms of Jesus and found her whole world turned on its head and all the scripts torn up, and we are about to walk with her as she surrenders herself to the dying and rising and living Christ and passes with him through the deep waters of death into the promised land of resurrection life and love.