



## A NEW LIFE, A NEW HOPE

(Mark 16:1-19; Romans 8:31-39) Becky Douglass

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On Friday, we looked at the many different responses of those who were around Jesus on His journey to the cross. Some responses were positive and some negative. Most surprising to us is the way that Jesus' own disciples responded – the ones who had followed Him for years, who had heard Jesus' predictions of His death and resurrection, who had declared their trust in Him.

But this didn't surprise Jesus. He quotes from the Old Testament prophet, Zechariah, predicting: *"God will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered"*. (Mark 14:27). He knew what would happen, although I don't think that made it any easier for Him to see all His closest followers abandon Him during His hardest hours.

**Judas** betrayed Him to the Jewish leaders, knowing they desired to kill Him. Some believe that Judas was hoping to provoke Jesus into acting with power as the Messiah – that he had good intentions, but things went bad. However, it is hard to see this in the accounts we have. As he betrays Jesus with a kiss, he seals his own fate as his guilt over what he has done eventually drives him to suicide.

As Jesus is arrested, some of his **disciples** initially try to defend Him, but *"then all his disciples deserted him and ran away"*. (Mark 14:50) After Jesus' death, and even after they see Him alive again, they stay in hiding for fear of the Jewish leaders. They are ruled by their fear and their own safety becomes more important than their loyalty to Jesus.

**Peter** protests that he will stay true to Jesus even if all others fall away. And it is true that Peter is one of only two disciples who we see present in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' trial and death. The other is John who was at the cross with Mary, Jesus' mother. Peter ran away with the other disciples, but then he comes back to the High Priest's house to see what is happening to Jesus. But there, in the pressure of the moment, when given the opportunity to declare his loyalty to Jesus, Peter denies Him. And then he breaks down and weeps when he realises what he has done.

Remarkably, the most loyal of Jesus' followers seem to be the **women**. As women, they wouldn't have been allowed to be at any of the trials, but they are there at the crucifixion and they are concerned to see Jesus properly buried. Instead of staying hidden for fear of the leaders, they venture out to the tomb which is guarded by Roman soldiers. Maybe because they were women, they were not seen as a threat and so had more freedom. All four Gospels place the women in prominent positions in their accounts.

Also surprising was the role of **Joseph of Arimathea** who *“took a risk and went to Pilate and asked for Jesus’ body”*. (Mark 15:43) John mentions that Nicodemus was also involved in burying Jesus. (John 19:39) Both these men were not public followers of Jesus but had showed sympathy for his message even though they were part of the Jewish religious leadership. We have no record of them standing up for Jesus during His trials, but they do risk their position in the Jewish leadership and before Pilate when they take on the responsibility to bury Jesus.

It is easy to imagine that Saturday must have been a long day indeed. Jesus’ followers would have had plenty of time to think – to rehearse in their minds what they had done and speculate on what they could have done differently that might have changed the outcome. They would have had to listen to the comments of others around them. Some might have had words of sympathy for their loss, but others would have ridiculed their trust in someone who seemed to have failed.

We have no record that any of them remembered what Jesus had said about His coming death or His promised resurrection. And even if they did think about it – why would they think Jesus would want to have anything to do with them after they had failed Him? They must have been ashamed to even think of that possibility.

The question on all their minds must have been, “What now?” What was there to hope in? They had given up everything to follow Jesus. They had no other life outside of Him. They must have felt like their lives were finished.

This, then is the position in which we find Jesus’ followers as we come to Sunday morning. It was in this desperate state that the women made their way to the tomb on Sunday morning. It seems like they weren’t thinking very clearly as they hadn’t planned how they were going to roll away the stone. Or maybe they had thought of this and asked the men to come with them, but they were too afraid and so the women had to go on without them, hoping that something could be worked out. What is clear is that they have no expectation of anything but that Jesus would still be dead in the tomb – probably beginning to smell and therefore in need of more anointing spices.

And then they saw the stone rolled away ... and there was an angel ... and their world was turned upside down! They couldn’t begin to comprehend what was happening! You get the feeling that the angel had to calm them down before it could tell them what had happened. *“Don’t be alarmed.”* The angel said. *“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.”* (Mark 16:6) Even with this assurance, we are told that the women were so terrified they couldn’t tell anyone what they had seen. Other gospels tell us that they did eventually tell the disciples, but they were met with scepticism.

Here the oldest manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark end abruptly, leaving much of the resurrection story untold. Many scholars feel the break comes in the middle of a sentence which indicates that the end of the original account has been lost. What we do know is that very early on, the church was unhappy with this ending and added a brief summary of what is written in the other accounts. The question is not about the veracity of what is written – everything here is affirmed in the other Gospels – it is only a question of what Mark originally wrote. However, I think it is helpful to look at what the church added, because it brings together the main resurrection appearances of Jesus and people’s reaction to them.

First it mentions **Mary Magdalene’s** encounter with Jesus (found in John) and says that the disciples didn’t believe her. I suppose the disciples could be forgiven for thinking that they could dismiss the words of a woman who had had trouble with her mind in the past. Then it mentions the **two disciples** who travelled to Emmaus (found in Luke) and received from the

risen Jesus a lesson in the Old Testament witness to His death and resurrection. No one believed them either. This is harder to understand because not only did they have the witness of their own eyes, but also that of their holy Scriptures.

And finally, the **Eleven** saw Jesus himself, who rebuked them for their '*stubborn unbelief*' (mentioned in several of the Gospels). Jesus had risen from the dead, but they had still been living as though He hadn't. They were still living in the shadow of His death instead of the light of His resurrection. It was only when they believed that they moved from death into life. It was only then that His resurrection was made real in their lives. And that is true in our lives, isn't it? Jesus has risen from the dead. Nothing can change that. However, it means nothing to us until we believe. And then, with Jesus, we can step from death into life.

A new realisation for me has been that although Jesus rebukes His disciples for their slowness to believe in His resurrection, He never once rebukes them for deserting Him during his arrest, trial and crucifixion. Later, He meets with Peter, but the accounts we have of this are not of rebuke, but of forgiveness and assurance. Even though they all deserted Him, the first message that He has for them, through the angel in the tomb speaking to the women, is: "*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.*" (Mark 16:7 – see 14:28 for Jesus' words) Notice the concern to mention Peter in particular. Notice the care to refer them back to before those horrible days when they had given up on Him. This, friends, is forgiveness. A forgiveness won for the disciples through Jesus' death and resurrection. A forgiveness that they didn't even know how to ask for but that He supplied anyway. This is the promise of a fresh start, a new life. Those who had lost all hope, were now given the hope of a new life with the risen Jesus.

Peter, the one for whom those days must have been the worst, later says in his epistle:

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. (1 Peter 1:3)*

Can you imagine what that must have been like for Peter? In other accounts of Jesus' resurrection, we read that Jesus appeared to the disciples many times over the next 40 days before He finally ascended into heaven. During that time, I am sure He spent much time teaching them about the forgiveness they now had because of His sacrifice for them. And this understanding would have grown when the Holy Spirit came upon them at Pentecost and He began to teach them and reveal to them things they hadn't understood before.

Another person who experienced the depths of God's forgiveness and new life was Paul. Paul started out persecuting Jesus' followers, but then had his own encounter with the risen Christ which changed his life and transformed him into the foremost witness to the transforming power of the death and resurrection of Christ and the new life found in Him. He speaks of this in the passage from Romans which we read this morning:

*What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else? Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? No one—for God himself has given us right standing with himself. Who then will condemn us? No one—for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honour at God's right hand, pleading for us. (Romans 8:31-34)*

God himself has given us right standing with himself – Christ is at God's right hand, pleading for us. No one can accuse us; no one can condemn us – no matter what we have done. Because of Christ's death and resurrection, we can know forgiveness and a new hope of life

with God just as those early disciples of Jesus experienced. When we turn to Him in belief and trust in His forgiveness, our sin will never more come between us and God.

And there's more! We don't just have our sins forgiven, as His own people, we know His constant love surrounding us. In this broken world, there will be times when we have "*trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death*" (Romans 8:35) but these things need not overwhelm us. Before Jesus' resurrection, the disciples were overwhelmed – as I think we would have been overwhelmed as well. But as we read in the book of Acts of their lives after the resurrection, we see that they now have a new power and life. This doesn't take away the difficulties, but gives them peace and strength in the midst of them. Paul tells us that even though difficult things will happen to us, "*despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.*" (Romans 8:37) We can trust God in the hard times because we can trust God's love for us.

But Paul is not ready to stop yet. He goes on to say that even when we feel like everything is against us, when our own heart deceives us, God remains faithful to us.

*And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.*  
(Romans 8:38,39)

Paul wants us to know that we can totally trust God's love – the love which was revealed in the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus our Lord. I particularly love the phrase: "*neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow*". Sometimes it is not about what others are doing or what happens to us, it is what goes on inside our own head which makes us feel like we are cut off from God's love. I am sure this was true of Jesus' disciples when they looked back with remorse on how they had run away or looked forward in fear of what might happen next. But even though we may feel far away from God in those moments – we're not. He's right there where He has always been; loving us and holding us in His forgiving love, wanting to give us new hope and joy in our life with Him. We just need to believe in Him.

Because of Christ's death and resurrection, we can have a new life in Him. And this new life gives us a new hope that we are His and there is nothing we, or anyone or anything else, can do that will ever come between us and God again. Which brings us to the last few verses of Mark. In this new life, we have a new purpose – to introduce others to the risen Jesus Christ who will forgive them of their sins and welcome them into new life in Him. "*Go into all the world and preach the Good News to everyone.*" (Mark 16:15) I think we have something amazing to share, don't you?