

And Looking Up They Saw

The last words of our Scripture reading point us to the fact that the first Easter it was all happening just as he told them it would. That doesn't mean they were ready for it. The women mentioned in **verse 1** had all witnessed the crucifixion. On Sunday, their sorrow woke them early, and love moved them to bring their tribute. They came expecting to care for the lifeless, broken body of Jesus. They did not think they were on the way to witness a miracle. When I read the scripture this week, I was struck by the words that seemed to stand out at the beginning of **verse 4**. The women were grieving the horror of what they *had* seen. Then, **verse 4** says, "looking up, they saw." They saw the stone had been rolled away. That begins the true story of the resurrection of Jesus. It seems to me it is also a fitting symbol of what we need to do. We need to look up and see. We need to look up and see – to *look up and see* the reality of the resurrection of Jesus but its phenomenal significance for all of us today.

I. THE EASTER STORY CHALLENGES US TO LOOK AT THE EVIDENCE AND BELIEVE IN THE MIRACLE.

When the women entered the tomb they saw a young man dressed in white. They were alarmed. **Verse 6:** *He said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. ⁷ But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you."* It had all happened just as Jesus said it would. ***He has risen. Let's look up and see the stone rolled away and understand what that means for all of us.***

There are two basic questions people today ask about the miracle of Easter: First, "*Is it possible?*" Second, "*Did it happen?*"

A. First, is it possible? Well, If God exists at all the resurrection of Jesus *is* possible.

To deny the possibility of the miraculous is a disabling mindset! It rules out the possibility of the Christian story from the beginning.

The story of the Bible is that there is a real God who exists as three persons, the God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. That means there has always been love and goodness in the universe.

This God created the world and has guided and intervened in our world supernaturally at critical moments in history. When the time was right, God the Son came into the world to save us from our sins. He was born miraculously. He became Immanuel, *God with us*. Theologians call that the incarnation of God in Jesus. In his highly regarded book on miracles, the famous author and scholar C. S. Lewis said that the incarnation is *the great miracle*, and if it is true, then all the other miracles of the life of Jesus are not hard to believe at all. If God became one of us and lived on the earth among us in Jesus Christ, it isn't a very big step at all to believe that that life would be uniquely miraculous. If the God who created the world came into our world to redeem us, we would expect his life in this world to be full of signs and wonders, and his death would not be the end of his story.

If God exists, then, of course, the resurrection of Jesus is possible.

B. Did Jesus really rise from the dead? Yes!

*Here in **Mark 16**, we have the beginning of several lines of evidence.*

1. First, The tomb was empty. Verse 6 records the women coming with no expectation of a resurrection, and then, looking up, they saw the stone rolled away. *And then they found the tomb was empty*. This is what all the Easter morning gospel stories tell us, and it is very important. Some people have tried to explain the empty tomb away by saying Jesus just fainted and then revived. But the Roman soldiers were experienced, and their lives were on the line. After Jesus died on the cross, one of them speared him in the heart to make sure he was dead. One of the ancient prophets, Isaiah, had said that the messiah would be *assigned a grave with a rich man in his death* (Isaiah 53:9). It seemed unlikely because Jesus wasn't wealthy, but a rich man named Joseph of Arimathea offered his expensive stone tomb as a burial place for Jesus. Had Jesus not risen, it would have been easy to open the tomb and present the body for evidence. But the tomb was empty.

Not only was the tomb empty but

2. Second, There were eyewitnesses to the resurrection. In **Mark 16:1**, we're not just told that some women came. The women are named. It was *Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome* who came with spices. Biblical scholar Richard Bauckham says this is how Mark lets us know he is recording history and not just a legend. The repeated names were being shared and spread throughout the ancient world when the women and others named were still alive. They were eyewitnesses to the whole phenomena of the life of Jesus, its factual record, and its miraculous nature.

*When the women looked up and saw the stone rolled away, that was just the beginning of a story in which there will end up being many eyewitnesses. Paul writes about this in first Corinthians. Twenty-two years after the resurrection, he talks about how Jesus appeared to more than five hundred at the same time, and then he says many of them were still living. Twenty-two years is not a long time. It was twenty-two years ago that we, having built this building, held our first Easter service here. For those of us who were there, it was not that long ago. When the apostles were writing about the resurrection and proclaiming it, there were scores of living eyewitnesses. The message of Easter is that something happened in human history, something that is so dramatic and important that the implications affect all of our lives. In Jesus Christ, God was incarnate; he became one of us, lived a perfect life, then died on the cross to pay for our sins. On the first Easter, the women came to anoint the body, and they looked up and saw – they saw the stone was rolled away and the tomb was empty. Then the angel told them, *He is risen!**

II. THE EASTER STORY INVITES US TO LOOK UP AND THEN, BELIEVING, RECEIVE THE MESSAGE OF HOPE.

Look back at **Mark 16** and pick up the reading in **verse 6** again, *"Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. 7 But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" The disciples had all fallen away. The three closest had failed to stay awake in the garden when he asked them. The others ran for their lives when he was arrested. But he doesn't say, "Go tell those foul-ups that I'm done with them."* He's offering grace and relationship.

A. We foul up and fail Christ in many ways, but he offers us mercy.

One disciple is singled out by name. The angel says, *"tell his disciples and Peter."* Peter had claimed to be loyal to the death, but what happened? There had been a dramatic moment in which Peter was standing by the fire in the courtyard of the high priest after Jesus was arrested. Instead of standing up for Jesus, he caved under pressure. He denied knowing Jesus, and then, right when he was denying Jesus the third time with oaths and curses, Jesus turned and looked right at him and caught his eye. Luke says Peter went out and wept bitterly.

So the angel, the messenger of God and of Jesus, tells the women to tell the disciples and *especially Peter* that Jesus is going ahead and they will see him just as he said. The promise of his grace isn't forfeited because of our shameful sins or mess-ups. Peter could not undo what he had done; none of us can. But we can believe that Jesus really is as gracious as he says. He really does offer us a relationship that isn't based on our goodness but on his saving grace and profound mercy. Christ wants us to receive His grace, and he wants us to share it with each other. In this year of so much relational tension and division, will you let this Easter be a turning point in which you first receive and then offer, to others, the same grace you need and have received? How can we claim to celebrate his grace to us and then resist his call to give grace to each other? Easter isn't just about power it's about grace.

B. The resurrection of Jesus backs up the message of mercy.

In **verse 7**, the angel said, *'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'* One reason the resurrection matters is because it assures us that everything that Jesus told us is true, and we can count on it.

1. Jesus promised redemption. In **John 11:25-26**, he said: *"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"* He said many things like that. The resurrection is the promised sign that proves that through faith in Jesus, we can receive the redemption he has promised. Redemption means you can live with confidence. Your sins are forgiven. You are God's son! God's daughter! God's presence is at work in your life to make you the person God wants you to become. What Jesus promises you is that his sacrificial death can be for you the payment for sin that redeems your soul. Look up and see that and claim the promised redemption and the great peace in that promise.

Jesus promised redemption and....

2. Jesus promised hope. Throughout the Bible, there is a promise of something bigger, much bigger even than individual souls being saved and living on after death. The promise from the ancient prophets was that one day God would so completely bring about resurrection and renewal of the heavens and the earth that there will be no more evil, death, sin, decay, ugliness, or chaos but only a beauty and love that is holy and full of glory and lasting for all of eternity. The resurrection of Jesus is the first fruit of that greater harvest. What we see in Jesus and

his resurrection is a preview of what God will do with the whole of creation. To believe in the message of the resurrection is to choose to shape your life in light of that hope. To refuse to act as if this life and the little bit you carve out of it is all you will ever have. Jesus says *I am not a metaphor or just a symbol of springtime and new life. Springtime and new life and caterpillars turning into butterflies, those things are all symbols of who I am and what I promise.*

Have you ever watched a movie or TV series wanted to watch it again, but it wasn't the same because it was full of twists and turns and surprising endings? Some of the heroes died, and others proved to be bad, and once you had seen it, you can't see any of the earlier parts without thinking of the ending. Think about the movie *The Sixth Sense* with Bruce Willis (Okay, spoiler, but this was out 22 years ago!) It's sort of the opposite of the gospel because you think the main character is alive, but in the end, you find out he's dead. Once that shocking surprise ending is revealed; you can't look at the earlier scenes the same way. Maybe this can help us grasp the significance of the resurrection. In the resurrection of Jesus, God shows us the stunning ending for every believer in Jesus and for all of this beloved but broken planet. If you believe in Jesus as your Savior, you are already "in him," a new creature in God's eyes, waiting for him to make all things new. Your story is still playing out, but he has already shown you in the risen Christ how your story will end personally and how this planet's story will end in history. As every scene in your life plays out, live it, face it, endure it, enjoy it, in light of the promise that he promised us all.

CONCLUSION

Look up and see and believe in Him. The message of Easter is an invitation to come to Christ, to say, *"I turn to you. I believe in you. I'm trusting you and receiving you as my Lord and my Savior."*

If you do believe in him, then look up and see clearly the hope Christ offers you. Even the things that look the darkest and the most hopeless can give way to life and light through the power of the risen Christ. The resurrection means that God is real and he cares. Your feelings, no matter how strongly you feel them are not ultimate. If Jesus is Lord, the only thing to do is to take heart and have faith and live for him.

Amen