

Mark 16:1-8

I like many others enjoy reading a good detective story and OK many have similar threads but I enjoy them. One thing that often occurs in such stories is that when a murder has been committed the detective will ask “did he have any enemies?”

Often for the sake of keeping the reader guessing there will be loads of enemies. People he has got one over on or walked over or cheated out of something and so on. However, never is one of the dead person’s key enemies mentioned and that is his last and possibly greatest enemy. Of course his last and greatest enemy is....death. We read in 1 Cor 15:26, “The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” One of the well known quotes from the Bible made better known because it was put on the headstone of James and Lily, that is Potter as in parents of Harry.

Death is the last and perhaps greatest enemy of each one of us and if we are honest we do see death as an enemy and we will fight to overcome death. My how we fight against it. We live in an age of unprecedented advances in medical science much of which is aimed at keeping us alive. There are many reasons why people fight so hard against death and I would myself battle to stay alive, for my family and I suppose just to keep on annoying you lot! I haven’t got to the point that Paul got to where he said, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” and “I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far” (Phil 1:21&23). No I like many others have a desire to carry on living and yet we all know that ultimately we must all die. Death is the last and perhaps the greatest enemy.

However, today on Easter Day we celebrate the fact that in Jesus this last and great enemy has been conquered.

Today we complete our series Jesus Master of the world and here we see Jesus Victor from the grave the one who has won the battle over death. Here was the one who came as pioneer of the Kingdom and as the anointed rescuer. As such he died in our place on the cross as those of us who were here on Friday were reminded. But death could not hold him. Placed in a stone tomb he broke free gloriously and showed us that death is not the end.

Each of the gospels tells us in a different way of the resurrection of Jesus and today we look at Mark to see why we believe Jesus rose from the dead.

Four things I want to mention briefly.

1. a lack of expectation, v1

What we see at the beginning of the account of the resurrection is a lack of expectation.

I went to watch Kettering play yesterday –why? Well not because I expected them to win and begin to climb up the table and out of relegation. More because well it is what I do.

These women were coming to the place where Jesus body has been laid why? Well certainly not because they expected him to have risen, in fact just the opposite. They came with their spice to anoint him. They were expecting a dead body and that is one of the reasons that encourages me to believe Jesus rose because his close friends weren't expecting it. The resurrection was not something his friends orchestrated – they weren't expecting it.

2. an empty tomb v5

On 25th Oct 2011 it was reported in the press that the body of Muammar Gaddafi, his son Mutassim and a top aide had been buried in secret in the desert. The main reason was to prevent the site becoming a shrine. Today no one knows where Jesus body was put after his death because after his resurrection the place was unimportant. I know that today there are suggested places not least the Garden Tomb and people go there, myself included, but we go to celebrate the resurrection. The tomb when the women got there not only had its stone removed but there was no body in the tomb. The empty tomb is a central reason for believing that Jesus is victor from the grave. However the empty tomb for those women and centuries later needed an explanation and so

3. the angelic messenger v5

The women went into the tomb and they saw this “young man dressed in a white robe, an angel. Just as at the birth of Jesus angels appeared to Mary, to Joseph and to the shepherds to explain what was going on, so here at the resurrection the angel was there to explain, “he is not here. See the place where they laid him.” The angel explained that it was no use looking for the body it wasn't there and encouraged the women to look for themselves that later they might testify to the fact that there was no body in the tomb. But he also explained why there was no body, “He has risen”. The event was of such importance that God left us in no doubt what had happened. The messenger made it clear to these women that the tomb was empty not through any spurious or nefarious activity but because of the activity of God who raised Jesus from the dead as Jesus had said would happen.

4. Changed followers v8

Now as we read these verses we may feel there was no change in these women. They began in an uncertain frame of mind wondering who could move the stone. Then, when they saw the angel, they were alarmed or frightened, and at the end they were trembling and bewildered. So we could say that through the story there was no change in these women but yet there is in the account at least the seed of the change because the passage ends with the sentence, “They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid” (Mark 16:8). Now that was not what the angel had told them in v7 when he told them to tell the disciples. But they said nothing and so no one knows that Jesus rose from the dead. But of course we do know and that was because somewhere along the line there was a

change in them and they did say something to the other disciples. Then later they and the disciples were to be found proclaiming the resurrection to anyone who would listen and to quite a few who would not listen.

These women, who were clearly shell shocked by what had happened in that tomb, said nothing but the truth changed them and they with the rest spoke boldly about the resurrection. They changed from fear to faith and from silence to proclamation.

Can I make a confession here?

Until earlier this year I had not been to see a dentist for a long time. But then inevitably a problem occurred and I went in fear and trembling to the dentist. At least I thought it was the dentist but when she stood there sucking in air shaking her head and saying this is going to need a lot of work I wondered if I was in a garage. Anyway she did quite a bit of work on me and when I stumbled out of the surgery I met a mum walking her children home from school. I started talking and apologised that my words weren't coming out too clearly because I had been to the dentist. She said, "gosh I haven't been to the dentist for ages" and I found myself saying "you must go don't leave it till you need treatment". I had changed from fear to faith and for a while I became almost evangelical in talking to people about the importance of getting their teeth seen to. I had changed.

These women were changed by the resurrection of Jesus and those words "he has risen" became their message. As one writer puts it, "By far the best proof of the resurrection is the existence of the Christian Church. Nothing else could have changed sad and despairing men and women into people radiant with joy and flaming with courage." (Barclay p387)

This is the message for us on this Easter Day "he has risen". Death has been defeated. Jesus is as Paul says in 1 Cor 15:20 "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep". In other words we share in his resurrection and as he is risen so shall we be raised. He is the victor from the grave and that means death is not the end. Our last enemy has been defeated and as Christ was raised so will we if we trust in him.

Now please don't get me wrong here I am not suggesting that death is insignificant. I have done a lot of funerals and over the years in this as in many areas of life things have changed and now people want all kinds of music and readings. I have to say some of the readings and poems people come up with I struggle with. There is one by Canon Scott Holland that I definitely struggle with because although I can get an idea of what he was trying to say to begin with the line "Death is nothing at all" seems to me at least nonsense.

So when I say death has been overcome I am not saying that death is trivial something to be viewed lightly. It isn't. Yet I do want to say that for those of us who are followers of Jesus Christ it should not worry us because Jesus has gone there before us and come out the other side.

I have only been potholing once and I'm not really sure I want to go again. We went up to Derbyshire as part of a group from the college I was at and we had some very experienced guys in our group. So we go down this cave and it was OK to start with but then the tunnel got a lot smaller. Still we pressed on and then came to a part that was half in water and very small. "Time to go back I thought, there's no way through". The leader then took off his rucksack got onto his back and squeezed himself through this gap. He then shouted it was OK and, being young and stupid, I thought, "if he's got through must be fine". He had come through the other side and it encouraged me that I could too.

The resurrection of Jesus shows us that death is not a tomb but a tunnel. That is it is not a tomb with no way out but a tunnel through which we venture into the eternity that God has promised for all who follow Jesus. We can enter heaven and eternity because of Jesus but we enter at death. Death is not the end, Jesus has shown that. Yes death is still serious and it is scary, but we should not be afraid because Jesus has gone before, he has assured us the way is open and he is waiting there for us. So we trust him to lead us through death and into the presence of almighty God.

The message of Easter is "he has risen" and it brings us assurance that death is not the end. But also it should be the message on our lips. Having come out of the dentist's I was quick to tell others of their need to get treatment. It is no good me waiting till I have come through death to tell others to follow Jesus I and we need to do that now. We need as those first disciples did to tell people "he has risen". He is victor over the grave and so death is not the end but a new beginning.