

THE RUMOR OF HOPE

by Ray C. Stedman

Dr. Carl F. Henry, one of America's leading contemporary theologians, said recently of Jesus, "He planted the only durable rumor of hope amid the widespread despair of a hopeless world." It is from this sentence that we take the title for our study this morning -- "A Rumor of Hope."

As those of you who have been attending PCB regularly know, we have been studying in the Gospel of Mark, and have worked our way through to the end of the tenth chapter. But I want to skip ahead this morning to the sixteenth and final chapter, and take the Easter story from Mark's gospel. We will cover the intervening passages in later studies.

And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week they went to the tomb when the sun had risen. And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?" And looking up, they saw that the stone was rolled back; for it was very large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe; and they were amazed. And he said to them, "Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you." And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid. {Mark 16:1-8 RSV}

There Mark ends his story. The footnote in the Revised Standard Version gives another ending for this Gospel which some of the other versions have. I will not comment on it this morning; we will study it at a later date. But there the best of the early manuscripts end Mark's account.

You notice the chapter begins with the darkest day in human history -- that black Saturday when Jesus lay in the grave. But it ends with the women who had come to the tomb leaving filled with such joy and awe and exploding hope that they dared not breathe a word of it to anyone. When the close of the passage says "they were afraid," it would be a mistake to read it as though it means they were terrified, or threatened because they were not. The word for "astonishment," in the original Greek, is literally "ecstasy." They were caught up in an ecstasy of excitement and trembling awe at what they heard from the angel in the tomb.

It is this that sent them out to establish a rumor of hope in the midst of the hopelessness of mankind. I want to look with you now at this brief account from Mark, to see what it was that made these women change like this.

The account opens with the words, "And when the sabbath was past..." The other gospels do not mention the Sabbath, but Mark gives us this brief account of it. If we have any imagination at all, it would be easy to understand that *that* Saturday before the resurrection must have been the darkest day these disciples had ever experienced. What a dreary, interminable day it must have been! A day of shattered hopes, of broken dreams, of desolated spirits, and of wounded and frightened hearts. A dark and dreary day indeed, a day in which the future was grim and foreboding. All their brightest hopes had collapsed around them, all their choicest dreams had perished with the death of Jesus. These disciples, crushed, their hopes dashed, their dreams demolished, tried to live through that dark Saturday with no hope for the future, no belief in the resurrection. Every act on that day must have been torture for them, with every fiber of their being crying out, "What's the use! Why go on?" It was a day they would never forget as long as they lived.

I think some of us have felt something of that. And you know, there are more human beings today who live constantly in the despair and hopelessness symbolized by that dark Saturday than have ever lived in the drama of Friday or the victory of Easter. Someone has called our present generation "Saturday's children," and it is

an apt term. As you know, our great American cities are, for the most part, vast, teeming pools of human misery, where people live out their days in a kind of ritual dance toward death, without hope or illusion. In the midst of an increasingly godless world, despair grips people's hearts everywhere. Hopelessness and meaninglessness come crushing in on us from every side. Not even the most optimistic of the prophets and seers of today, either secular or sacred, in looking into the future, see any hope in the affairs of men as they are. We are indeed *Saturday's children* .

And yet, the amazing thing about this account is that when the time came to record these events, when the proper hour arrived for these disciples to sit down and write their accounts, this dark day had so dropped into the background, was so lost in the joy of resurrection, that the most they felt it necessary to say is only: "And when the sabbath was past..." Their hope had swallowed up their despair.

I want to examine with you why this was true, what it is that Mark records in this brief incident of the women coming to the tomb that so changed these women as to give them hope in the midst of their hopeless despair.

The first thing was that the stone was rolled away from the tomb. They came concerned and worried about that stone. Any of you who have been to the Garden Tomb in Jerusalem, where I think this event indeed took place, know that the stone is no longer there, but that you can see the narrow grooved platform along which it was rolled, right in front of the tomb. And the entrance into the tomb itself is almost as tall as a man. The stone which covered the entrance to that tomb must have weighed at least a thousand pounds. It was indeed a very large stone, as the account tells us, and these women were naturally concerned about how to roll it away so that they might anoint the body of Jesus with the spices and ointments which they had brought. But when they arrived, the stone was already rolled back.

Matthew tells us that very early, long before daybreak, an angel had come and rolled back the stone, and sat upon it. His countenance was like lightning bright and shining, so that he dazzled and dismayed the guards who had been detailed to watch over the tomb. They fell as dead men on the ground, and, then, as they recovered their senses, stumbled off into the darkness in fear. All of this had happened before the women arrived.

When they came, there was no sign of anyone, and the door of the tomb was open. That told them that something amazing had happened. At this point they did not know what it was, but they understood that something remarkable had occurred, for the stone was already rolled away, and the tomb was open.

Then, when they went into the tomb, the body of Jesus was gone! That which they had come to anoint was no longer there. This empty tomb has been the answer to all the arguments of skeptics for twenty centuries. No one has even been able to explain it. Every generation has tried. In our own day we have Schonfield's *Passover Plot*, as one of the most recent attempts to explain away the events of the crucifixion and the resurrection. But it, like all the others, relies upon that ancient lie circulated in the very first century by the soldiers, who were paid to say that the friends of Jesus had come and stolen his body away. No one has ever been able to explain how that could happen. That his enemies would steal it is impossible to believe, because they would gladly have produced it. And that his friends could do it is impossible to conceive, for there were guards stationed at the tomb, and the stone was sealed with the Great Seal of Rome.

The most amazing thing of all, the thing that confronted these women as they went into the tomb, was the fact that though the body itself was gone, the grave clothes were still there, lying as though still wrapped around a body in the place where the body had been laid. The body seemingly had evaporated through the grave clothes; it was gone. It was evident that there was no body there, but the formation of the cloth was as though it were still wrapped around the body. The other gospels tell us that when these women left the tomb they ran to the disciples and told them the news, and Peter and John came running to the tomb. When they went in and saw the grave clothes, they were convinced that Jesus indeed had risen. The fact of these grave clothes has never been explained. No one has ever satisfactorily explained the conundrums and puzzles which arise with regard to these empty grave clothes.

And the words of the angel to these women contain the answer to all the skepticism of twenty centuries. For the angel said some things to them which answer most of the claims which have ever been raised in

questioning the actuality of the resurrection. The first thing the angel said was, "This Jesus of Nazareth, this One who was crucified, this same one whom you seek, has indeed risen from the dead." Many of the attempts to explain this away say that the women went to the wrong tomb, or that they found the wrong person, or that the disciples invented another person, not the same Jesus, that the Jesus who lived and walked through the pages of the Gospels was crucified and lies yet in some unknown Syrian grave -- as Matthew Arnold put it, "Upon his grave, with shining eyes, the Syrian stars look down..." That whole question is answered here by the angel. He says to the women, "This very same Jesus, the One you knew from Nazareth, whom you accompanied about the hills of Galilee and Judea, the Jesus who was crucified, whom you saw on the cross with the nails in his hands and the blood running down his side, that same One whom you are seeking, is risen from the dead." That establishes the identity of Jesus.

Then he said to them, "He is not here." That is, "He is not only risen; he is not here." And in those words he makes very clear that, though Jesus is risen, there is nevertheless a very real tie with our humanity. He is not just a spirit. This is not a spiritual resurrection but a bodily resurrection. It was the body of Jesus that rose from the dead. There are cults and groups today that try to argue against that, who claim that what happened was that the spirit of Jesus rose, and he now lives spiritually only. But the Bible consistently defends the proposition that it was the very body which was put into the grave, dead, which also rose from the dead. "He is not here." He is a person yet, a human person with a human body -- changed, yes -- but still human. And in that human body he rose from the dead. That is the claim of Scripture. "Furthermore," the angel said, "he goes before you to Galilee." There is a specific geographical spot on the face of the earth, that you well know, where you will see him. He will be there when you get there. "Go and tell his disciples that he goes before you to Galilee." So the angel underscores the claims of Scripture that Jesus is alive, that he rose bodily, and that he is available in specific places.

The third thing the angel says is put in these extraordinary words that only Mark records: "But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee." That is a wonderful touch. What a gentle, tender word that is! The last time we saw Peter in this Gospel account, he was standing in the courtyard of the high priest during the trial of Jesus. And a little maiden, a little slip of a girl, kept following him around, saying, "I know you. You were with him, weren't you?" Peter kept denying it; three times he denied it. The last time she accosted him she said, "I know you're one of his, because you sound like a Galilean." He was as marked as a Texan would be! This time Peter denied it with curses and oaths: "No! I don't know him! I've never met the man." Just then the cock crowed, and Peter remembered that Jesus had said, "Before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times." And the last we saw of Peter, he went out into the darkness of the night, weeping bitterly. What a tender thing it is for the angel to say to these women, "Go and tell the disciples and Peter that he goes before you to Galilee." It puts him right back into the apostolic band.

What does this say to us? Well, that says that Jesus is available to individuals -- not just to the crowd at large, not just to the world in general, or the church, but to you. Put your own name in there, if you like. This accessibility to individuals has been the hallmark of Christianity ever since. Each one of us can know him personally, intimately -- not just as a figure of history, nor as a coming King, nor in a general sense, as we know about the President of the United States, but in that intimate, personal, real, conscious sense of knowing which we share in the most intimate communion of men.

The last thing the angel said was, "He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you." That is, these are faithful words. Jesus had already promised that he would do this. This ought not to have taken them by surprise, because he had said that he would go before them to Galilee when he rose from the dead, and there he would meet them. The angel is here underscoring the reliability of the words of Jesus. He is absolutely trustworthy; he does what he says he will do. His promises can be believed. Whatever he said, he also fulfilled, and you can rely upon it to the very last letter.

Now, this is what changed these women. This is what filled them with hope, brought them from the very depths of dark despair to trembling ecstasy, so that they went out with gladness to spread this rumor of hope throughout the world -- the only durable rumor of hope that the world has ever known.

You are familiar with the story -- how the Gospel accounts tell us that just a few moments later, as Mary Magdalene lingered behind, there in the early morning light, Jesus appeared to her. At first she thought he was

the gardener, but when he spoke her name, she knew who he was. He showed himself alive first of all to Mary. She went running with the news, and Peter and John came to the tomb and saw the grave clothes, and were convinced. Then in the afternoon, he appeared on the road to Emmaus to two disciples, and that strange encounter took place where he walked with them and opened the Scriptures to them and taught them from the Scriptures about himself. That evening in the upper room, where ten of the disciples were gathered together, Jesus suddenly stood in their midst and showed himself alive to them.

Now Peter was present. Jesus had said to go to Galilee, and there they would see him. I think that is referring to the intimate account which John gives us {in John 21:15-17}, where on the beach of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus says to Peter, "Peter, do you love me?" Peter says, "You know I do, Lord." Again, "Peter, do you love me?" "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." And yet a third time, "Peter, do you love me?" And Peter cried, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Then Jesus gave him his commission: "Feed my sheep." He was to be a pastor, a shepherd to the flock of God, which Peter took as his lifelong work from that time on. This was why the angel sent that personal word to Peter, when he spoke to the women at the tomb.

Then we are told that one week later, still in Jerusalem, Jesus appeared to the eleven disciples, when Thomas the doubter was invited to touch him, feel the scars, and was convinced by that.

John gives us the scenes in Galilee that I mentioned, where Jesus prepared breakfast for the disciples on the beach.

Paul tells us he appeared after that to more than five hundred people at one time, on a mountain in Galilee.

Then, back in Bethany, Jesus appeared for the last time, and led his disciples from Bethany to the Mount of Olives. And from the top of that mountain, as they were talking together, they watched him ascend into the heavens and disappear behind a cloud, and they saw him no longer.

The point that Mark makes here is that these women believed, though they did not see.

How wonderful to have been able to see the risen Lord! All those who did so were regarded after that with unusual respect and awe in the Christian community. But not all were privileged to do that.

When Jesus appeared to Thomas the doubter, and invited him to feel the wounds in his hands and side, he said to him, "Thomas, because you have seen, you believe; but blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe," {cf, John 20:28}. In these words he was looking down through the course of the ages since, and including us all when he said "Blessed are those who, having not seen, yet believe." Peter writes something similar:

Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy. {1 Pet 1:8 RSV}

That has been the experience of thousands, even millions, from that day on. That is where we are today. We have not seen the risen Lord He left the realm of the visibilities of earth many centuries ago. But we have the testimony. We have this evidence -- these many infallible proofs of which Luke speaks, which are convincing to the intellect and encouraging to the emotions, to awaken hope within us, as these women found their hope awakened by the word of the angel.

This brings us to the final point: if there is an invitation to this risen Lord to enter into your life and heart, you too will know him, feel him, have him present in your life. The question this brings before us at the close of this Easter message is, where are you? Have you learned to worship the risen Lord? Have you found him to come into your heart and life and change you? That is what makes life different. That is what puts joy in a heart and a smile on a face. That is what makes Christianity really Christianity. It is but an empty ritual, mere religious dogma, without the experience of a living, risen Lord.

I want to share with you an account which reached me this week from a friend of mine, Jay Kessler, president of Youth for Christ, International. He said,

I've never seen a clearer example of the miracle of God's resurrection power than in the life of Lonnie Chapman. When Lonnie was a child, he stole from the grocery store because his parents refused to give him food. He was beaten, locked up, and cursed by his alcoholic father. When he was twelve, he watched his father rape his ten-year-old sister. Once his father tried to kill him with a piece of timber. Once his father punished him by breaking his fingers with a brick. Lonnie survived. He dropped out of school, traveled around, and ended up in California, where he teamed up with a friend whose name was Galen. Galen helped him become a thief and a murderer. After nearly half a dozen filling station stickups, Galen, Lonnie, and another teen robbed a California filling station. They kidnapped the attendant to keep him from calling the police. They drove him out into the country and tied him up with electrical cord. At that moment, Lonnie relates, Galen went into an insane rage and yelled, "Kill him Lonnie, kill him!" According to Lonnie, he didn't want to do it. He fired the rifle at the ground below the victim's feet. Galen screamed, "You didn't kill him, you didn't kill him!" Trembling, afraid for his own life, Lonnie walked up to the helpless victim and shot him. A rifle blast in the face and another in the lower back ended his life. Lonnie is in prison now, sentenced to a life term for first degree murder. I don't want to say Lonnie's tragedy happened only because Galen influenced him, but the influence is there.

Later, sitting in prison, Lonnie met a different kind of friend -- Rod Burke, one of the Youth for Christ staff, who spoke to him through a radio broadcast. Lonnie wrote to Rod, and Rod quickly drove over to see him with a gift copy of the New Testament under his arm. Young teens, Christians, began to back up Rod's prison visits with fervent prayer. Lonnie read that New Testament from cover to cover. Today, in Lonnie's probation report, you'll find this curious and cautiously worded sentence: "From conversations with the defendant, and letters from several other sources, it appears that the defendant has, in fact, undergone the Christian conversion experience." What an enormous understatement! Even in his prison cell you can see that Lonnie is an utterly transformed young man. He has inner peace. He is forgiven. He is without bitterness. He knows that he may spend the rest of his days in prison, and yet he has found meaning and purpose in his life. He witnesses before his fellow prisoners. He has given New Testaments to all his cell mates. He writes letters to people he believes he can help. Ask him, and he'll tell you that he has been born anew to a living hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And it's enough. It's all he needs, even in a prison cell.

I am sure we could probably match that testimony right here in this congregation, perhaps a dozen times over. Those of you who were here at the Good Friday service know that two or three of those who shared their witness said that just last Easter they came to know the Lord Jesus right here in an Easter service, when they understood this tremendous rumor of hope that the women began there in Jerusalem: Jesus is alive. Jesus is available. Jesus will do what he says. He will fulfill his promise. And this is his promise:

He said, "If anyone hears my voice, and opens the door [the door of your heart], I will enter into him and live with him, and he with me," {cf, Rev 3:20}.

That is his promise, and he does what he says he will do. Millions today are finding out this great fact -- that he can change a life and, despite the circumstances, even if they are bleak and despairing, he can fill the heart with joy and peace and glory, and make you over again.

As we bring this service to a close, we who meet here week after week hope and pray that this will be your experience today. Perhaps some of you have never really known what the Easter message means. It is addressed to you, that you might find the peace and joy and forgiveness and hope that a living Lord Jesus, living with you in your life and heart, can bring to your life. We invite you, as we close in prayer, that you might in your own heart be saying, "Lord Jesus, come into my life." Open the door to him, say, "Come in, fill me, take me." You may have been religious, you may have been raised in a Christian home, and still have not found the living Lord. His presence is what makes the difference between death and life, darkness and light.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, we thank you that you are, indeed, what you promised to be -- a living Lord, a God who is omnipotent, strong, powerful, compassionate, tender, merciful, gracious, enduring -- and that you can enter our lives and begin to "pick up all the threads of our despair, and knit together the raveled sleeve of care", and bring us out of darkness into light, out of despair into hope, and out of death into resurrection. We pray that many, right now, in

the quietness of their own hearts, may be praying to you, asking you to do what you promised to do in their lives, that they too may be born again unto a living hope, by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. We thank you in your name, Amen.

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