

## The Shocking Surprise

### Mark 16:1-8

#### Introduction

One of the lingering memories of my childhood was my dad's obsessive listening to radio station 4BH 882. The radio acted as dad's alarm to wake him in the morning, he'd listen to it while he helped us with our breakfasts and then would listen to it through the day as he did the cleaning and cooking, etc. before listening to it as he fell asleep at night. Heaven help us kids if we spoke too loud when dad was waiting to be told by the announcer, "Call in now to win Kamal's greatest hits!"

On one occasion dad had managed to go into the draw to win a security review of the home which would include locks being fitted to the windows and deadlocks on the doors. It was announced that this would be drawn on the Wednesday but on the Tuesday night I took a call with a person telling me that he was from 4BH. I took the phone to dad who was told that he was the winner. Dad, knowing that it wasn't due to be drawn till the next day, proceeded to tell the person, "I don't believe you." However, after a little more explaining dad was convinced.

For the rest of that night there was some extra adrenalin in us (we didn't have the most exciting of lives) and so it wasn't easy to go to sleep. What would it mean to have a house with a security set up? My childish brain was enthusiastically coming up with plans for the equivalent of the Bat-cave! The next morning the family were willing listeners to 4BH to hear the announcer saying that they were drawing the winner and were calling the lucky listener to then hear the recording made of the call to my dad the night before starting with him saying, "I don't believe you."

My dad had quite understandable reasons to be skeptical when he received the call from 4BH but received the news even if there was a period of questioning and uncertainty as we adjusted to what it would mean. This morning we're going to see how the women who went to Jesus' tomb received news that was even more unexpected and they needed a period of time to adjust to it.

## Going Without Hope (vv.1-3)

We start this final section of Mark's Gospel with the record that two women are going off to anoint Jesus' body as a sign of their devotion.

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?"

It's helpful for us to see the little details which help to affirm the truthfulness of this account. First, as was mentioned last week, the reference to the women being the ones to go to the tomb and make the discovery would not have been recorded were it not for the fact that this is genuinely what happened. The testimony of women was not accepted in the Jewish courts and so if Mark wanted to defend the account of Jesus' resurrection at a legal level then he would have recorded the presence of men.

Second, we note that the women are not presented with any great degree of faith or insight. The women aren't going to the tomb expecting to find Jesus risen from the dead. Jesus had been laid in the tomb just before the Sabbath had started at sunset on Friday night and the women would have had to wait the whole Sabbath until they could go and buy spices after sunset on Saturday. Early on Sunday morning the women approach the tomb expecting that they will only find the dead body which they were going there to anoint and they were wondering how they would be able to move the heavy stone which was blocking the entrance.

The women go to the tomb without any particular hope or faith but they were going as an act of devotion. It is to these devoted women that a startling revelation will be made.

## Confronted By Facts And Revelation (vv.4-7)

I've told you of my dad being told that he'd won a prize the day before it was supposed to be drawn, Can you remember a time when you received truly

unexpected news? Unfortunately many of us will be able to remember being told unexpected bad news, of a cancer diagnosis or a car accident but I hope that we may have positive memories of surprise too such as of a pregnancy. We read about the women being given unexpected news in verses 4 and following:

But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

“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. 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.’”

Mark is typically brief, giving us just enough information to keep the story moving. The young man is not explicitly described as an angel but the wearing of the white robes and the use of the typical expression, “Do not be alarmed” both point to him being an angel. Most significantly though, the young man’s role in giving revelation, explaining that the tomb is not just empty but that Jesus is risen, strongly points to the young man being a messenger, an angel, of God.

It’s interesting that while this news is very surprising for the women, the messenger points out that it shouldn’t have been unexpected. The message that the women were given was, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’

Now, most of us here will have heard this story many times before, we will have been to Easter services and maybe even watched movies depicting the events of Easter Sunday morning. However, as best as we can, let’s try to imagine the shock and bewilderment which the women must have experienced. Growing up, my family found it surprising enough just to be told that dad had won a prize a day earlier than we thought, what must have been going through the minds of these women? No wonder they needed to be told, “Don’t be alarmed.”

Indeed, it is the shock that the women must have experienced which leads to the very honest, if unexpected conclusion to Mark’s Gospel.

## Leaving With Options (vv.7-8)

If you have a Bible you may well have noticed that most English versions have a note below verse 8 saying, “The earliest manuscripts and some other ancient witnesses do not have verses 9–20.” There are two alternative endings which add to Mark’s Gospel, one alternative is only two sentences long and the other adds 13 verses, The style of writing of both additions is very different to the rest of Mark’s Gospel and almost no Biblical scholar consider them written by Mark. The reason they came about though is because many people, including some very early Christians, find Mark’s original ending too abrupt and not sufficiently uplifting.

While it is possible that the original ending of Mark’s Gospel has been lost, this morning I’d like to consider that Mark really did finish his account at verse 8 and see that there are strong reasons why Mark did this.

So we’ve already noted what the women were told to do by the messenger, “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.’” Now we can look at how the women responded, “Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.”

What a brutally honest record! This type of response is also found earlier in Mark’s Gospel. In chapter 9 we had the record of Jesus being transfigured and Elijah and Moses appeared with him. Let me remind us what Peter did in response, “Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)”

In Mark’s Gospel, one of the responses to a dramatic revelation from God is for people to be struck dumb, or close to it in Peter’s case.

The women have a normal reaction to receiving dramatic revelation and this ties in with one of Mark’s major themes, that of the tension between belief and unbelief, faith and lacking faith. The question for us is, if this is the original ending of his Gospel, why would Mark conclude his story here?

I'd like to share three reasons why I think Mark concluded his Gospel here:

My first reason why Mark concluded his Gospel here is that I think it's possible that his account was written with the intent that there was a Christian nearby who would explain and possibly expand on what was written down. This would be one explanation for the brevity of Mark's Gospel as a whole and perhaps this was connected with the ministry which Mark had personally done as an evangelist. Mark was happy to finish his Gospel here because it allowed for him or some other evangelist to make a final personal appeal to the reader directly.

Second, the very fact that the Gospel is compiled and is being read or listened to means that the women did respond in faith and so told the disciples and Peter that Jesus would meet them in Galilee.

Third and finally, Mark doesn't explicitly say whether the women embraced faith and told the others that Jesus had risen or whether they remained silent in fear and unbelief because Mark wants his readers to make up their own mind as to whether they will embrace this good news with faith or reject it as unbelievable. In this light, this is a powerful and challenging place for Mark to conclude his Gospel and it provokes us too. What will we do after hearing that Jesus has risen from the dead?

## Conclusion

In conclusion then, I will slip myself into the role of the evangelist, encouraging you who have read this account, to respond to the Good News of Jesus' resurrection with faith. May you embrace Jesus' victory over death, trust Jesus and what he has accomplished yourselves, and share this wonderful news with others.

In all honesty, knowing how long many of you have been in churches, I don't think this will be shocking or surprising news for any of us ... but it's still wonderful news, very good news, and worth celebrating and sharing.

We're going to start by declaring the truth of this tremendous news in a wonderful Easter song, "Christ the Lord is Risen Today."