

The Mystery of the Empty Tomb

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Easter Sunday, 4th April 2021 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst at the 8.00 Holy Communion service.

Reading: Mark 15:42-16:8

Solving a mystery

Do you like a murder mystery? Lewis, or Poirot, or Line of Duty? As I watch, I'm always trying to speculate on the significance of particular remarks, or the way a character is looking, to piece together what might have occurred, and who has a backstory that they are keeping hidden. And that's just on the television. Have you ever held a murder mystery evening around a meal, where everyone plays a part and you have to discover which of you is the murderer?

I've entitled this sermon, "The Mystery of the Empty Tomb". And immediately you're thinking, it's not a mystery, we know the story. Jesus rose from the dead. Mystery solved!

But is it true?

But it's not as straightforward as that for everyone. Many people today view the resurrection of Christ as another ancient legend, a bit of religious make-believe. For all they know, Jesus' bones are still buried somewhere in the Middle East. To believe that the resurrection of Jesus really happened requires you to believe that miracles are possible. Not everyone is willing to accept that, but equally, not everyone is open-minded enough to look at the evidence.

But the mystery is not only about what happened, but what it means. It really does matter whether Jesus rose from the dead. Not only do Christians believe that this happened, but we also believe Jesus' words that 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.' (John 11:25-26 NRSV). Like it or not, we're all going to die physically. But how we are able to prepare for that will depend very much on what we believe will happen when we die.

Mark's Gospel was written no more than 40 years after the events it describes, possibly earlier, and is believed to be based on first-hand accounts from eyewitnesses who were still living when it was written down. Although the Greek used is not polished, there's a freshness of detail in Mark's style, which you notice in reading his account of the resurrection story. So let's spend a few minutes looking forensically at the evidence. The four gospels differ in details, but they all agree that the women who went to Jesus' tomb on Easter Sunday morning found it empty. What could have happened to the body?

One explanation is that they went to the wrong tomb. But Mark records that “Mary Magdalene and Mary the Mother of Jesus saw where the body was laid” (15:47). They’d followed the events, and they saw their job, in the absence of any of Jesus’ female relatives, as being to anoint the body with spices and ointments according to Jewish custom. They knew that they wouldn’t be able to do this until Sunday morning, because the Sabbath was about to start – it runs from Friday evening to the Saturday evening, when they would be able to buy what was needed in preparation for an early start on Sunday. So they were quite sure where the correct tomb was.

Another explanation for the empty tomb would be that someone had moved the body. But who? The male disciples of Jesus had fled when he was arrested. Conceivably they might have wanted to lay the body to rest somewhere else, but would they have really been bold enough to invent the fiction that Jesus had come back to life, and would they have been willing to die for this lie? Luke recounts that when the women told them that Jesus was alive, they didn’t believe it. And yet the resurrection of Jesus formed the foundation of the message that his early disciples spread throughout the Roman Empire over the following decades, and many were killed for refusing to renounce this belief.

If the Jewish or Roman authorities had taken the body, they would have quickly produced it once Jesus’ disciples started proclaiming that he had risen, to disprove this “fake news”.

Or maybe Jesus wasn’t fully dead when he was buried, and had recovered and left the tomb by himself. But Mark has told us that then Joseph of Arimathea asked the Roman Governor for the body, Pilate checked with the centurion in charge of the execution to make sure “whether he had been dead for some time” (Mark 15:44). John’s gospel records that a soldier had stuck a spear into Jesus’ side, causing “blood and water” to come out – in modern medical understanding, this shows that the blood had begun to separate, which only happens after death. Besides, there was a heavy stone rolled over the mouth of the tomb, which three women wondered if they could move – not really a job for a man recovering from crucifixion!

The gospels of Matthew, Luke, John all record incidences of individuals and groups of people meeting the risen Jesus, and St Paul, in a letter to the church in Corinth written no later than 25 years after the event, refers to several appearances of Jesus, including one to a group of 500 of his followers.

Spreading the news

But if the resurrection of Jesus is a historical fact, and if it forms the basis for a belief in life after death, and indeed can give us an assurance and peace as we face our own deaths, isn’t this a piece of news that is worth sharing?

The angel gives the women a message:

“go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” (16:7).

Did you notice that phrase “his disciples *and Peter*”? Peter, of course, *is* one of the disciples. But Jesus specifically wants him to know that he is risen, because Peter will be feeling even worse than the other disciples: he didn’t just run away, he had promised never to deny Jesus and that is precisely what he had done. Peter needed to know the good news, that Jesus was not only alive but would meet him again. Is there one person that you know who needs to know good news about Jesus? To know that there is a reason for hope, that the past can be forgiven?

One of the most surprising things about Mark’s gospel is the way it ends. Mark records that the women are alarmed at the sight of the angel, and

...they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

I don’t believe that Mark intended to end his book there. Historically, it is very likely that Mark was writing in Rome at a time of persecution. Perhaps the last page of his book became detached, and Mark was arrested or died, and so was unable to tell anyone what he had written. You will see in your bible two additional endings which have been added on by other hands, a shorter and a longer ending, both based on other material which is not entirely consistent with the other gospels that we have in our Bible, but which validates the story of the resurrection.

But what most intrigues me is the statement that the women said nothing to anyone because they were afraid. They clearly had no expectation that Jesus would rise from the dead, and the empty tomb experience shook them profoundly. But they clearly did recover sufficiently to tell of their experience – otherwise, how would Mark have known about it to write it down?

But suppose they hadn’t? And suppose the other disciples had kept their experiences of the risen Christ to themselves? Would we even have heard of Jesus Christ two thousand years later?

And what about us? Like those three women in Mark’s gospel, we may not have everything about Jesus clear in our heads. We may have a lot of questions about God’s purposes, and why he has allowed us, or those we love, to suffer. The death of Jesus must have been the most traumatic experience for his friends and family. But later they came to make sense of it. And their experience of the risen Jesus and of knowing his presence continuing with them through the Holy Spirit enabled them to follow his teachings and his example, and give their lives to the service of God and others.

So what are we afraid of? We know how the story ends. We have two thousand years of testimony to the truth of the Christian message, not just in logical arguments but in lives lived in such a way that people encounter Jesus through his followers. It is true. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed, Alleluia! Spread the news!