

A Generous Easter

Mark 16:1-7

Slide 1

Two days before, the world was dark. Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, had given in to the religious leaders of the city and had Jesus crucified.

Why? Because Jesus had displeased the religious rulers of the day by threatening the status quo.

Jesus talked of grace and forgiveness. He told people they could have a personal relationship with God.

Then, when Jesus died on the cross, the hopes and dreams of His followers died as well. For three years they had followed Him and held onto His every Word.

In Him, they saw the promise of a better world. Yet, on that Friday their dreams died with Jesus. But that was Friday, and this is Sunday.

Mark's account of what happened early on that Sunday morning is recorded in Mark 16:1-7.

Mark 16:1-7, "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?" 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.'"

Now, if we go back to Friday, the Bible tells us that Jesus' body was taken down from the cross at the end of the day and laid in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

And, because the end of Friday signified the beginning of the Sabbath, there was no time to properly prepare the body for burial.

These three women were going to the tomb to give their final gift to their friend... To wash His body and anoint it with the burial spices that custom dictated.

The Gospel of John tells us that one of the spices used in Jesus' burial was myrrh. You might recall that myrrh was one of the gifts presented to the Christ child by the Magi.

It seems that myrrh was destined to be both the first and last gift given to Jesus.

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So, resurrection Sunday begins as a day of generosity, the generosity of service when these women got up early so they could be at the tomb as soon as possible to take care of their friend's remains.

Yet, when they arrived, they were greeted not by a tomb sealed with a stone and guarded by Roman soldiers, but by an open tomb with a messenger from God telling them Jesus had risen.

On Friday we saw what that day had cost, but that was Friday, and this is Sunday.

John 3:16 tells us, *“For God loved the world so much that He gave His one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life.”*

The key word in this verse is *“gave.”* Jesus was not taken from the Father. The Son was not demanded of the Father. The Father gave His Son.

The Bible’s clear, we were created to have a relationship with our Creator. That was the plan from the beginning but, given free will, mankind chose to reject that relationship and that set the pattern.

Sometimes we struggle with the why of free will. Wouldn’t it have been easier if we were unable to sin, unable to choose to do that which was wrong?

That’s the double-edged sword of free will. We all want to be able to do as we wish. It’s just that we don’t want to pay the consequences.

In the case of rejecting God, the consequences are plain... Eternal separation from the God we rejected.

But how do we bridge the gulf that exists between us and a perfect God? We can’t on our own, and so the price was paid when God gave His Son.

The Trinity and the nature of God is and will remain a mystery until our eyes are opened on the other side of eternity. How can one God exist as three persons? How can there be a Son who has always been?

If you can’t understand this that’s alright, Augustine said, *“If you deny the Trinity, you lose your soul; if you try to explain the Trinity, you lose your mind.”*

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The next thing we need to realize is that over 2000 years ago the Son gave His life.

Sometimes when we think of Good Friday and all that happened on that day, we picture Jesus being dragged from the temple to Pilate and from Pilate to Herod and back to Pilate again.

We picture Jesus being forced to carry His cross after losing His freedom and His life at the whim of a fickle governor who decided to give in to the vindictive and selfish desires of the religious leaders.

But long before Jesus was crucified, before Jesus was arrested in the garden, and before Judas was bribed to betray Him, Jesus told His apostles in John 10:17, *“The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again.”*

Jesus didn't say His life would be taken from Him, He said He would lay down His life. A sacrifice isn't something that's taken, it's something that's given.

Gandhi said, *“The mice which helplessly find themselves between the cats teeth acquire no merit from their enforced sacrifice.”* But for Jesus it was not an enforced sacrifice. He wasn't like a mouse caught by a cat.

Listen as Jesus continues John 10:18, *“No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”*

Did you catch that? Jesus said, *“Not only do I lay my life down of my own accord but I can take it up again if I so desire!”*

Later on, John, one of Jesus' closest friends, would reiterate this when He wrote to the early Christians in 1 John 3:16, *"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us."*

Jesus gave His life for us. It wasn't taken; it was given.

Maybe you're thinking, *"But when they came to arrest Him, did He really have a choice?"* *"When they took Him to the high priest who sent Him to Pilate who turned Him over to be crucified. How was that His choice?"*

When the story is told of Jesus' arrest you might remember that Peter grabbed a sword and tried to fend off those who came to arrest Jesus, and, in so doing, cut off one guy's ear.

That was a mistake, Peter never intended to cut off the man's ear, Peter meant to cut off his head.

Then, Jesus reaches over and picks up the ear and puts it back where it belonged, which is kind of cool. But what would have been cooler was if Peter had cut off the guy's head and Jesus had to fix that.

But then, Jesus tells Peter to put down His sword and He makes this remarkable statement in Matthew 26:53, *"Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?"*

This isn't legions like we have legions, what Jesus was referring to was the largest unit of the Roman army which, at that time, numbered about 6,000 men.

Jesus is saying that at His word, the Father would send 72,000 of the biggest, meanest angels the world had ever seen, and it would be game over.

Right up to the end Jesus could've stopped what was happening. He wasn't a helpless puppet or pawn. He gave His life for us.

And if the story had ended with that, with the Father Giving His Son and the Son Giving His Life, it would've made a good tale and that would've been it. But that was Friday, and this is Sunday.

You see, the cost was paid on Friday, but the gifts were revealed on Sunday. Because on Friday Jesus' body was laid in a tomb and all He had said and all He had done was buried with Him.

Now, let's go back to our scripture, the women arrived at the tomb expecting it to be sealed, but instead it's opened.

Picking up the story in verse 6... As they entered the tomb they saw a young man clothed in a white robe sitting on the right side.

The women were shocked, but the angel said, *"Don't be alarmed." "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him."*

It was at that point that the gift was revealed, because up to that point the Father had lost His Son and the Son had lost His life.

The resurrection is the proof of the gift. And you might be asking, *"But how does that affect me?"*

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Well, because of the resurrection, Peter was given forgiveness.

Remember, on Friday Peter had promised Jesus, just hours before Jesus' arrest, that He would never deny Him and that He would die for Him.

Jesus never asked Peter to die for Him, only to live for Him, but in the end, Peter was unable to do either.

After Jesus's arrest, Peter had the opportunity three times to take a stand for Christ, three times He was asked about His relationship with Jesus and three times He denied that He ever knew His friend.

With His third denial Peter turned and looked into the eyes of the one He had just denied. We're told, with the realization of what He had done, Peter was crushed.

How could Christ ever forgive Him? How could Peter acknowledge a relationship with Jesus ever again?

Then in verse 7 we read the Angel's words, *"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.'"*

He didn't just say, *"go and tell His disciples,"* He added *"and Peter."* When the disciples heard that the grave was empty it was Peter who was first out of the gate to run to the tomb to see for himself.

For those of us who've felt at some time or another that we've blown our Christian witness, that through our actions or through our words we've denied Christ and we wonder, *"How can we ever look into His eyes again?"* He offers us the gift of forgiveness.

You see the issue isn't whether or not Jesus can forgive us, the issue is whether or not we can forgive ourselves.

Jesus was telling Peter that, not only did He forgive Him, He believed in Him and that there were greater days ahead.

If you feel that you've blown it, that you could never face Jesus again, He wants you to know that when He conquered death, He conquered it for you.

On Palm Sunday Jesus wept over Jerusalem. He wept for those who would reject Him and the truth of His message.

It appeared that there was no future for the people of Jerusalem. But listen to the promise that Jesus gives to the Apostles before returning to the Father.

Acts 1:8, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

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Conclusion

With the crucifixion, Jerusalem may have given up on Jesus, but with the resurrection it became evident that Jesus hadn't given up on them.

And so, with the resurrection, Jerusalem was given hope for the future. When Jesus wept over Jerusalem, He was weeping over all those who rejected His message and His truth.

But He didn't give up on Jerusalem and He hasn't given up on those who reject His message today.

Peter reminded the church 2000 years ago of that reality when He wrote in 2 Peter 3:9, *"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."*

We don't have to read very far into the book of Acts when we see the Holy Spirit empowering the Apostles, and Peter.

Peter, the one who had denied Jesus, was now preaching and literally thousands of people in Jerusalem were coming to know Christ.

The message Peter preached to the people of Jerusalem was simple, *“God sent His Son, you killed Him, now say you’re sorry.”*

It was in Jerusalem that the church was born, and the gift that Christ gave to the world was the gift of the Church.

Jesus said this about the church in Luke 6:47, *“As for everyone who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice, I will show you what they are like.”*

From out of the generosity of Easter the church was born, and generosity has been the legacy of the church for 2000 years.

From the very beginning we see the early church caring for the *“least of these”* and they followed the example of Christ.

Jesus’ brother James reminded the early church in James 1:27, *“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”*

And they got it. Since the birth of the church, we see followers of Christ reaching out to widows and orphans, to the sick and the despised.

History has recorded the generosity of those who follow the risen Christ. Those who have built hospitals and orphanages who have ministered to the hungry and the displaced.

Today, when there's a disaster, it's Christian relief agencies funded by Christian churches that are in the forefront. They're simply responding to the generosity of Easter.

How will you respond to the gift of the resurrection? Maybe like Peter you need to realize that Christ hasn't given up on you even if you feel that you gave up on Him.

Maybe you're like the people of Jerusalem who turned their back on Christ while He was on the Cross, but He didn't give up on Jerusalem and He hasn't given up on you.

Over forty years ago, Bill Gaither wrote these lyrics:

*Because He lives, I can face tomorrow,
Because He lives, all fear is gone;
Because I know He holds the future,
And life is worth the living,
Just because He lives!*