

SOUTHPORT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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March 22-23, 2008

“BELIEVING IN THE RISEN LORD”

MARK 1:1-14

How many of you have seen the recent movie, *The Bucket List*, starring a rather unlikely pair, Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman? It's about two terminally ill men who take a road trip to do the things they always said they would do before they “kicked the bucket.” In anticipation of the film's release, Nicholson was interviewed for an article in *Parade* magazine. As he was reflecting on his personal life, Nicholson said:

“I used to live so freely. The mantra for my generation was ‘Be your own man!’ I always said, ‘Hey, you can have whatever rules you want—I'm going have mine. I'll accept the guilt. I'll pay the check. I'll do the time.’ I chose my own way. That was my philosophical position until well into my 50s. As I've gotten older, I've had to adjust.”

But reality has a way of getting the attention of even a Jack Nicholson. Later in the interview, Nicholson adds:

“We all want to go on forever, don't we? We fear the unknown. Everybody goes to that wall, yet nobody know what's on the other side. That's why we fear death.”

I believe that death is one of the two greatest fears we have in this age and any age. The other is sometimes even greater—life. What is going to happen to me before I die?

Today we are going to face both of those fears head on as we travel back in time to a cemetery and see some people, just like you and me, who were struggling with death and life. As we look at the resurrection of Jesus the Christ, we see people who are having some honest doubts about believing in the Risen Lord. It is easy for us to be critical of them, wondering how they could possibly doubt the Risen Lord who was appearing to them. Yet, even when we look at the facts, we may find ourselves questioning our belief in the Risen Lord in our words as well as our actions.

Please come with me back to that first Easter looking at it through the lens of Mark 16:1-14. Read the passage.

THE EARLY FOLLOWERS OF JESUS HAD A DIFFICULT TIME BELIEVING IN THE RISEN LORD.

There were three women who were the first to discover the resurrection. They were hurrying to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body, a task they couldn't complete on Friday before sundown the beginning of the Passover Sabbath. First they could not believe their eyes to find that the large cart-wheel like stone had been rolled away from the mouth of the tomb. They had no explanation.

Then they are alarmed at the sight of an angel who is sitting on the shelf where the body of Jesus had been laid. The angel, true to form, delivered a message from God, beginning with the familiar words, “Don’t be alarmed.” Then 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,” as he pointed to the empty grave clothes. Then they are given instructions to go and tell the disciples and Peter to meet Jesus in Galilee.

Notice how these wonderfully faithful women respond to the rolled away stone, the empty tomb and the message of the angel. “Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.” In sheer fear, they had difficulty believing in the resurrection.

While some scholars question the authenticity of the last part of this chapter, we find three times in verses 9-14 of people having difficulty believing in the Risen Lord. After Mary Magdalene had been encountered by Jesus in His first post-resurrection appearance, she quickly shared the astounding news with the grieving disciples. We are told in verse 11, “They did not believe it.” It was too good to be true. It was wishful thinking on the part of Mary Magdalene.

Next in verse 12, Jesus appeared to two of His followers on the Road to Emmaus. Once again, in verse 13 we are told when they shared the news with the rest of the disciples, “they did not believe them either.” It was too far-fetched to comprehend.

Finally in verse 14 as Jesus, the Risen Lord appears to the Eleven Disciples while they were eating together. We are told that “He rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen Him after He had risen.” They had gone through so much in those past few days. From hoping that He was going to set up His kingdom at any moment, their hopes were smashed when He died on the cross.

At the end of Matthew’s Gospel just before Jesus sends forth His disciples with the Great Commission, we are told in 28:16-17, “Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw Him, they worshipped Him; but some doubted.” Jesus has been appearing to His disciples for 40 days, yet some still “doubted” or were confused, not knowing what to make of all that had transpired.

If you are honest, you might find yourself in the same place today. You are honestly questioning the reality of the Resurrection of Jesus. Certainly, it would be wonderful if it were true. Yet, it is so far outside the boundaries of the ordinary that it may stretch your sense of credibility. If others want to believe, that’s great for them. But, for you belief in the Risen Lord is very difficult.

On this subject of believing in the Risen Christ, Walter Martin and Jill Rische write:

“Science says if there is any such thing as infallible proof, it is the repetition of the same experiment. Jesus rose from the dead, and Mary Magdalene encountered him—experiment one. The women encountered him—experiment two. The two disciples encountered him—experiment three. The apostles encountered him—experiment four. Five hundred people saw him after the Resurrection—experiment five.

Each one of these is the repetition of the same experiment. They all encountered the same phenomenon. What was it? He was alive! That's what changed the history of the world."

The German theologian, Wolfhart Pannenberg speaks to this subject when he writes:

"The evidence for Jesus' resurrection is so strong that nobody would question it except for two things: First, it is a very unusual event. And second, if you believe it happened, you have to change the way you live."

Like those early followers, if you are having difficulty believing in the Risen Lord, what is your reason? An unusual event? Fearful of the way it might change your life?

ONCE THEY BELIEVED, THOSE EARLY FOLLOWERS SHARED THEIR FAITH WITH THE WORLD.

It is important to turn to the rest of the story in Acts 1 and 2 to discover what happens; what makes the difference. Just before Jesus is to ascend into heaven, Jesus tells His followers to stay put there in Jerusalem for the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Then He tells them what is going to happen to them when He says in verse 8, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Dear friends, it is in this verse and what follows in chapter 2 that we find out what really happened to these fearful, doubting, fragile disciples. Ten days after Jesus ascended into heaven, the disciples are obediently in Jerusalem in one place when the Holy Spirit comes on all of them just as Jesus had promised. It is the promised Holy Spirit who makes the difference.

Filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit, their unbelief and confusion melts away. On that Pentecost, those once frightened disciples are able to speak to the international community in their own languages. Hearing the good news about Jesus in their own languages, spoke to them at the very depths of their beings. We are told that 3,000 people from all over the then-known world believed in the Risen Lord that day.

Think about it. These same disciples who had scattered at the time of Jesus betrayal, trial, and crucifixion, are now out there in the open, in plain view of the religious leaders, witnessing to others right there in the middle of Jerusalem. These same confused followers of Jesus, after the Holy Spirit indwells them, are transformed from doubters to effective communicators of the faith.

Just as Jesus had told them, they did become witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Even though persecuted and scattered, these same disciples boldly proclaimed Jesus as Savior and Lord so that Christianity spread like wildfire. Empowered and encouraged by the Holy Spirit all of them, but John, were martyred for their faith in the Risen Lord. These same men became one of the most compelling proofs for the Resurrection of Jesus.

Listen to these wonderfully descriptive words of Dorothy Sayers as she talks about what happened to these men when they believed in the Risen Lord:

“The disciples had seen the strong hands of God twist the crown of thorns into a crown of glory, and in hands as strong as that they knew themselves safe. They had misunderstood practically everything Christ had ever said to them, no matter: the thing made sense at last, and the meaning was far beyond anything they had dreamed. They had expected a walkover, and they beheld a victory; they expected an earthly Messiah, and they beheld the Soul of Eternity.”

TODAY, WE COME FACE TO FACE WITH THE RISEN LORD.

Like the disciples that first Easter, you and I are encountered by Jesus, the One who was crucified and is now risen. How are you going to respond to Him?

In the rational, scientific world in which we find ourselves, you may be having a difficult time believing. Now you wouldn't want the person next to you knowing that's how you feel, but it's the truth.

If that's you, it's alright. Jesus understands you and just as He did with His early followers, He treats you with patience and respect. He knows how you are wired and what your concerns are today. He will not try to trick or manipulate you. He really wants to have a lasting relationship with you.

I have often shared the story of a psychiatrist who came to me when I was a young pastor. He was in a bad place in his life and needed something more. We spent 3 months meeting weekly talking about what it meant for Jesus Christ to be our Savior, bringing us forgiveness for our past, peace, joy and meaning in the present, and hope for the future. We talked about how as Lord Jesus wanted to bring us direction and guidance in the most positive way.

While he agreed that this is exactly what he was looking for, we spent 6 more months talking about all of the rational reasons he couldn't take the step, by faith, to accept the gift of new life that God wanted to give him. Finally, when he had exhausted his list of questions and obstacles, he embraced the Risen Lord. Just as was true for the early disciples, the Holy Spirit filled and empowered him and allowed him to believe even though every question was not answered and every obstacle was not removed. That was resurrection day for him as he began the journey of faith with Jesus, the Risen Lord.

If you have had a difficult time believing in the Risen Lord, He meets you where you are and desires to be in a relationship with you. It means opening yourself up to Him, admitting your doubt and misgivings, and asking Him to forgive you and to walk with you. When we do that, the same Holy Spirit who transformed the lives of the early followers can also begin His work of transforming you in the most positive way. He can help you to experience life as it was meant to be lived. He can fill the emptiness and bring you new joy and hope.

Maybe you have believed in the Risen Lord for a long time, but your walk with Him has become casual and commonplace. It's not like He has moved away from or disappointed you. If the truth be known your life is being lived as if you really don't believe in the resurrection. Your experience does not come close to resembling the joyful worship and the passionate service we see in those early believers of the Risen Lord.

Listen to these words from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a 20th Century Saint who was martyred for the cause of Christ:

“Socrates mastered the art of dying; Christ overcame death as “the last enemy” (I Corinthians 15:16). There is a real difference between the two things; the one is within the scope of human possibilities, the other means resurrection. It’s not from *ars moriendi*, the art of dying, but from the resurrection of Christ, that a new and purifying wind can blow through our present world...If a few people really believed that and acted on it in their daily lives, a great deal would be changed. To live in the light of the resurrection—that is what Easter means.”

Dear friends, if we really believe in the Risen Lord, we can be used by Him to change the world. “Change” is a word that’s being thrown around a lot in this year’s presidential campaign. You and I can be agents of change, in the same way that those early disciples were used to change their world.

That only happens as we open ourselves up to the Risen Christ and allow the Holy Spirit to fill and empower us like He did those first followers. If the fire of passion for the Risen Christ has grown dim, you can allow Him to re-ignite the passion of your commitment right now, here today.

Praise God! Christ has risen! He has risen, indeed! Do you really believe that?