

SERMON FOR EASTER

(Cape Town - 12 April 2009)

Text: 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. ²Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb ³and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" ⁴But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. ⁵As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. ⁶"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. ⁷But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" ⁸Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid. (Mark 16:1-8)

I know we are celebrating Easter, but let me start off by reflecting with you shortly on death. We all know that death is quite inevitable. But despite the fact that we all know that one day we are going to die, death is not something that is naturally accepted by us. Even at a ripe old age of 70, or 80, or even 90 years death does not come easy. Even on our death bed, with no chance of recovery, we tend to fight it with every grain in our body. Part of the reason why we do so, is that death is so final. We just hate this idea that our life just comes to an end.

What exasperates the problem is that we live in a time when the notion of life after death is generally called into question. Most people today just don't believe that a person who is dead may one day be resurrected again. Far more widespread is the motto: "Live out your desires because tomorrow you are dead." In other words: Enjoy the moment, because once you are dead, you are dead - that is it. A resurrection along the lines of my dead body and soul being re-awakened seems quite implausible to the modern or post-modern human mind - and is therefore widely rejected.

Interestingly, however, this rejection of life after death is primarily confined to the modern *Western World*. In the Eastern World and especially in ancient Israel the resurrection of the dead and life after death were widely expected. At the time of the New Testament, that was the norm.

Last Sunday, on Palm Sunday, we mentioned the resurrection of Lazarus in Bethany just before Jesus entered Jerusalem. Why did this large crowd follow Jesus with such excitement? Their primary excitement was not that Lazarus was actually resurrected from the dead. They were excited because the resurrection of Lazarus indicated to them that the Messianic age was dawning them. For them it was a sign that the promised Messiah had arrived. That somebody who was dead, lives again, was not such a big issue to them.

It is against this background that we should read our sermon text. With the three women arriving at the tomb of Jesus on that first Easter morning there are especially two striking aspects: The first one is: They are totally surprised by the resurrection. What they find at the tomb of Jesus, is obviously the last thing they expected. The other surprising aspect is, the lack of effort on the part of the evangelist to prove the resurrection of Jesus.

Let us start with the last one. If it was a matter of proofing to the doubtful mind that Jesus

had in fact been resurrected, the evangelist gets it all wrong. In reading this narrative, it is quite obvious that the evangelist was just recalling the events as he had heard them.

His story starts with the three women being the first and primary witnesses of Jesus' resurrection. Well, I can tell you, if Mark intended to "proof" the resurrection, he would never have mentioned the women. As you may know, in ancient times the testimony of a woman was not accepted in a court of law. And this is the reason, why the apostle Paul in arguing the resurrection of Jesus to the doubtful Corinthians, simply doesn't mention the women. In 1 Corinthians 15 he provides his readers with a list of witnesses. It goes like this: "... **[first] he [Jesus] appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time [and so on]....**" (15:5-8). Do you notice something? He never mentions any women.

But the fact that Mark does, raises the trustworthiness of his account. He is not arguing a point. He is just retelling the story as it happened. In fact, even more surprising is the ending of the story. Once the women entered the tomb, there is a young man, an angel, who tells them: "**He has risen...[and now] Go, and tell his disciples and Peter**". But instead of doing so, we read that they were terrified and bewildered. They ran away from the tomb and told nobody. And extraordinary as it may seem, that is where the original Gospel of Mark ends: Women running away from an empty tomb.

As so often in the stories of Jesus, also this Gospel is open-ended. There is no final conclusion. The story is just told and to use the rubric of an e-TV election debate: "You be the judge".

The second extraordinary aspect of this story, is the "surprise" in the resurrection of Jesus. As I have already noted: In ancient times there was a general belief in the resurrection. So why are the women so totally surprised and bewildered by the words of the angel: "**He is risen**"?

The reason for their surprise is the cross. The reason why they are so shocked is that three days before Jesus was publicly crucified as a "criminal".

This is the crux. When Jesus was captured in the Garden of Gethsemane, brutally flogged, and cruelly nailed to the cross, the followers of Jesus had expected God to intervene. When God didn't intervene, they drew the conclusion that Jesus had been cursed. In Deuteronomy 21:23 it is written: "**Anyone who is hung on a tree is cursed by God**". And that is exactly what the followers of Jesus saw on Good Friday. There was a man cursed, "**a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering**" (Is.53:3). In their own hearts they didn't want to accept that this man was cursed. They loved him that is why the women went to the grave to anoint his body *despite the disgrace of Good Friday*.

So what kind of people were resurrected from the dead? Ancient belief was that they had to be "holy men", without blemish, but definitely not anybody who was cursed. No wonder the women got a fright when they arrived at the tomb of Jesus. Against the background of the "cross", they *never* expected "this man" to be raised.

The words of the angel to the three women highlight this. The angel says to them: **“You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen.”** In others words: “Yes, you are not mistaken. It is indeed the crucified one, who has been raised by God.” The women are shocked. They run away.

But as already noted, this is the crux of the Easter story. If a popular Barack Obama, for example, is killed and resurrected, it means nothing to me.

But if *Jesus* is resurrected, that is a totally different story. Let me quote the prophet Isaiah (53:3-6). He writes about the Servant of God: **He** [and you will see the similarities with Jesus] **was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering... and we esteemed him not.** And then he adds: **“Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God... But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities...by his wounds we are healed.”**

The man who died on the cross and then was raised by God, is the man who took the punishment for our sins upon himself. *That* is the Easter story. We are not just celebrating a resurrection of the dead. We are celebrating that God raised *Jesus* from the dead. We are celebrating the fact that God raised the one from the dead who paid the penalty of our sins.

Initially we noted, death is not just a “natural” process. There is a reason for death. According to Scripture death is the result of sin. Death is the result of us being separated from God. The apostle Paul writes to the Romans: **“The wages of sin is death”** (6:23). In other words, the reason why we die, is because our relationship with a God isn't right. And this something we tend to ignore or tend to overlook. Deep down in hearts we resist the idea that one day we will have to give account of our lives before God. We just wish our “wrongs” away and just hope that one day our sins will not matter.

But they do matter. And one day our lives *will* be judged. There are people in our country who may never “get their day in court”. But we will get our day in court. And it is vitally important that on that day, the one who paid for my sins will stand next to God and intercede on my behalf: “I know this man. Everything has been paid for him.” We celebrate the resurrection of the one who paid for our sins.

Jesus said to Martha, the sister of Lazarus: **“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.”** **“Do you believe this?”** Jesus asked Martha.

Today he asks you: “Do you believe this? You have heard a very simple account of what happened on that first Easter morning spoken by three women. Do you believe it?”

If you do, and accept this Lord as your Saviour, then and only then it is time to celebrate Easter: The one who paid for my sins has been resurrected. Hallelujah! Amen.

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