

Mark 16:1-8  
April 12, 2009, Easter Sunday

Hampton Baptist  
Charles R. Smith

## "A Ray of Hope"

Mary Rose Betten, Catholic lay leader/playwright, was directing a children's Easter performance and overseeing the casting so that each child felt comfortable with his or her role. One boy insisted he wanted to be the rock in front of the garden tomb. "Wouldn't you like to have a speaking role?" she asked him. But he would have no other.

The presentation went smoothly. Once again, she asked the boy why he wanted to play the rock. His smile beamed at her: "Oh, it felt so good to let Jesus out of the tomb." (Jean W. Spencer, Camarillo, CA, *The Joyful Noiseletter*, April 1994, p. 2.)

Today, we celebrate the fact that Jesus is no longer in the tomb but is risen from the dead. Our Gospel Lesson *begins* with the *ending* of the Sabbath. Jesus had died a cruel, agonizing death on the cross. From a distance, Mary Magdalene, Salome, and Mary the mother of James and Joses had watched Jesus suffer. They had heard him cry with a loud voice, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" They had wondered the same thing. These ladies had followed Jesus through his public ministry; they had heard his teachings; they had seen his miracles; they had experienced his touch.

But now he was dead. All that they held dear was now being called into question. They had lost their friend; they had lost their hope. How could God have allowed this to happen? Jesus had died at 3:00 on Friday afternoon. These ladies watched Joseph of Arimathea lay Jesus in a tomb hewn from the rock. Through their tears, they had viewed a large stone rolled in front of the tomb. The Jewish Sabbath began at 6:00 Friday afternoon and lasted until 6:00 Saturday afternoon. This had to have been the most gloomy of Sabbath days for them. And the nights were probably even worse. I imagine that their sleep had been troubled and filled with tossings and turnings.

So at their first chance, after the Sabbath was over, they left their homes in Bethany, about two miles from Jerusalem, and started the journey to the tomb. Their intent was to anoint Jesus with the spices for burial. He had not been anointed before he was laid in the tomb, and there just had not been any time to do it. Their Sabbath was intended for *rest*, but how *could* they rest knowing that their best friend had died . . . unjustly. They began their journey before sunrise so that they could be at the tomb when the sun came up.

If you think about it, this was a very brave act on the part of these three women. Although it was only two miles from Bethany to Jerusalem, they had to travel under the cover of darkness. Yet the urgency of their action far outweighed any danger they may have encountered.

Knowing the ladies left with such urgency, and realizing their intent of anointing the body, one can only conclude that they fully expected to find the body of Jesus exactly where they had seen it placed on Friday afternoon. Although Jesus had assured them of his resurrection, although he had told them that he would rise again on the third day after his death, these ladies were either not *remembering* these statements, or they were not *believing* them.

Sounds kinda like us, doesn't it? Sometimes, especially in times of adversity, we don't *fully* understand, we don't *want* to understand or we don't *try* to understand that God is with us. It seems that when circumstances are the toughest, we have little faith. We expect the situation *not* to get better; we *script* our circumstances. We lose hope in a positive alternative, because we have been let down before. Like the ladies on the way to the tomb, we ask, "How could God have allowed this to

happen?" We have entered an impenetrable darkness, one where no light can be seen; one where shadows are not cast, because the entire circumstance is a dark shadow. We wonder how any ray of hope can ever penetrate this lightless abyss. This was the condition of these three ladies.

With the exception of the women and one disciple, *everyone* had deserted Jesus. Earlier, Mark recorded that his disciples had fled when Jesus was arrested. And who can forget the story of Peter's denials of Jesus. After the Last Supper, Jesus predicted that Peter would disown him three times, while Peter declared that he would go all the way to the end with Jesus, *even* to the death. Jesus' prediction came true; on three separate incidents, Peter sought to dissociate himself from Jesus for fear of persecution. Peter distanced himself from the One who just a few hours earlier he promised that he would follow him until his death.

But these ladies *had* followed Jesus *all* the way to the end . . . and now beyond. They had watched with agony the crucifixion; their hopes had been dashed as they saw him set in the tomb with a great stone covering its entrance. They had grieved during a black Sabbath. Now, they were on their way to the tomb. With every step, they remembered his goodness. As they walked from Bethany to Jerusalem, they were reminded of his love and kindness.

As they walked, it dawned on one of them, "Who will roll the large stone away from the tomb?" A large circular stone, similar to the wheel of a cart, had been rolled down an incline and lodged into place blocking the entrance to the tomb.

Just after sunrise is a serene time; the earth is quiet, and the atmosphere is peaceful. This was the time that the ladies topped the hill and through the morning mist, they saw it. They expected to see the tomb as they had left it. The image of the large stone over the tomb's entrance was an indelible snapshot deposited into their memory banks. But that is *not* what they saw. *Someone* had moved the stone.

With distress, the ladies may have wondered, "Who could've done this? And why? Was it not enough that they killed him unjustly? Was it not enough that he suffered the most dehumanizing of executions? Now someone must have stolen the body, and who knows what they have done with it. People have been so mean, and now this."

They were startled and frightened. But they were also courageous. Notice that our text states that the women went *into* the tomb. They were again being openly identified with the Jesus movement. For them to anoint his body indicated their allegiance to this dead *hero*, who was also a dead *criminal* in the eyes of the Roman government.

Today, a crime scene is sealed off with yellow tape to prevent the disturbing of evidence. If a crime had been committed, these ladies could've been indicted as at least being accomplices. Yellow tape keeps people away from the crime scene; *nothing* could've kept these ladies out.

They had come to the tomb with spices fully expecting to find Jesus in his grave clothes. Now with the stone rolled away, they still entered the tomb. What had occurred was far from their understanding. Instead of finding Jesus wrapped in linen, they found a messenger from God. He immediately tried to put the fears at ease by saying, "Don't be alarmed."

"What? Are you kidding? My life is falling apart. My world is in shambles. Things just *can't* get any worse. And you say 'don't be alarmed?'"

And then they received the ray of hope. The news of Jesus' resurrection was a light that penetrated their darkened world. The Easter experience had erased their black Sabbath. "Jesus the Nazarene, the one who was crucified, has risen! He is not here! And for evidence, if you still don't believe me, then see for yourselves. Look at the place where they laid him."

These ladies had seen the place where Joseph of Arimathea had laid Jesus' corpse. They had watched him secure the linen cloth around his crucified body on Friday. But now, on the first day of the week, on Sunday, these ladies looked at the same place where Jesus had been laid. The messenger was right. Jesus' body was not there.

But the messenger continued his message, "Go tell the disciples, those who deserted him when he was arrested, *even Peter*, the one who openly denied him three times, go tell them that Jesus still lives and that he will meet them in Galilee, the province where they had seen him perform so many good works. He will be there, just as he told you."

With God, there is always a second chance. No matter how bad our circumstances seem, no matter how ominous our situation, no matter how deep our abyss, God is always available to provide a second chance. And for Peter, this gutless, cowardly, turn-coat, this message was a ray of hope.

Yet even with this ray of hope, the women were still trembling and bewildered. A ray of hope doesn't take away anxiety, but it does help us deal with it better. A ray of hope does not remove fear, but it does assure us that God can help. A ray of hope does not necessarily solve the problem, but it does indicate that there is a solution.

Today, I pose this question, "What is *your* ray of hope?" Some may be having difficulty with their marriages, their families, their employment, their finances, or their futures. Some today struggle with bad news of cancer, of organ failures, of job loss, and the loss of a loved one. My prayer is that you will have an Easter experience. The darkness of what we call Good Friday could not have been any more dispiriting. But on the heels of that bad news, after walking through the valley, these ladies emerged on the dawn of Easter morning by witnessing a ray of hope.

This light which pierced their darkness revealed the *best* news that could come: Jesus was not dead! Instead, he was alive! The risen Christ had conquered even death!

So for those today whose days are filled with despair, for those who wonder when life is going to get better, for those who long for a brighter tomorrow, for those who think that God has forgotten them, or God has abandoned them, or that God is trying to punish them, take heart. Have hope! Jesus has overcome death, and if that can happen, then Jesus can help you with every problem you might experience. While even death seems final, the good news of Easter reveals that with a belief in Christ, not even *death* can have the last word. The message of the resurrection communicates hope amid the most dire of circumstances. Compare your situation with that of the ladies in the resurrection story. Look at their plight; put yourselves in their shoes.

Jim Wallis, founder of Sojourners, has stated, "Hope is believing in spite of the evidence and then watching the evidence change." (lecturing at Emory and Henry College, Emory, Virginia.) Let's not allow the evidence of today to steal the hope of tomorrow. Let's rejoice that nothing, not even death, is more powerful than our God. And finally, on this Easter Sunday, let's allow that ray of hope to change us into believing, hoping, and trusting that we too can have an Easter experience, when we allow God to overcome our greatest problem or fear. Thanks be to God for Easter, the reason for our faith. AMEN.