

Mark 16:9-20

May 24, 2009 Memorial Day Weekend; Ascension Sunday

Hampton Baptist

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“What in the World Have You Saved Us For?”

On this Memorial Day weekend, it is good to remember. The American tradition of remembering those who died in war dates back to post Civil War days, although the last Monday of May did not become the official national observance of Memorial Day until 1971. We need to be reminded of those who selflessly gave their lives for us. Because the holiday is called Memorial Day, it is designed to remember those who have *already* died. Our freedom is due largely to the sacrifices of others before us, great men and women who valiantly gave their lives for our freedoms. Some here today have relatives that you specifically remember who gave *their* lives for *your* freedom. Remembering their sacrifices is *moving* to say the least. Their gift to us should not be forgotten nor minimized. Instead we should cherish our freedom even more. The idea that someone would give his/her life so that we could enjoy *our* freedom should be enough to move us to action.

Today, I would like for us to remember a great one who sacrificed *his* life for *our* freedom. Without *his* sacrifice, we would not enjoy our abundant life. *His* death for us should never be taken for granted nor minimized. We should never forget the supreme action of the man known as Jesus, the Son of God, who gave his life for us. But, he not only *died* for us; he also rose from the dead. Had he remained in the tomb, had he not risen from the dead, we would simply be honoring the life of a great prophet, teacher, and healer.

But the story does not end at his death. His resurrection is an exclusive claim of any religion. Islam's Mohammed died; Buddha's life also ended at death. Confucius, although offering many wise sayings, was not powerful enough to break the bonds of mortality. Only Jesus has been resurrected. Jesus is the sole *claimant* to resurrection power; Jesus is the only person who was stronger than the grave. Therefore, on Memorial Day weekend, we remember the One who died for us, but more importantly are challenged by his mission for us.

While this is Memorial Day weekend, on the Christian calendar, today is Ascension Sunday. Our New Testament Lesson mentions the ascension in the summary of the post-resurrection narrative. Many of your Bibles may have the following note regarding these verses: “The most early manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16:9-20.” These verses were probably added by a later scribe; they probably were not written from Mark's pen. Nevertheless, I do not doubt their accuracy, because one can easily find their references in Matthew, Luke and John, all of which were written *after* Mark's gospel.

In examining the experiences of Mary Magdalene in verses 9-11 and what is commonly known as the Emmaus Road experience found in verses 12-13, we can find that Jesus appeared directly to select folks after the resurrection. He shared conversation with them. As a result of their experience with the risen Christ, they reported the good news to the grieving disciples. Their belief, resulting from a personal experience, moved them to tell others.

The sequestered disciples in an upper room rejected the eye-witness accounts of Mary Magdalene and the two on the Emmaus Road. *They* did not believe until Jesus appeared directly to *them*. He confronted them for their lack of faith and for their discounting of the messengers who had seen Jesus. He then directed them to offer the good news to all the world, to every person. Great signs and wonders would accompany this telling of the good news. If they remembered Jesus by their actions, then the unthinkable could happen. Even the miraculous. Jesus then went to heaven. The

author of this epilogue to Mark's gospel does not go into detail about the ascension; those details can be found at the end of Luke's gospel and also at the beginning of the Book of Acts, which was also written by Dr. Luke. Our ascension "verse" simply mentioned that after Jesus had spoken to the disciples, (quoting the Apostles Creed) "He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty." So, Jesus went to *heaven*, and the disciples went to *work*.

Why did they not get it earlier? Why did they respond in disbelief to Mary Magdalene and the Emmaus travelers? Maybe they were so focused on their own pain, their wondering about their future, their pity-filled self-absorption that they refused to believe the good news. But after Jesus ascended into heaven, the disciples got busy. The *memory* of their experience with Jesus was the fuel that drove them.

*Remembering* should also move *us* to action. Jesus died for us, for you and for me. We *talk* a lot about God and about God's love. At Easter, we focus on the resurrection, and in communion we concentrate on Christ's death. But his saving act of crucifixion for our sins was for a *reason*. Christ did not die for us so that He could draw attention to himself as the sole claimant of resurrection power. Jesus did not rise from the dead to provide a happy ending to an otherwise tragic story. Jesus rose from the dead to *save* us from our sins; our acceptance of him provides us salvation. Our faith plus his grace equals our salvation.

So why did God choose to send Jesus to save us from our sins? The primary reason is that we are to continue the work that Jesus started. We are to be the hands and feet of God. The verse found at the top of our worship page reads "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." This is the mission of the church. What we do as a church should be to continue the mission of Jesus; our primary role is to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. Because if we don't do it, if the church fails, then the mission will not be accomplished.

A man was charged with being drunk and setting a bed on fire. When he went before the judge he said, "Your honor, I *am* guilty of being drunk, but that bed was on fire when I got in it." The world was already in trouble when the church got in it, and it still is. Without the church's mission - its message about the Master - the world does not stand a chance, for we are bound and determined to destroy ourselves and each other. The church's mission is to be the hands and feet of God.

Kyle Matthews wrote and recorded a song which speaks to this idea; while the grammar is colloquial, it is entitled "*What in the World Have You Saved Us For?*"

*If we were not loved to love; If we were not touched to touch;  
If we were not led to lead; If we were not fed to feed;  
If you did not sacrifice, so we could have new life,  
fuller and deeper than before;  
Then Lord, what in the world have you saved us for?*

*If we were not taught to teach; If we were not sought to seek;  
If we were not helped to help; If we were not told to tell;  
If you've not forgiven us to let mercy live in us*

*so you could love through us once more;  
Then Lord, what in the world have you saved us for?  
There's a reason we were brought to life:  
Lord, you made us for this special place and time,  
And you showed the way for us to find  
our Sacred purpose, our place in your design.*

*For, we have been loved to love; we have been touched to touch;  
We have been led to lead; we have been fed to feed;  
If you did not set us free,  
so that our songs might lead prisoners toward the open door  
Then Lord, what in the world have you saved us for?*

All of us have gifts and have received gifts from God's bountiful favor. Some of us fail to recognize these gifts and how we should be serving as conduits. God has *gifted* us; we in turn are encouraged to share these gifts with others. All of us have been loved; in turn, we are to love others. We are to touch others, because Christ has touched us. Some are gifted leaders and teachers; we are to lead and teach by example and word. Because all of us have more than adequate food, we are to help feed those who have little or nothing. We are to seek those who need help and then diligently seek to help them, just as Jesus has pursued us and helped us. If we don't follow Christ's example, then what has he saved us for? To come to church and *remember* to thank him? Not enough. To *remember* him by dropping a ten-dollar bill in the offering plate every week? Fairly insignificant response to the One who gave his life for us.

Instead, Jesus has saved *us* so that we could continue the work *he* started. Our remembrance of what he has done for us should be motivation to love, to touch, to lead, to feed, to teach, to seek, to help, and to tell. Like those in our gospel lesson today, *our* belief resulting from a personal experience should move *us* to tell others. That's why it is good to *remember* the One named Jesus who sacrificed for our freedom. The idea that someone would give his/her life so that we could enjoy our freedom should be enough to move us to action. We should remember what Christ did for us, and then we should offer his love to others. *That* is the primary mission of the church.

A young man went into a beautiful new library. He stood there on the first floor, and looked around at glass-covered display cases, stamp collections, marble statues, pictures, various announcements about classes and activities offered, magazine racks - and then said with a bewildered look, "Where do they keep the books?" He thought a library was a place for books.

A grand post office was built in a certain town. It cost several million dollars. But when it was opened and dedicated, it was discovered that the architect had left out one thing. There was no place to mail a letter. A post office is for letters.

I read of a church which had something on its sign out front which was bothersome. There was no sermon title, worship invitation, or catchy sentence. Instead, there were only these words: "Karate Classes Every Tuesday." What does that have to do with church? What good would that do a person who was looking for hope, help, light, and love? A church has a message about Christ, or it is not a church.

And *why* is this message so important? Because it is the *only* answer for the problems we face, and the problems of the world. Two hunters got lost. One remembered reading that if you ever get lost while hunting, you should shoot three times in the air. They tried it. No help came. They tried it again. No help. One asked, "What do we do now?"

The other said, "I don't know. I'm all out of arrows." When we forget what we are supposed to be doing and work hard at other tasks rather than *gospel* work, then we have lost our mission. Our primary mission is not to be a concert hall; our primary mission is not to be a religious museum full of historical artifacts; our primary mission is not to be a philanthropic entity helping non-profits. If we lose focus on our *primary* mission, we are like lost hunters shooting arrows in the air. No one hears them, nor our cries for help. No one even cares. But Jesus the Christ cares. God cares. Help is on the way. Help has come. *That* is the church's message. Jesus is Christ, and our primary mission is that we are his body, the ones who have been chosen to continue his mission.

This weekend, as a nation we are being called to remember. As you remember Christ's death for you, ask yourself, "What in the world has he saved **you** for?"