

Message: See and believe

Is that a cliffhanger or what? What did she see? The video “Return of the King”¹ captures a moment in the garden near the tomb, when Mary looks up and is surprised to see ... who? The scene captures the drama of Peter’s words, recorded by Mark in the passage we read together earlier. Please permit me to set the stage

Jesus is dead. The Romans crucified him with the blessing and collusion of the church and politicians. Jesus was captured late Thursday night, at the garden of Gethsemane, where he was praying. Judas Iscariot betrayed him. Peter denied him. Almost all of Jesus’ followers are in hiding, afraid they’re next. There was a mock trial in the middle of the night. Pilate, the Roman governor, agreed to put Jesus to death at the urging of the high priest. Jesus’ mother Mary, John, Mary Magdalene and a few women were there at the end. They saw Jesus die on the cross at around 3:00 pm. A few influential supporters took Jesus down from the cross and put his body in a nearby tomb, rolling a large stone in front of the entrance.

Jesus is dead. The movement is done.

That was the mood on Saturday. Everyone’s been at home keeping Sabbath law. They’re stunned and in shock. There are a lot of tears, sorrow and a sleepless night. No one could have imagined the life-changing whirlwind of the last 48 hours. They didn’t remember what Jesus said a few weeks earlier, “*We’re going up to Jerusalem. The Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the legal experts. They’ll condemn him to death and hand him over to the Gentiles. They’ll ridicule him, spit on him, torture him, and kill him. After three days, he will rise up*” (Mark 10:33-35, CEB). Jesus predicted his own death, but no one close to him wanted to believe it. They didn’t understand.

You know who did believe? Jesus’ enemies. Mark records two instances showing Jesus’ enemies knew about his prophesy. The first was at Jesus’ trial, when “*some ... gave this false testimony against him: ‘We heard him say, “I will destroy this temple made with human hands*

¹ <https://www.worshiphousemedia.com/mini-movies/50328/return-of-the-king>

and in three days will build another, not made with hands." Yet even then their testimony did not agree." (Mark 14:57-59). Jesus' enemies didn't understand what was going on, but it didn't stop them. They were willing to risk the death penalty for giving false testimony.

The second time Jesus' enemies spoke was during his crucifixion.

The cross was outside the city in a very public place. Mark records the scene, "*Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, 'So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!'"*" (Mark 15:28-30). Jesus' enemies were gloating, thinking they'd won. They'd finally see the end of this Jesus and the rabble that followed him. Who are they to change things, disrupting the old way of worshipping and serving God. They didn't get it. They followed the way of hate.

It's baffling. Jesus loved us so much he willingly gave his life for us. Jesus told everyone what would happen, but no one understood it or believed it. In fact, his enemies used it against him.

Passover is finished. God saved us. Who is Jesus?

There were no believers when Jesus died. No one was waiting for Jesus on the morning of the third day with a colt. If they'd been waiting, can you imagine THAT ride into Jerusalem? God had different plans. God's plans include you, me and all people for all time. God's grace is vastly greater than we can possibly imagine. God's greatest work comes down to one, pivotal act.

Jesus rose from the dead. Love leads us on a new way.

God revealed it in an amazing way. That first Easter Sunday started out simply. Three women got up early so they could go finish treating Jesus' body. It was a common practice to visit the tomb of a loved one. Spices would help to mask the smell. This is such a human element to the narrative. We have the same considerations today at wakes and viewings. The three women had many things on their mind that morning. As they walked, they realized they had a problem. There was a very large stone blocking the entrance to the tomb.

How would they move it? That’s when the surprises – God’s revelation, started coming. The women arrived at the tomb. When they did, they got their first surprise. They looked and the stone had been rolled away! But it was the first thing in the morning. Did someone do something to Jesus’ body? They must have rushed in to see. That’s when they got their second surprise. There was a young man dressed in a dazzling white robe sitting there. But no Jesus!

Have you ever been in a situation where you were thrilled and scared at the same time? That’s what Mary, Salome and Mary were experiencing. They were awestruck by the young man and his unusual appearance. They knew he was special. They were also scared because they didn’t see Jesus’ body. They didn’t know what happened to him.

That’s when they got their third surprise. The young man, okay, let’s call him an angel – one of God’s messengers, spoke, *“Don’t be alarmed. You’re 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’ll see him, just as he told you’”* (Mark 16:6-7, NIV). The message is wonderful, but confusing. What does it mean? Where is Jesus?

There’s a fourth surprise. Did you hear it? God revealed Jesus’ resurrection to the women who followed him. God made them the first, true disciples. God gave them a task: tell others. What a role reversal! Praise God. All they had to do was tell Peter and the others. Hmmm.

What would you do? You’re hearing this message in the comfort of a sanctuary, far removed from extreme violence, foreign occupation and persecution by civil and religious authorities. Few of us have experienced death of a loved one under the circumstances of blatant, public humiliation and hate. It’s hard for us to bridge the cultural, gender and social gulf between our world and Israel in the first century. Some of you have related experiences, but most of us haven’t. If we could go back, I’ll bet we’d do the same thing the women did.

We’d run for a safe place! Trembling, fear and confusion took hold of or possessed the three women. They wanted out of the tomb - in a hurry.

The Greek implies they were in a trance; watching themselves going through the motions. They couldn't pause or stop. They just left.

We'd do the same thing. Here's an illustration to help. If you've ever been in a serious car accident, there's a moment when you're just along for the ride. Time seems to slow down for those few seconds between the time you first reacted and the impact occurs. Afterward, you recall what happened in great clarity and detail, but during the incident you couldn't speak or act or do anything. It's a form of disassociation.

I think that's what Mary, Salome and Mary experienced. They received a shock that disconnected them from what was happening for a short time. Later on, they recovered and were able to tell others about what they saw and heard, even describing their trance-like experience. But, at that moment, all they could do was go through the motions. They believed, but were shocked and amazed. Jesus rose from death.

Who is Jesus? That's the question Peter asks you to answer. You've heard the eye witness account. You've read about the miracles and perhaps even experienced one. No one else ever did what Jesus did. And it was done while the tomb was watched closely by enemies.

Are you shocked and amazed? Maybe you feel like you're watching life like you were in a trance. It will pass. God can save you and set you free, if you trust and believe, even when things are uncertain.

Do you trust God? If this amazing message resonates deep inside you someplace, I urge you to accept it. Then get to know Jesus, not just know about Jesus. Knowing Jesus changes your life powerfully, from the inside-out. It's the reason why we gather on Easter and other times. God exists and we know him.

Who is Jesus? He is the Son of God, our risen Savior!

We aren't Christians because of books, buildings, institutions or politics. We're Christians because of who Jesus is. We're followers because of what Jesus did for us. No one else has ever prophesied their death and resurrection. Jesus did. He did so with love, so that we could be saved and have eternal life. We're free from whatever binds us. Jesus keeps God's promise. So we can trust God.

Why does this matter? It reminds us that there is a higher purpose to what we do. We share a common connection, a bond that unites us in faith. No matter where we are, we’re following a Savior who wants to give us life. Jesus came to give us a new way to live, the way of love.

Who is Jesus? Trust God and believe.

If you want to know Jesus’ love, pray with me ...

“O God, I have gone my own way for too long. My way hasn’t helped me with my problems, my life seems empty. I need a new way. I want to know your love. Come into my life and save me through your mercy and grace. I pray this in the name of the One who rose from the dead, Jesus Christ. Amen.”

If you prayed that prayer for the first time, welcome to the kingdom of God! Praise God. You are God’s child and you are loved. Please share that good news with someone so we can celebrate with you. I encourage you to find a good Christ-centered Church so you can be with others who will help you get to know Jesus.

Mark 16:1-8 (CEB)

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they could go and anoint Jesus' dead body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they came to the tomb. They were saying to each other, “Who’s going to roll the stone away from the entrance for us?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away. (And it was a very large stone!) Going into the tomb, they saw a young man in a white robe seated on the right side; and they were startled. But he said to them, “Don’t be alarmed! You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He isn’t here. Look, here’s the place where they laid him. Go, tell his disciples, especially Peter, that he is going ahead of you into Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you.” Overcome with terror and dread, they fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

Acts 10:34-43 (CEB)

Peter said, “I really am learning that God doesn’t show partiality to one group of people over another. Rather, in every nation, whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to him. This is the message of peace he sent to the Israelites by proclaiming the good news through Jesus Christ: He is Lord of all! You know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism John preached. You know about Jesus of Nazareth, whom God anointed with the Holy Spirit and endowed with power. Jesus traveled around doing good and healing everyone oppressed by the devil because God was with him. We are witnesses of everything he did, both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him up on the third day and allowed him to be seen, not by everyone but by us. We are witnesses whom God chose beforehand, who ate and drank with him after God raised him from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”