

Sermon File # 663

Scripture Text: Mark 16:1-8

Sermon Title: *I Believe Jesus Rose from the Dead* (fifth in sermon series from the Apostles' Creed)

Manuscript written by Roger Roberts and

Sermon preached at International Baptist Church, Brussels, Belgium

On Sunday morning 8 August 2010

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

For additional information regarding this manuscript, contact Roger.Roberts@ibcbrussels.org.

All Rights Reserved.

I Believe Jesus Rose from the Dead

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to Mark 16:1-8. Today we come to the fifth assertion in the Apostles' Creed. We have already affirmed, with this most ancient of Christian creeds, that we "believe in God the Father, almighty Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended into hell;" Today we will look at the next phrase in this great foundational creed, "I believe that on the third day Jesus Christ rose again from the dead."

Of all the four gospel accounts, Mark gives the shortest version of the resurrection of Jesus. In fact, the best textual evidence shows that Mark ends his gospel with verse 8 of this final chapter. As the footnote in your NIV Bible probably says, "The most reliable early manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16:9-20." Of course, Mark knew about resurrection appearances of Jesus recorded in the other gospels, since Simon Peter was one of his primary sources in writing his account. Prominent New Testament scholar, Bishop NT Wright thinks that Mark wrote or at least intended to write a more complete ending and account of Jesus' resurrection appearances. That ending, which would show how the fear of the women

was dissolved into faith, was either lost or Mark died before his account was finished (See pages 616ff, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*). I nevertheless believe that what we have is exactly what the Lord Jesus Christ wants us to have, if not what Mark intended.

Jesus had foretold to his disciples his resurrection in the same breath with which he told about his looming passion and death. But the harsh reality of Jesus' crucifixion and the end of his life by a brutal death, plus the fear of a similar fate that might await them, drove the disciples to despair and into hiding. A group of devoted women followers, also thinking their Lord to be dead, came to the tomb that first Easter morning, armed with the spices they intended for the anointing of his emaciated body. As they worriedly talked about how they could possibly find help to roll away the 1 to 2-ton stone from the entrance to the tomb, they arrived to discover that the stone had been rolled away. And also, they encountered a young man, whom we know from the other gospels to be an angel, who explained the stupendous occurrence earlier that Sunday morning. Matthew tells us that after the risen Lord had left the tomb there an earthquake and then the angel rolled the stone away (Matthew 28:2).

On a trip to the Holy Land years ago, Nancy and I visited The Church of the Holy Sepulcher and also Gordon's Tomb in Jerusalem. No one knows which might have been the exact sight of the place of Jesus' burial and resurrection. But we liked the setting of Gordon's Tomb simply because it hasn't been encased by a cathedral, and looks much like what Jesus' tomb would have been in fact. We saw the huge stone that would be rolled in front of the tomb's entrance, about the size of a large cartwheel and over a ton in weight, I would suppose. (Show painting of the entrance of the tomb and give to the children a copy of the sketch, asking them to add to the picture what they hear from the sermon.)

Follow as I read **Mark 16:1-8**.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is not a doctrine that grew up within the church. Rather, said scholar CH Dodd, the church grew up around the truth of the resurrection of Jesus. There are many signs, and as Luke says, "convincing proofs" that Jesus is alive (Acts 1:3), besides the many accounts in the New Testament. We've all heard of the missing body of Jesus, which his enemies would have been eager to produce; the undisturbed grave clothes that Jesus' body left behind in the tomb like a butterfly's chrysalis; the empty tomb itself; the obviously uncorroborated accounts in the four gospels that ring of authenticity; the 500 plus witnesses of his resurrection appearances; and the existence today of an ever-growing church, that has survived and thrived during generations of suffering and martyrdom.

And the group that launched the church in its incipient worldwide missionary movement through the period of Roman Empire-led persecution was the band of disciples that followed and then failed Jesus miserably. Mark's Gospel features discipleship, and shows us the first disciples as negative more than as positive examples. We've already noted that one of their leaders, Simon

Peter, failed Jesus miserably in his three-fold denial, about which Jesus had warned him. But what made the difference in the lives of these disciples was the discovery of the risen Lord Jesus. Because of his resurrection, Jesus transformed these defeated disciples into Holy Spirit-empowered witnesses of the gospel and indomitable leaders of the church militant and triumphant. This was an important message of encouragement to the persecuted church in Rome, to whom Mark was writing his gospel.

Mark chooses as his featured witnesses of Jesus' resurrection a group of women followers. If he were concocting a fabricated account to impress his readers, Mark would have described the discovery by a highly regarded man, perhaps a leader in society, religion or government. But Mark describes the experience of women who, the weak and the "lowly, weak and despised nobodies in the eyes of the world," as Paul describes those of us God tends to chose as his witnesses (1 Corinthians 1:27&28). And these women who came to anoint Jesus' body knew they were powerless to remove the stone from the entrance to the cave-tomb. These women knew that the stone for them would be insurmountable. But the stone had been removed to give them entrance into the tomb.

As we assert our belief that Jesus rose from the dead on the third day let's consider that...

The empty tomb gives entrance for the believer

The stone was rolled away, not for Jesus' benefit, but for the women and for all who would discover the resurrection. Unknown to the women, the risen Jesus had left the tomb even before the stone had been rolled away. We know that in his resurrection body Jesus was able to pass through his grave clothes, and then enter the barred Upper Room simply by appearing. So, the stone was rolled away, not to remove the body of Jesus, but to allow for the women, these witnesses, to enter the tomb. Inside Gordon's Tomb is a shelf where the body of the dead would be laid in burial. It was inside such a tomb that that the angel, whom the women thought was a young man, sat to announce what had happened to Jesus (Verse 5).

The tomb was open for these women and is today open for any seeker...

Who is looking

These women had followed Jesus and already their lives had been touched by him. But because they did not understand the promise of Jesus about his resurrection, their hopes were trashed nearby on Golgotha's hill where Jesus was crucified. They didn't expect to find anything but a mangled corpse, and were prepared only to give a gesture of loving devotion to their Lord's lifeless body. But nevertheless, they were willing to look inside the tomb.

I don't know what brings you to the house of God today. Perhaps you are sincerely seeking answers to life's questions and strength for living. I know a

lot of people claim to be looking for the truth and for something to believe and I hope you are one of them. But also many are interested in getting answers but aren't looking for anything that will change their lives. Maybe like these women at first, you are expecting to find little from your religious quest or "pilgrimage" to church.

If you are here without faith, I welcome you to look at the evidence that Jesus lives, just as these women and the other disciples were willing to do. Our text tells us that they "looked up" and saw the entrance and then "entered the tomb." They were willing to look. Unless we are willing to seriously consider the claims of Christ and the revelation that he lives, Christian worship will be nothing more than simply a cultural tradition. But serious looking can launch us into the discovery of our lives.

When our son, Kyle, was a little boy with an overly active imagination he went through a "monster" phase, a semi-obsession with scary creatures that were out to get him. During that phase, when I would tuck him into his bed, and after I would pray with him, there was a required ritual before I could turn off his light. I would open his closet door and peer inside it, and say, "There are no monsters in here," and then close the closet door securely. He would then be satisfied.

No one can lightly dismiss the momentous fact of Jesus' claims to be the Redeemer who alone can forgive sins, and the fact that his death was for us, and that God raised him from the dead, and he now reigns in the kingdom of the heavens. Only when you are willing to peer into the door of evidence can you find inner peace and satisfaction. You cannot just "close the door" and dismiss the evidence without looking inside. But in addition to simply intellectually looking at the evidence that has stood the test of history and time, there must be given personal consideration.

The empty tomb allows for the entrance of the seeker...

Who is considering

In our Western culture it is virtually impossible to not know something about Jesus, and that he was the Son of God who was crucified and raised from the dead. Even the secular cinema-going crowd has probably seen movies such as *The Passion of the Christ*. But then there must be a movement beyond the merely superficial awareness of the facts about Jesus to a consideration of his claims and of the significance of his resurrection to our lives personally.

Years ago Billy Graham told the story of a pastor friend who was approached by a young attorney who had been attending his church worship services as a seeker. The lawyer told his pastor that if he, the pastor, could supply him substantial evidence for the bodily resurrection of Jesus he just might be willing to become a believer. The pastor, wishing to encourage this young man to faith in Christ, immediately combed through his library, pulling off the shelves every book and article that might speak to the verity of the resurrection of Jesus. He included ancient histories and books on the

reliability of the New Testament manuscripts, and all of the arguments based on the witness of Scripture, and since then, evidence such as the growth of the church. He even included successful refutations of such arguments against the historicity of the resurrection as Schonfield's infamous "swoon theory" presented in his book, *The Passover Plot*.

The pastor reported to Mr. Graham that the young man spent hours pouring over and considering the material that the pastor had provided for him. Finally he confessed to the pastor, "I am convinced that the evidence is conclusive that Jesus did rise from the grave, but still I am not a Christian. My problem is not with my head, but with my heart. I know that if I believe, I must let him be the Lord of my life and let him change my life" (Billy Graham, *Decision Magazine*, April 12, 1976).

To deeply consider, not only the historicity but also the meaning of the resurrection, draws us into the realm of deciding what we must do about and in response to the crucified and now risen Lord Jesus.

The stone is rolled away to allow entrance for the seeker...

Who is encountering

Now the women are standing in the "not so empty tomb" of Jesus (verses 5ff). They encounter the angel, who invites them to survey the evidence of the abandoned and yet unraveled grave clothes that had been wound around Jesus' body and head (John 20:6-7).

So with everyone, the looking and considering soon lead to an encounter of faith. And faith is a work and gift of God's grace. This separates the women, and Simon Peter and John, who also believed at the empty tomb (John 20:8) from the young lawyer referred to above. By God's initiated grace we are able to respond in faith to the evidence God gives us. The word, applied by the Holy Spirit, is able to penetrate the darkness of our sin-hardened and obstinate hearts (2 Corinthians 4:6; Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12). Right there in that vacated tomb, the Spirit of the Lord, the Lord who is now risen, came heart to heart with those women in a divine encounter. And I believe that anyone who comes to faith in Jesus does so in the most alone moment in one's life. It's as though no one else exists and the eternal God now has your undivided attention.

And this encounter is not a casual one, but rather a frightening one. As NT Wright says, the women were "afraid, of course, because empty tombs and explanatory angels are enough to scare anyone" (Page 630, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*). The angel, knowing how frightened these women were, said, "Don't be alarmed!" They no doubt feared that the body of the Lord had been taken away. But then there were also aware that they were in the presence of holy God and surrounded by mystery.

A faith encounter with the risen Christ is never casual and cannot be taken lightly. In the presence of the crucified and risen Lord we are disturbingly

aware of our sin and vulnerability before a holy and just God and realize our desperate need for his mercy.

And now the seeker, like these women, is one...

Who is experiencing the mystery

I cannot tell and we cannot know all that might have happened in those brief moments in the abandoned tomb of our risen Lord Jesus. But I believe these women after that experience were to never be the same again. This is what we mean by the experience and terminology of rebirth, conversion, regeneration and transformation. Somehow, all that transpired in Jesus' suffering and death was made efficacious by his resurrection. When Jesus was brought forth from the dead, God was announcing that what he had in mind for the crucifixion of the eternal Son of God was accomplished. Now his Son was vindicated by God's raising him from the dead. Now there can be forgiveness of sin and a restored relationship with God, and the gift of eternal life and a hope for an everlasting heaven. We who have been aliens, and became seekers, are now believers and followers. And we must never lose sight of or take for granted the great mystery of our salvation, made possible "because he lives."

Recently former US President Bill Clinton was interviewed by a TV news journalist about his formative years. He was reared primarily by his mother because his stepfather had a strong addiction to alcohol and was negligent and even abusive to young Bill and his family. But as a teenager William Clinton rose above his circumstances and began to excel in school. He was awarded with a trip to the White House, the residence of the President of the United States. There, along with other high-achieving youth, Bill Clinton had the opportunity to meet and shake the hand of then-President John F Kennedy. Bill Clinton related in the interview how that encounter impacted his life and in a real sense gave him his motivation for his successful political career.

Meeting the risen Lord Jesus should have a much more profound impact upon us. Not only have we met him and become acquainted with him. He is now present with us and through the Holy Spirit living in us. Both John Kennedy and Bill Clinton had their character flaws, but our Lord Jesus is perfect love and holiness, and the most complete and authentic Person who ever lived. We need to recover the awesome mystery of our encounter with Jesus and realize the implications and inestimable privilege of knowing him

Those of us who seek after God, and then by his grace experience the rebirth, experience the mystery of regeneration. At times we are painfully aware of how slow is our progress in becoming more like Jesus. Our transformation is not instantaneous. But when the risen Jesus touches and takes over our lives, the process of becoming more like him is set in motion. We do indeed become new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17). And the mystery of transformation, even in slow times when we think there's no progress, is always taking place. The change is not always instantaneous but it is

supernatural. Just like the women would never be the same again after having entered the tomb, so we, once we meet Jesus through faith, are never the same again. As Paul told Timothy, “the mystery of godliness is great” (1 Timothy 3:16).

The women inside the tomb could not remain there. The angel gave them a clear mandate to go and tell Jesus’ other disciples where they were to meet him.

As we assert our belief that Jesus rose from the dead on the third day let’s consider also that...

The empty tomb gives an exit for the believer

The women came into the tomb as seekers. Now they leave as believers. As is apparent from the text, they are not yet fully clear on what they believe, and their hearts are still trembling over the encounter and probably also over the unanswered questions and unresolved issues, but they will never be the same again. And they exit the tomb under a clear mandate. The believer who has experienced an encounter with Christ as the risen Lord is one...

Who has something to tell

All of a sudden these unknown, considered-to-be-insignificant women followers of Jesus were commissioned to tell great news. They were to go and tell the other disciples that Jesus was alive and was planning to meet them in Galilee, a remote place of relative insignificance as well. They became the first to announce the greatest fact in history, that the crucified Son of God is alive! The cross was God’s victory snatched from the jaws of Satan’s intended defeat. Now there is salvation for mankind, forgiveness from sin and hope for life and eternity. And these women were first-hand witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection.

We too have something to tell if indeed Jesus has touched our lives. Our testimony is not just about what has happened to us, but it begins with what Jesus has done for all of us. He has provided for salvation for all who believe. This eschatological salvation that provides for our passing God’s judgment as his justified ones and that gives us entrance into heaven also makes a radical difference in life now. Salvation means God is directly involved in our lives now and does all kinds of delivering on a daily basis.

And our God through Jesus delivers his gracious salvation to all who believe and he delivers daily all that we need for life and godliness. Grace is free. He daily supplies our needs. And we have this good news to tell, to those around us where God has placed us in this community in such need of God’s grace and supply. We need to be aware that, even in spiritually dark and closed-to-evangelical-truth Belgium, we have a great story to tell. And we must pray for grace, wisdom and courage to share it as God gives us opportunity in our spheres of influence. Remember that here the people have not so much

rejected the risen Lord Jesus as much as they have rejected Christianity or even Christendom in its ancient and oft-times cryptic form. We can share about Jesus in a fresh and winsome way as he gives us the opportunity.

So, the believer leaves the tomb with something to tell, but also the believer is one...

Who is seized by the mystery

Notice how these women leave the tomb, “trembling and bewildered,” they “fled from the tomb,” and “They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid” (verse 8). *The Message* paraphrases the reaction of the women this way: “They got out as fast as they could, beside themselves, their heads swimming. Stunned, they said nothing to anyone.” But we know that after a short while, they were able to excitedly report this great news to the other disciples (Matthew 28:8ff; Luke 24:9ff; John 20:18).

So, these women, just like the other disciples in Mark’s Gospel, didn’t always get it right at first. Peter had just denied his Lord, and throughout his ministry with these disciples Jesus is always teaching and repeating instructions over and over again. But eventually the women do begin to talk, and as one has said, a group of near-terrified and bewildered women would soon have the entire neighborhood awake in these early morning hours (NT Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, page 630).

But wait; let’s put ourselves in the place of these women. They had just encountered the totally unexpected, and had seen an angel in an empty tomb, having seen the grave clothes and realizing their Lord, who was brutally crucified and whose lifeless body was laid in the tomb, was now alive and moving about their neighborhood somewhere. Perhaps to criticize their trembling, fear and bewilderment is to expose our own casual approach to our faith. Salvation faith deals with mystery, and what Rudolph Otto termed “the mysterium tremendum” (pages 220ff, *The Idea of the Holy*).

I think today we emphasize an all-too-cozy idea of a personal relationship with God. And our songs seem to reflect this, particularly our contemporary choruses that talk implore “draw me close to you” without any thought of what such closeness might entail. In the worship experience of Peter, James and John which Jesus was transfigured into a glorious appearance, they were frightened into incoherence (Mark 9:6). I doubt if they then sang, “Draw me close to you, let me feel you near, and the warmth of your embrace.” More likely they would have sung, “Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,” and then, “Search me, O God, and know my heart today!” I do not intend to debunk the more casual songs that speak of our intimacy with God and of his kindness and gentleness with us. But I believe that before we ask him to draw us near and embrace us, we had better be sure that we have recognized that our God is a consuming fire and that we have confessed before him and forsaken our sins. Our Jesus is not a “drive by Jesus,” who is standing waiting patiently for us to drive by and grab

a little affirmation and self-assurance at our convenience, and then drive off to resume our self-centered agendas.

When Jesus is powerfully present, he cannot be ignored, as often he is in our casual, “drive by” attitude, when church worship attendance is mostly a cultural obligation. The living Jesus simply will not be ignored. We must give a verdict and decide about him. His powerful presence either brings faith and humble submission and God-fearing worship, as with the women in the empty tomb, or it brings fearful rejection of his presence and claims upon our lives. When Jesus healed the raving demoniac the crowd on onlookers, having seen what Jesus did to their herd of pigs and then how he totally transformed the demoniac, the people were afraid! They simply could not deal with the awesome power of Jesus who messed with their lives and their livelihood (Mark 5:17).

Some of you heard me share my possible encounter with an angel in November 2004. All I experienced was the hearing of his voice to awaken me. And then later in the morning when I saw how he had delivered and protected us from a burglar, I felt somewhat “spooked.” It was as though the angel left a bit of his angelic “aura” in the house. And, it seems to me when I have a genuine and fresh encounter with God one of the primary emotions is reverential fear.

I can relate to Simon Peter’s emotion when he had seen Jesus demonstrate supernatural power in the great catch of fish. Falling to his knees at Jesus’ feet Peter said, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” (Luke 5:8). And Isaiah in the temple, at the sound of the angels, and with the quaking of the temple filled with smoke, cried out, “Woe to me!” “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty” (Isaiah 6:4-5). You don’t hear Peter or Isaiah cooing, “Draw me close to you....” In fact, they are saying, “Depart from me! I’m sinful and unworthy!” And in that awareness the holy Lord of glory graciously cleans us and makes us worthy by his cleansing and indeed draws us to himself as a loving Father.

And so, the mystery that seizes us is terrifying but also transforming and leads us to true peace and joy and delighting in God. When we have this holy-love fear of a holy and loving God we need fear no one or nothing else. And he gives us joy that we’ve never known before. As the women exit and run in fear their fear gives way to faith, which is always the way the story goes in Mark’s gospel. Whether it’s the disciples’ fear in the storm, which Jesus turns to faith by his command, or the fear of grieving parents of the death of a child, Jesus commands fear into faith. He says, “Don’t be afraid. Just believe” (Mark 5:36, 36; 6:50). The word translated “bewildered” is the Greek word “ekstasis,” which is the basis for our English word “ecstasy.” As New Testament Greek scholar AT Robertson wrote, these women clearly experienced a mixture of emotions (Page 402, volume I, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*).

The life of the disciple is a life of mixed emotions. And the basis of our joy in the Lord is a sense of his awesome, holy presence that must be regarded with our respectful, careful yet loving obedience. I pray that, as we affirm this truth in our Creed, we will encounter the holiness of and be seized by the mystery that Jesus lives. And though we are drawn to his love, as were unworthy sinners like crooks and prostitutes in the days of his mortal flesh, we are also aware of his glorious power and perfect sinlessness and our total unworthiness.

The stone is rolled away as an exit for the believer...

Whose life is an unfinished story

Those who say that Mark intended his gospel to end with verse 8 mention how this rather unpolished Greek writer gives a very artful, open-ended conclusion (see David Garland, above citation, page 615). Whether that's the way Mark designed it, or whether the originally intended conclusion was either lost or unfinished (as with NT Wright, above citation, pages 619ff), we can be sure what we have is what God desired us to have. He is sovereign over his word and has seen to it that we have "everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him" (2 Peter 1:3).

We know that these women eventually did what the angel commanded, and the good news of Jesus' resurrection spread like wildfire. If they failed at first, as did Simon Peter, they finally succeeded in delivering the message. So, Mark is the Gospel of the Second Chance, how God uses the little people who often fail, but he uses us nevertheless.

This unfinished ending is also a way of saying that you and I are to finish the story. By our living a transformed life and by spreading the amazing news that Jesus lives we are writing our own conclusion to Mark 16. Your life and my life are unfinished stories that God is still writing.

(Refer to the pictures the children completed on the papers with sketches. Tell them that just as they can complete these drawings, so God will lead them to complete the "picture" of their young lives. Mark 16 is an unfinished chapter and so are their lives one that God is writing. The story of their lives must include the risen Jesus if the "picture" is to be complete.)

Conclusion:

Can we say this line in the Apostles Creed with personal conviction? Have we gone to the tomb and into the tomb? Have we entered to look at the evidence ourselves? You may review the evidence and hear others' testimonies, but never try to see what is there for you, what is there to investigate, consider and then believe. But I pray you will go in and let Jesus, not just an angel, but the risen Lord Jesus himself speak to you. To fully consider is to open yourself to him as Lord, as the young unbelieving attorney admitted. That story Billy Graham told is about 34 years old. I wonder if that

attorney, who perhaps is close to my age now, has ever opened his heart to believing and trusting for himself what he intellectually discovered to be true. And the longer one resists faith, the harder one's heart becomes, moving dangerously close to that unpardonable condition or to that final opportunity.

And will you, fellow believer, join me in re-entering the tomb of the risen Lord that we might recover more of the sense, the awe-inspiring awareness that Jesus lives? The Lord of glory is alive, and in the words of George Herbert, "Christ plays in 10,000 places" and he is certainly here today through the Holy Spirit (Herbert is quoted by Eugene Peterson in his book of the same title). If your need is for fresh hope, realize he is alive as the resurrection and the life. He holds the keys to heaven and everlasting life for you and your loved ones. If your need is for renewed joy, he is the Jesus who gives the ecstasy of his living presence, the joy of the indwelling Holy Spirit. If it is for peace, he says, don't be afraid, only believe. And why do we leave the house of God and go on living as before, as though he were not the living, abiding Savior? How is it that we can go into the house of God and the presence of Jesus and be less impacted than young Clinton by association with a US President?

We are invited into the tomb where Jesus came alive. Now we are made alive in him and because of him. Can you say with conviction, "I believe that on the third day Jesus Christ rose again from the dead"?

Questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. How would you describe the emotions of the women as they approached the tomb of Jesus?
2. Do you recall how you came to believe in the resurrection of Jesus?
3. Did you have to overcome doubts in order to believe?
4. What do you think about the concept of spiritual encounters and even worship experiences needing the element of mystery and reverence, along with intimacy and comfort?
5. We know from the other gospels that although the women left the tomb with fear and trembling, eventually they did obey the command and delivered the good news of Jesus' resurrection. Mark's Gospel has been called "The Gospel of the Second Chance," with its portrayal of the disciples' initial failures, such as Peter's denial of Jesus. How is Mark's telling about the disciples' initial weakness and even failure an encouragement to you?

6. Do you think that unbelievers whom you know understand the truth of Jesus' resurrection? How do you think you could share with them how the risen Lord has changed your life?
7. Do you live each day in the awareness that Jesus lives? If not, how do you think that this awareness might change your life?

All Rights Reserved.