

## If You Hurry You May Catch Up with the Risen Christ

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<sup>1</sup>When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so they could go and anoint Jesus. <sup>2</sup>And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. <sup>3</sup>They'd been saying to one another, "Who'll roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" <sup>4</sup>When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very big, had already been rolled back. <sup>5</sup>As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side. They were alarmed. <sup>6</sup>But he said to them, "Don't be alarmed; you're looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He's been raised; he's not here. Look, there's the place they laid him. <sup>7</sup>But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you'll see him, just as he told you." <sup>8</sup>So they went out and fled from the tomb, because terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. (Mark 16:1-8)

Before I came to the United States, I was sometimes in Jerusalem at this time of the year with student groups, and once or twice I was there at Easter, and I remember noticing how for many people it was just an ordinary Sunday, and therefore just an ordinary working day, because most of the people were Muslims or Jews. Early on such a Sunday morning, you could have seen women coming into Jerusalem through the Damascus Gate from the villages around, with bundles of herbs and eggs and produce to sell near the gate. These Palestinian Muslim Arabs in their dark robes were dignified women, inscrutable. Behind their reserved faces you wondered what was going on inside their heads and hearts. Even in those days they were the victims of political intransigence on the part of Palestinian and Israeli men, and that was part of the story.

I imagine there might have been women like them coming into Jerusalem on the first Easter Day, but on that daybreak there are also three women leaving Jerusalem. They are also women of reserve, women of dignity and women with pain in their spirits. They are grieving for a man they all loved, a dead messiah. They are going to anoint his body. The place where he was executed and the place where he was buried lie outside the city walls. They are still coming to terms with the idea of him being dead, and perhaps they want to go and look at his body to acknowledge

that it really is true, to tell it that they cared. They are confused, and half-way there they realize that won't be able to get into the tomb because of the boulder in front of it.

It's Easter Sunday, but it's not Easter Sunday in their lives yet. It's spring, when the days get lighter and the trees bud, but spring is a peak time for committing suicide. It can be spring in nature, but that can draw attention to the winter in many people's hearts. What the calendar says and what nature says conflict with what is happening inside people; they can't bear the difference.

There was a South American Indian tribe that was exploited and oppressed by the government and by business and by industry. At Easter they observed only Holy Week, they didn't observe Easter Day. It wasn't real for them. We are not expected to jolly people out of that feeling when they are in that position, though we may look for the way God may want to bring Easter reality to them.

In our culture everybody is wishing you Happy Easter when it's way before Easter, when Lent is only half over. We want to skip over Holy Week, to skip over Good Friday, to leap straight to Easter Day and the Easter Egg Hunt and the Easter Bunny and the Easter Brunch. But the wonder of Easter depends on the wonder of Good Friday.

One Good Friday a Christian woman came to see me because she was being assaulted by her husband. She was trying to make their marriage work in a civilized way and she was trying to bring their children up happily, but he would turn on her, even though she felt she was trying so hard. "And there's no justice," I remember her saying, with a Good Friday anguish. Things hadn't changed much for her by Easter Day. It can still be Good Friday for us, when the calendar says Easter Day. Sometimes we just have to be with people in their Good Friday.

To their surprise, the two Marys and Salome discover something that tells them Good Friday has passed. The boulder has moved. Inside the tomb is a young man in a white suit looking as pleased as Punch, brushing flicks of rock dust from his sleeves: "How about that then?" ("All right, what do you do for an encore?") He has pushed the stone away. He didn't do it to let Jesus out. Jesus left a while ago. He did it to let people in, to see that Jesus has gone, to allow potential witnesses see that the tomb is empty.

“No-one’s stolen the body,” the young man says. “That’s where he lay down, but he’s got up, he’s gone back to Galilee. He’ll see you there. Bye!” And (whoosh) the young man is gone.

Jesus and his friends were never really at home in Jerusalem. Jesus had work to do there, but he has done it, and he’s back north now. Galilee wasn’t quieter than Jerusalem; it was busier in its way, more multi-ethnic, than Jerusalem. It wasn’t safer, either; people had tried to kill Jesus *there*, Jerusalem just happened to be the place where they succeeded. It wasn’t merely that Galilee was home; home was where they had *first* rejected him. Urban, multi-ethnic, unfashionable, needy, hard Galilee was where God had first sent Jesus to preach and work signs that God was beginning to reign in his people’s life in a new way. So Galilee is where Jesus is off to. He will see them there, if they want to join him in his mission to that ordinary world.

You’d have thought that Jesus has surely now become predictable, now he’s dead. Surely now he’s obliged to stay in one place. Surely now you know where to find him. But actually he’s gone off somewhere else. He is so unpredictable, so uncontrollable. He’s always missing from where you thought you could find him, and present somewhere different from what you thought you had a right to expect. He promises to be somewhere, and when you get there you find that he *was* there a little while ago, but he’s now moved on again.

The women were prepared to face up to the fact that Jesus had become a corpse. They weren’t hiding from reality like the men. They were prepared to adjust, to begin living in light of reality and loss, of pain and disappointment. Then they find that he is not there, the young man in the white suit says he’s alive, and they are invited to go and tell the men, and Peter, and to begin hoping again.

“Tell the disciples *and Peter*.” Does Peter still count as a disciple? He was the man who fell asleep in Gethsemane. Then he disowned Jesus. Then he kept well away from the cross. Does Peter still count as a disciple? Have you ever done something that makes you wonder whether you can still count as a disciple? If you have, you’re invited to put your own name in the young man’s sentence. “Tell the disciples and . . . John (or whoever it is) that I’ll see them in Galilee.”

So what happens next? The women are thrilled to bits and they run to tell the disciples. No they don't actually, Mark tells us. At the beginning of the story they're grieving and hurt, at the end of the story they're trembling and bewildered, they're running scared and not telling anyone anything. After all, imagine your house is about to be repossessed or your job is about to fold. You're just getting used to the idea when someone says there is a miracle solution. Do you believe them, just like that, and rush out to tell the world? Aren't you afraid, half-wishing they hadn't told you because you don't know where you are again now, you don't know what to believe? "It's not the despair I can't stand, it's the hope," John Cleese's character says in the great movie *Clockwise*. It's not the despair, it's the hope.

So the women are afraid at what they hear from the young man, and at first they say nothing to anyone. Yet their silence can't be the end of this story, otherwise we wouldn't know about it. But the last thing Mark does tell us is that they said nothing because they were so scared. Mark's account of Jesus' resurrection is really strange. Jesus isn't even there. Perhaps the way he tells us about what happened helps us put ourselves into the story. The women stand between an empty tomb and a Jesus who's already over the horizon, just a cloud of dust.

We also live our lives between that empty tomb and the Jesus who is already over the horizon. We don't see Jesus being raised from the dead. We have the *evidence* that he was raised from the dead. There's no corpse in the tomb. He's gone. But it happened before we got there. We didn't see him.

And we can't *see* Jesus with us now. We have a sense of his presence through the Holy Spirit, but we don't actually see him. We'll see him when he appears at the End on resurrection day, but that's in the future. He's active and speaking in the present, and we may miss what he's doing or saying in the present because we are blind to it, like those disciples. Mark says to us, "Open your eyes, get your walking boots on, Jesus is alive, he's off to work in the world, if you hurry you can catch up with him and join in. The Twelve Disciples are disillusioned and demoralized, they may not be there. Even the women are beside themselves with fear. Nobody will do it unless you and I do."