

## Jason Upchurch - Mark 15:40-47 - The Good News of the Grave

Of all of the sermons in Mark's gospel, I think this one is going to be the most unusual. I think it's the most unusual because this passage usually brings up questions that the passage itself doesn't answer but that we want information about.

And since these questions are so common I want to include them in this sermon because I think it would be a disservice to not touch on them.

So let me give you a road map of where we're going. I want to walk through the passage at hand, then I want to talk about 2 questions that are related to the passage.

1) Where did Jesus go for the 3 days he was in the grave? That's a question most people have or have wrestled with. And while none of the gospel writers give us a detailed explanation, it's obviously an implication of the passage.

2) Why does it matter that Jesus was buried? Could he have just died and immediately rose? What's the significance of the 3 days?

So that's where we're headed this morning. Buckle up, it should be interesting.

Let's start with our passage.

**Big Picture:** There were a lot of people who were faithful to Jesus even when all hope was gone.

And I think it's helpful to remember that at this point in the timeline - the moment of Jesus's death - none of the 12 disciples anticipated the resurrection. Jesus breathed his last and it was game over for them. Many of them had already left and deserted Jesus. It seems the only apostle we know for sure who was at Jesus's side as he died was John. There may have been others but they aren't mentioned.

They had just spent the last few years of their lives with this amazing man and seen amazing things but now it had all vanished in the moment that Jesus was arrested and condemned and Jesus died.

It's hard to describe the despair and hopelessness. This was the biggest reversal of events that they could have imagined. When they had come into Jerusalem just 5 days earlier Jesus came in riding on a donkey to the crowds hailing him as the Son of David - the rightful King of Israel. Jesus was destined to rule and reign over all the nations and pour out blessing as Messiah's reign finally came at last.

And now all hope was gone.

**Side:** this is one reason we know the resurrection wasn't a hoax. The disciples weren't sitting back giving each other fist bumps and winking at each other because they knew the outcome in advance. Every one of them thought this was game over. None of them had any idea the resurrection would happen.

**Matt. 28** records that even after Jesus had appeared to the disciples multiple times and was giving them the Great Commission some of the disciples doubted. Think about that. He was standing right there living and breathing - again - and they were having trouble believing it.

There is no way the resurrection was some sort of contrived hoax made up by these guys. It was just as much of a surprise to them as anyone.

In any case, we're left with a many people in the aftermath of Jesus's death who were faithful to him even when all hope seemed to be gone.

1) Women Disciples. Read 40-41

So there are 3 women mentioned here: Mary, Mary and Salome. Mary Magdalene was from a very rich fishing village on the northwest coast of the Lake of Galilee.

We don't know a lot about Mary Magdalene. There is a common misunderstanding that she is a prostitute because she anointed Jesus's feet and another woman who was a prostitute anointed Jesus's feet. But there is no certainty that they are the same ladies, and are very likely not the same.

Luke's gospel says that she had seven demons cast out of her. It may have been Jesus himself who did that, or one of his disciples. We don't know for sure, but what we do know is she became a disciple. And her faith was evidenced through her works. **Read 41**

She had been among the many people who ministered to Jesus and the disciples all along the way from Galilee to Jerusalem. She didn't just follow and listen, she was involved in the missionary effort to proclaim the good news.

Until this point we haven't really thought a lot about the countless saints who had aided the proclamation of Jesus and disciples along the way. But you have to remember that true gospel proclamation needs partners everywhere and all the time.

Remember when the 12 went out in groups of 2 to preach the good news to Israel? They stayed in homes of people who would accept them. They were housed and fed and encouraged by saints we'll never know.

Most of us will never be known by even the next generation or two generations from now.

Let me give a local example of that. In Deer Park we have 2 well-known parks. Mix Park and Swinyard Park named after two men. Do you know what their claim to fame was? Most people don't. They lived less than a hundred years ago. It's a small town and their relatives live close by.

James Swinyard was a city councilman for 4 years and the mayor for 18 years. He was the second longest mayor in Deer Park. The longest serving mayor was Earl Mix. I've lived here for 14 years and serve in government and I didn't know that until 3 months ago.

Memories fade. Legacies are forgotten just decades later.

You know what matters? Being faithful in the station that God has given you. You don't need a claim to fame. Jesus is the only one we want to be famous anyway. And so only as much as we use what we can to minister to him and his saints are we aiding in the proclamation of his glory.

That was Mary. She was healed through the ministry of Jesus and the apostles and gave her life to service.

If Mary had a "claim to fame" it is that she was the first person to see the Lord Jesus alive that resurrection Sunday morning, according to John's gospel. The fact that a woman - generally looked at as unreliable in the ancient world - would be the first witness to the resurrection adds credence to its reality.

If this were a fictional story that people were trying to pass off as true you'd never have a woman as a witness, you'd want multiple men with an airtight reputation. Not a single woman who had been demon possessed earlier in her life. She had the honor of the first glimmer of saving hope that Sunday morning.

Sadly, Mary Magdalene came to infamy about 20 years ago when Dan Brown's book "The Da Vinci Code" came out. The book was a work of blasphemous fiction. Brown made up a story that Mary had actually married Jesus and it was this big secret that was covered up by the Catholic Church for millennia. Needless to say it was all fiction but as people do, they took it as fact.

Not only was Christ himself blasphemed, but Mary Magdalene - who is our sister in the faith - was also lied about and slandered. And sadly the only connection many people have with Mary is the DaVinci code.

But she is a dear saint, who was faithful to the Lord.

The other 2 ladies we know very little about. **Read 40**

Mary, the mother of James and Joses we have no other information about. When you look through all the gospels there are a lot of Marys. Identifying them precisely is often difficult without a lot more information. But again, she ministered to Jesus and the disciples.

Salome, the third woman mentioned, we do have more information about. Her reputation in our minds is probably not a good one. She is the wife of Zebedee the mother of James and John. What we know her for most is probably the infamous question she asked Jesus on behalf of her sons. Do you remember it? Can they sit on your right and left in your kingdom?

That's a rather bold question. She's swinging for the fence asking for her sons to be second only to Jesus in worldwide power.

If you remember Jesus did not rebuke her - or them - sharply but deferred to the Father's will in the matter. And even though that seems ridiculous and arrogant to ever ask such a thing, here she is looking on from a distance at her Lord who died for her.

I take a lot of comfort in her because there are times in our walk with the Lord that we do and say many foolish things. Arrogant things, ridiculous things. And although many people often just remember the worst of us, that's not God's outlook or final answer in our lives.

Here, even when all the big name apostles are gone, Salome is as close as she can be to the Lord that she ministered to for so long.

That's the ladies.

## 2) Men Disciples. Read 42-47

Jospeh is a man from the city of Arimathea, which was called Ramah in the OT. It was about 15 miles away from Jerusalem.

Jospeh is an amazing character because what we learn with him is that not the entire Sanhedrin was against Jesus. He wasn't even a low man in the council. He was someone very well respected by the others. Luke calls Jospeh a good and righteous man who was looking for the Kingdom (Luke 23:51).

John also adds that Nicodemus was with Jospeh and helped prepare Jesus's body for burial. So there's actually 2 men working here though Mark focuses just on Jospeh.

Now, just to understand the timeline here. Jesus dies around 3pm, give or take because they didn't have watches. The Sabbath begins at sundown. Remember this is springtime so sundown comes early, they have a very small window to get Jesus off the cross, wrap him up, prepare his body with spices, and in the tomb, be back home before the sun goes down. They have to work quickly.

Jerusalem was a huge city in ancient times, but Jesus is crucified less than a half mile from Pilate's headquarters, and the tomb they used for his burial is less than 100 yards away from where he's crucified. So the distances aren't that far, but time is short.

And here, Jospeh puts everything on the line. Just that morning his colleagues on the Sanhedrin had stormed Pilate's house to demand Jesus's crucifixion. Here, several hours later, Jospeh is coming to Pilate to ask for Jesus's body that he might bury it.

Something to keep in mind is that burial in the Bible is preferred option for the people of God. It is always expensive. But the reason the people of God bury is because it honors the body of the dead and it looks forward to the resurrection. Every time we pass a cemetery we are reminded that one day there will be no dead bodies in that yard because Jesus will come and raise all people from the grave. The righteous to glorified bodies, the unrighteous to corruptible. But all will be raised.

How the Jews would normally bury people was lay the body on a decomposition table inside of a cave or tomb. The decomposition table was basically a flat stone table with a small indent to keep the head of the body straight up. They would wrap the body with a linen shroud that was filled with very strong spices to help mitigate the smell of a deteriorating body. After a year or so the soft tissue of the body would be completely worn away and all that would remain were the bones of the person. So they would come back into the cave or tomb, and place all the bones of the body into an ossuary - a bone box. The bone box was relatively small, because the largest bone in the body is the femur - the leg bone. And they would set the bone box in the cave along with the rest of the family in the cave. Caves and tombs were very expensive, so space was shared usually among family members.

The other gospels add some details. Matthew says it was a new tomb and the tomb was owned by Joseph. Luke says that it had never been used before. And John adds that it was very close to where Jesus was crucified.

**Side:** There are a lot of theories about where Jesus was crucified and buried. There are several proposed sites around Jerusalem that people claim.

I happen to believe the location of crucifixion and burial is actually inside what is now the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. If you go there today, it's basically a Temple of Catholic idolatry. The terrain is unrecognizable because you're basically standing in a massive cathedral. But I think the location is probably correct.

In any case Joseph - and Nicodemus - had the supreme honor of burying the Lord Jesus in this new cave of his. Little did they know it wouldn't be used for long.

These are all faithful saints, faithful to the Lord when it seemed as though there was no hope. And again, I think they serve as encouragements to us to be faithful even when we're not sure exactly what difference it makes. God knows, and God will reward us accordingly.

Now, I want to transition to these questions I mentioned earlier. Because I do think they are relevant to the passage and a general conversation.

1) Where did Jesus go for the 3 days he was in the grave? That's a question most people have or have wrestled with. And while none of the gospel writers give us a detailed explanation, it's obviously an implication of the passage.

We can answer that in several ways. First, the most explicit passage on the issue is **Luke 23:43:** Truly I say to you, today you will be with me where? In Paradise.

Where is that? Well, Paradise is another term for heaven.

**2 Cor. 12:3:** Paul says he was caught up to Paradise, to the third heaven. In Greek terms heaven could be where the birds fly, it could be where the sun moon and stars are or it could be the throne room of God, which we usually call heaven. The throne room of God is the third heaven.

So that's where Jesus says he's going and taking the thief on the cross with him.

**Turn to Eph. 4:9** for a minute. Now here's where it gets tricky. We have a couple of other places that indicate that that's not the only place he went. **Read 9-10**

Ephesians 4 is often a difficult passage to translate for several reasons. Some of you grammar Nazis should here insert that commas and comma placement are extremely important. I won't get too far into the weeds, but suffice it to say I agree with the ESV rendering that when Paul says he descended into the lower regions, what Paul means is that he went into the earth. His body was buried in the grave.

And what Paul is contrasting is how his body went from the lowest possible place - a grave - to the highest possible place: heaven. So that comma, is an epexegetical note. It's like saying I went to the store, that is Yokes. I'm not telling you I went to 2 different stores. I'm being general then specific.

I personally believe it just means his body went into the grave. That seems to be the true contrast here. Jesus's body ascended into heaven, after having been lowered into the grave.

Now, 2 quick notes before turning:

1) Jesus did not suffer in hell after he died. Many people believe this - and actually I believed this when I was a young Christian. I'm not even sure why I believed it because I can't remember anyone teaching it to me. But I thought Jesus died on the cross. And because I deserve hell, Jesus went to hell for me for 3 days. And he suffered in hell those 3 days.

That's not true. The Bible nowhere teaches anything like that. Doesn't even hint at it. We also know that because Jesus last words on the cross were "it is finished." His substitutionary work for our sins was finished the moment he gave up his spirit. There was nothing more to do. The wages of sin is death and he died for our sins.

So he didn't go to hell.

2) This question is further confused because the most common versions of the Apostles Creed say he descended into hell. For many of us that has made the Apostles Creed suspect because it seems to be peddling this idea that Jesus suffered in hell.

But that line in the Apostles Creed is almost certainly not original to any of the earlier accepted forms of the Creed. It was a late addition. Further, even those who argue that it should be included make note that the Greek word "hell" is "hades" and often just refers to the physical grave. It's just an emphasis that Jesus literally died, was buried and he stayed there. Almost no one I know of argues that it means Jesus suffered in hell.

Again, my view is that line in the Apostle's Creed shouldn't even be there. It wasn't in the earlier versions, and it seems redundant and confusing.

### Turn to 1 Pet. 3:18-22

This is another verse on the issue of Jesus's whereabouts after his death. The passage is crazy difficult to understand on a number of levels so I'll just hit the highlights. **Read 18-22**

So a couple of observations. First, the only suffering Jesus did was on the cross. Peter makes that clear in **Vs. 18:** he suffered once for sins. How? Being put to death on the cross. Death was the end of the suffering.

The tricky part - or one of the tricky parts - is "he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison." There are about 50 interpretations of what that means. Most people boil it down to one or 2. I'll just tell you what I think: I think while his body was in the grave, Jesus did go to Paradise. He went to heaven. He was in heaven with the other guy on the cross that very day and the Father and all the saints.

But I also think at some point he went and proclaimed his victory to demons who were locked away in hell. The Bible indicates in **Jude** and **2 Peter 2** that there are demons, evil spirits, who have been locked up in gloomy darkness in chains until the judgement. The Bible says they were engaged in sexual immorality and God has put them in solitary confinement until the judgment. What I think they tried to do was corrupt the human race in **Genesis 6** to keep God from sending a fully human Messiah.

In any case, while Jesus's body is in the grave it seems as though he went and proclaimed to spirits in prison. I think they're demons because the only creatures called "spirits" in the Bible are demons. What did he proclaim to them? I think he proclaimed victory. They lost. They tried to thwart God's saving plan those 2,500 years

earlier and they lost. And Jesus finishing his work on the cross was evidence of their eternal defeat. It was Jesus spiking the football in the end zone on these demonic spirits.

So all that to say I believe he was in Paradise - heaven - and yet at some point he went and proclaimed victory to demons in the gloomy darkness of hell.

2) Does it matter that Jesus was buried? Could he have just risen instantly?

Well, I think we can say that if it happened to Jesus it matters. But more technically it matters for a few reasons.

Who do we bury? Dead people. The burial of Jesus is part of the proof he actually died.

It's also fulfillment of prophecy.

**Psalm 16:10** says "you will not abound on my soul to Sheol or let your holy one see corruption." The prophecy is that Jesus would die and would go to Sheol - which in some sense is the grave. But he wouldn't be abandoned there. His physical body, though utterly beaten, would not see the corruption of decay.

**Isa. 53:9** says He was assigned a grave with the work and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence nor was any deceit found in his mouth."

This is amazing because it says he would die with wicked people - he did. It says he was assigned the grave of a rich man - he was. And he would be innocent - also true.

**Matthew 12:38:** Jesus's death and resurrection fulfills the sign of Jonah. What's Jonah's sign? He was in a fish for 3 days. In the same way The Son of Man was in the heart of the earth for 3 days and 3 nights.

So it proves he was dead. Really dead. And fulfills prophecy.

Finally it is a picture of our new lives in Christ. **Turn to Rom 6:4**

Paul makes an argument here and also in Colossians 2:2 that Jesus's burial is the way in which we are to consider our old way of life. **Read 1-4**

It's not just that we were united to Jesus in his death. We were united with him in his burial. What does that mean? It means that if you're a Christian, all your old sinful life and habits and difficulties you need to imagine are lying in a tomb somewhere outside of Jerusalem.

Were you a thief or an adulterer before you were saved? Were you a liar or cheater? Well, if you're in Christ, then that old self that you were is lying in tomb somewhere. It's dead and gone.

One of greatest disservice's of Alcoholics Anonymous is this idea that we are defined by our sin. "Hi I'm so and so and I'm an alcoholic." No you're not. Not if you're in Christ. You're not an alcoholic - it's not a disease anyway. You were a drunkard but that drunk old self might as well be buried in a tomb on the other side of the planet. It's gone. Dead and cold and dust by now.

Did you gossip and look a porn? Dead. Gone forever in some grave decomposing. You were buried with Jesus in his death. And when he saved you what happened is just as he came back to new physical life, so you now have new spiritual life. You're not defined by that sin anymore. And more than that, one day there won't even be a struggle. **Read 5-7**

You've been set free from sin. When Jesus was buried, your sinful self was buried with him. And it's still dead. God looks on you as a new creation, and you need to look on yourself as a new creation and act accordingly.

Your old self is in the grave and that stone won't ever be rolled away.

**Pray**