

The Risen King

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[0 : 0 0] Well, this past week, the 2021 census results for England and Wales were published, and they say that the proportion of people who call themselves Christians has dropped to 46.2%. Apparently, that's the lowest that's ever been of people who self-identify as a Christian. And the Scottish demographics, they have been continuing to follow a similar trend, in other words, downward direction for a while now. Now, we might think that this signals the end or the death of Christianity in the UK. And admittedly, nominal Christianity is dying in the UK, and that's no bad thing.

But the question is not whether Christianity is still relevant in our secular nation. The question is, is it true? Is Christianity true? Is what we are reading about the death and the resurrection of Jesus true? And so today, as we come to the end of the Gospel of Mark, we're going to be looking at the resurrection of Jesus. The death and resurrection of Jesus are the climax of Mark's Gospel and are the heart of Christianity. And what we're going to see from our Bible reading is that belief in the resurrection was actually just as difficult for the people who lived at the time as it is for people today. But if Jesus did rise from death, then it means Christianity will always be relevant, because we're all going to die. And it will be relevant for all people in all places at all times.

And so Mark shows us here in his Gospel how we can be convinced of the reality of the resurrection. And he challenges us to consider the impact of the resurrection for our lives. So this afternoon, we're going to look at two points. The first is the reality of the resurrection, and the second is the impact of the resurrection. So first, the reality of the resurrection. Now earlier, if you were here last week, Mark recorded how Jesus died. And now he records the remarkable, astonishing news that Jesus has been raised from the dead. And you'll notice that his account has got all the marks of authenticity about it. Because he doesn't just make this bold claim, he also gives the evidence to convince us. And so at least three things are worthy of note here in this passage. And the three things are up on the screen.

There's the woman eyewitnesses, the empty tomb, and the predicted outcome. And so let's just look and see how each of these points to the reality of the resurrection. So first of all, the woman eyewitnesses.

And we'll read verse 1 and 2. When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome brought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on, the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb. So three women are mentioned, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome. So the very first eyewitnesses to the resurrection were women. And they're also mentioned in the account of the death and the burial of Jesus. So if you were here last week, we saw that. Mark chapter 15, verse 40, these three women saw Jesus die.

[3 : 2 3] Mark chapter 15, verse 47, same three women saw where Jesus was buried. And now these women are the first to witness the resurrection. And Mark, he records their names in quick succession, three times. Why?

Well, because he's writing history. And these women were the first eyewitnesses to testify about Jesus' death, his burial, and his resurrection. But here's the thing. None of them were expecting Jesus to come back to life, were they? They brought spices to the tomb. Why? Because they expected a dead body to be there. And as they made their way to the tomb, they were asking each other, in verse 3, who will roll the stone away from the entrance to the tomb. So they were expecting Jesus to be dead.

And that's why their discovery alarmed them, in verse 5. Now, Mark mentions these women as key eyewitnesses to the empty tomb. Now, that might not mean much to us today, but it was significant back then because women weren't considered to be reliable witnesses. A woman's testimony was considered to be pretty much worthless in the ancient world. In that culture, women weren't even allowed to give evidence in court. And we might think, well, why does this matter? Well, it matters because if you're going to make this stuff up, then you would never dream of using women as the key main witnesses to the event of the resurrection. If you're going to fabricate the resurrection story, there will be no plausible reason to add women as the first eyewitnesses. And so the only possible reason that explains why they're recorded as the main witnesses to the resurrection is because they really were there and they really did report what happened. Because if it was all just a made-up story, it would never be done like this.

But naming the women specifically was important for another reason. Because by the time Mark's gospel was in circulation, which wasn't long actually after these events, the woman would still have been alive. And so Mark could confirm that what he had written was true. It could be backed up by the woman because that's why their names are recorded here and are reiterated. Mark's essentially saying, if you want to check out the truth of what I've written, then go and speak to the eyewitnesses.

They were there when it all happened. Go and ask them and they can verify what I'm saying. So that's the first reason for the reality of the resurrection. And the second reason, next, more significantly, is the empty tomb. And we read about this in verse 4 and 5.

[6 : 11] But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. So large stone had been rolled away and Jesus wasn't there.

And so this unexpected and this shocking discovery alarmed them. Why? Because the empty tomb pointed to the risen Jesus. And that's what the young man dressed in white. An angel said to them, verse 6, So Jesus, no longer dead. He had risen. Now, he has risen is actually just one word in the original Greek. And yet everything hangs on this single one word declaration that is spoken in such a matter-of-fact way. The crucified Jesus had risen from death. Death couldn't hold him. The tomb was empty. And so the empty tomb is really the knockdown argument that confirms the resurrection. Now, if Jesus hadn't risen, there would be no Christianity. There would be no point in us turning up here on a Sunday afternoon at four o'clock. There would be no good news. There would be no message to proclaim. There would be no hope for our lives, no hope for our world. But Christianity is good news, and it's all centered on this explosive event, the death and resurrection of Jesus. And so we can trust the reality of the resurrection because of the woman eyewitnesses and because of the empty tomb, but also because of the predicted outcome. What's the predicted outcome? Look at verse 7. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, he is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him just as he told you. We're going to explore this a bit more in our next point. But what's the angel saying here? Well, he's reminding them that

Jesus actually said that he would rise from the dead. Jesus said he would see his disciples again. Now, we've seen how Jesus predicted his death so many times in Mark's gospel. But as he predicted his death, he also predicted his resurrection. It's just that nobody was expecting it. Nobody remembered that he had said this. And so some key verses in Mark, we've been through them already, but Mark chapter 8, verse 31, Jesus said he must be killed and after three days rise again. Then Mark 9, 31, Jesus said the son of man would be killed and after three days he will rise. Mark 10, 33 and 34, again, Jesus said the son of man will be killed three days later he will rise. And then Mark chapter 14, verse 28, Jesus said, but after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee. So Jesus was killed, just like he said.

Then he was raised, just like he said he would be. And it's extra detail. He said he's going to go ahead of his disciples into Galilee, for he would see them again. So Jesus repeatedly said he would rise from the dead. And yet despite this, the resurrection caught everybody by surprise. Nobody expected it.

So on the third day, none of the disciples showed up. The women did show up, but they expected Jesus to be dead. Nobody expected Jesus to have risen from the dead. Nobody was even curious enough to go and check it out. The disciples didn't think Sunday morning, well, maybe it's worth just going to see what the deal is. But no. And what's interesting here is that Mark doesn't even try to prove the reality of the resurrection. Mark's account of the resurrection, which differs from the other gospel accounts, doesn't even make any mention of the appearance of Jesus in the resurrection account.

[10:27] Why is this? Well, it's because Mark is expecting the evidence to lead us to the obvious truth. That is, that Jesus, having been crucified, having been buried, had been raised from the dead.

And so the question for you and me is, well, has the evidence led us to the truth? Do we believe that Jesus rose from the dead? Because the evidence is here for us. And so that's the first thing, the reality of the resurrection. Second point is the impact of the resurrection. Because the reality of the resurrection in history, if it's true, and we're claiming it's true, it should force us to consider what it means for our lives. Because if Jesus rose from the dead, it impacts us and it impacts our world, just like it did for those who first experienced it, these women who were first on the scene. And so as we consider the impact of the resurrection, we've just got to mention briefly the ending of Mark's gospel. Because it does seem like a strange ending. Because not only does Mark give very little detail in his resurrection account, but he also ends in such an abrupt way.

And so in our Bibles, we've got this extra bit from verse 9 to verse 20. And it's an added-on bit. It's in italics, you'll see. And it's in italics basically to indicate that this wasn't part of the original text of Mark. This wasn't the original document. And so nearly all the scholars would agree that this was added on later, in a sense to try and give a proper fitting conclusion to the gospel, to kind of rectify the strange and abrupt ending that Mark leaves us with in verse 8.

And so what are we supposed to make of all of this? Well, I'm sure the answer is simple. Namely, Mark deliberately ended his gospel the way he did in verse 8, because he wanted to. And we'll think more about why in a moment. And yet this kind of question, or the kind of ending, or seeing this in our Bibles might lead some people to raise the question, well, can we really trust the Bible?

Surely this kind of thing makes the Bible unreliable. Well, not at all. I actually think it proves the reliability of the Bible, because it's obvious the Bible is committed to the truth.

[13 : 01] The Bible makes a big thing of making sure what it records is true so that we can believe it. And so this additional section in Mark is one of the few places in the Bible where there's a difference from the earliest manuscripts. And we're alerted to it. So there's no attempt to hide this or keep it a secret. It's here for us to read for ourselves. And it's not as if what's said here, you can read it later, verse 9 to 20, it doesn't contradict Mark's gospel. In fact, what's stuck on at the end here is a bit like an edited version of what the other gospels say anyway. And so far from cause us to doubt the truth of the Bible, it gives us the confidence that the Bible is true in everything it says. In a sense, it's all been fact-checked. And here's a fact-check here at the end of Mark.

And so the question for us is, well, why does Mark's gospel end in this way? Well, look at verse 8. Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid. And that's it. Well, I think the surprising and shocking ending is supposed to provoke a response. The resurrection completely stunned the women. They weren't expecting the resurrection. And yet the reality of it was earth-shattering for them. It rocked them to the core because the resurrection indicated that Jesus really was the Son of God. And so it's no wonder they were afraid. The discovery they made was shocking and it was astounding. And so they give a true response to the awesome reality that Jesus, the Son of God, was born, he lived, he died, and he rose again. They realized this has serious implications for our lives. And so Mark, who began his gospel, you remember, by telling us that Jesus is the Son of God, who then told his gospel to prove the identity of Jesus, now ends his gospel by challenging us to respond to Jesus. He's showing us how these women responded and asking his readers like us, so how do you respond to these events? How do you respond to this news, this message of Jesus and who he is? Because if we're convinced that what Mark claims is true, well, it means that life can never be the same again for any of us. Because Mark forces us to come down on our conclusion on Jesus Christ. And so with that in mind, let's think about the impact of the resurrection.

The resurrection changes your mind, it changes your heart, and it changes your future. So the resurrection changes your mind. How did the women respond? They ran away, trembling and bewildered. They said nothing to anyone. They weren't expecting a resurrection, as we've seen. Why? Because dead people don't come back to life again. And yet something changed. So just think about it. The women were the first eyewitnesses. And so only they could transmit the details of the resurrection to Mark so he could record them and put them in his gospel. And so the very fact that we are reading about the resurrection today in our Bibles, in the gospel of Mark, indicates that these women moved from being bewildered through to being believers. And so no matter how inconceivable it seemed, they came to believe it was true. So do you think that these women, I mean, what's the other alternative?

Do you think these women fled from the tomb, they went back to their homes, they went back to their normal life, and they just forgot about everything that happened on that first Easter Sunday morning?

I doubt it. No way. It would have an impact on their lives. And so what shifted them from not even expecting the resurrection to then going and talking about the resurrection? The answer is the resurrection.

[17 : 21] And so if you're here this afternoon, you might be skeptical about the resurrection of Jesus. You might be skeptical about the claims of Christianity in general. And you might think it's all just unbelievable.

It's far too far-fetched. And you might be bewildered by all these massive claims with huge significance for our lives that Christianity makes. Well, guess what? You're in very good company. Because the first eyewitnesses to the claims of Christianity felt exactly the same way. But what's interesting is that they changed our minds. And so can you change your mind. Because the resurrection was just as inconceivable to people then as it is to people today. But the women let the evidence challenge their thinking, and they let it change their minds. What I'm saying is, you don't have to set aside your powers of reason and intellect to become a Christian. You don't have to take your brain out and put it under your seat to believe that Jesus died and rose from the dead. Christianity is not a faith based on some airy-fairy nonsense. It's based on what happened in the past. N.T. Wright, who's one of the foremost scholars, New Testament scholar, but one of the best on the resurrection, he says this in his book,

The Resurrection of the Son of God. He says, Do you hear what he's saying? He's saying that you don't live in a fantasy world if you believe the resurrection. He's saying you actually live in a fantasy world if you don't. In other words, only the resurrection of Jesus, that Jesus rose from the dead, makes best sense of all the evidence. And so it's good, of course, to raise your doubts about Christianity.

It's good to ask your questions. Absolutely. And that's what we're here for. But when it comes to the resurrection, gospel writers like Mark show that history and evidence are on the side of Christianity. So that's the first thing. The resurrection of Jesus changes your mind. Have you let it change yours? The second is the resurrection of Jesus changes your heart. Now, remember what these women were instructed to go and do. Verse 7, But go, tell his disciples and Peter, he's going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him just as he told you. So when was the last time Jesus saw his disciples? It was back in the garden of Gethsemane. But Jesus says he's going to see them again. Where? In Galilee. And one disciple is singled out here. So why does Peter get special mention? Well, it's because he disowned Jesus. Peter betrayed Jesus, denying him not just once, but three times. What Peter did was far worse than anyone else. And that's why the words and Peter are so beautiful, because Jesus doesn't write Peter off. Jesus wanted to see Peter again, despite his failure. Why? Well, Peter obviously had to face up to his failures.

But this is also a promise that Peter would be forgiven. And he would be restored as a follower of Jesus. So can you imagine just how these disciples, and especially Peter, must have felt when they heard this? Jesus offers them grace, because his death and resurrection means their sin can be forgiven. And so even if you have blown it big time, like Peter did, and you feel it and you know it, the resurrection tells you and me that there is forgiveness and there is a fresh, clean, new start.

[21 : 48] Now, we may have sinned and let God down, and we might feel that there is no way back for us. And maybe even today you are wallowing in shame and self-pity because of what you've done, feeling there's no way that you could possibly go to Jesus for forgiveness.

Well, let me assure you, you're not the only one who feels that way. I think people come to church and think, I am the worst sinner in here. All these other people are clean, good living people who've got it all sorted. Let me just tell you a secret, and it's a secret only ministers know. I've been a pastor for 15 years, and everybody, everybody, though you will not see it, everybody knows how much they failed, and how much they need God's grace, and how much they need forgiveness for their sin.

We all fail. We all sin. We all need forgiveness. And that is why Christianity is such good news, because the death and the resurrection of Jesus offer us that forgiveness. Because deep down in our hearts, we know this message is a message we all need. Because it is only through the death of Jesus on the cross that our sin and our failure can be forgiven. Not only that, it's better because Jesus wants to use failures like us, just like he used Peter. He has a plan and a purpose for us, just as he did for Peter and the rest of the disciples. And it's when we get this amazing grace, and it sinks deep down into our hearts, that it changes our lives. What happened when the disciples and Peter tasted this grace and were forgiven and restored? Well, what did they do?

They went into the whole world to tell the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus. It changed their hearts, and it will change your heart and my heart when we realize that Jesus loved you, Jesus died for you, Jesus forgives you, Jesus restores you, and Jesus has a role for you in his service.

The resurrection assures us of all of this. That's why it changes our heart. So it changes our mind, it changes our heart, and thirdly, the resurrection of Jesus changes your future. What do I mean? Well, it means that there's actually nothing to fear. Absolutely nothing. What did the angel tell the woman?

[24 : 24] Then verse 6, don't be alarmed. Then verse 7, but go. Because Jesus is the resurrected Lord, there's no need to be alarmed about anything. Not now, but not ever. The resurrection means that Jesus doesn't just transform our lives now, he transforms them forever. And so we've got nothing to fear, even death, if we believe in the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Because, well, of course we all die, but death can't touch us. George Herbert, the poet, said this, death used to be an executioner, but the gospel has made him just a gardener. I love that. Death can't take out the Christian because of the resurrection. And so when Jesus smashed through death, he opened up the door of eternal life for us. And because the resurrection gives us hope to face our greatest enemy, which is death, the resurrection gives us the resources to face anything and everything in life. So the resurrection doesn't just convince your mind, it doesn't just melt your heart, it gives you a certain and sure hope for the future. A few years ago, I read the sad story of a couple called Toby and Millie Saville. And they were only 25 years old and they were both teachers, they were both Christians and they were married in 2017. In fact, they were small group leaders of their church plant in Vauxhall in London. And they were tragically killed in a road accident when they were on holiday around Easter time on the Greek island of Santorini. It was a motorbike or a car crash. And this is what their church said about them on Twitter. It said, we are utterly broken and yet we are comforted by the hope we have in Jesus. A hope that completely shaped Toby and Millie's lives.

This hope is Jesus who dies for our sins and rose from the dead so that all those who believe in him will have life after death. And then Millie's father said this in the report, Toby and Millie were passionate about their Christian faith. And we are being sustained by the same sure hope of Easter resurrection. Isn't that great? Without Easter resurrection, what hope do we actually have? What hope does anyone have? None. Nothing. So the reality of the resurrection doesn't just change our lives. It doesn't just change what happens when we die. The reality of the resurrection changes our world. It changes everything. And the New Testament goes on and explains what this means. And the full implications of the resurrection of Jesus will be played out when Jesus Christ returns. And that's where this world is heading. But as we close, what we see is that the gospel of Mark leaves us hanging in a sense, asking us, what is your response to Jesus Christ? What will you do with the one who died for your sin and rose conquering death? What is your response to the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ? Because you see, everything hinges on how we respond to him. And that's why the church is here today, because it has got a message that changes people's lives and changes our world. And while there's nothing more urgent then for us to do than to repent of our sin, which is why Jesus died on a cross, and then believe the good news of his death and resurrection. Because it is a massive mistake to try and avoid the risen Lord Jesus

Christ. Because in this life, we will die, and then one day we will be forced to meet the risen Lord Jesus Christ. And he will be our judge. And so the implications of the resurrection mean Jesus needs to be our saviour before we meet him as our saviour before we meet him as our judge. And so the proper response, the right response, the fitting response to Jesus Christ is to go to him, to trust in him, to believe in him, and then to go and live our lives for him.