

“Serving God Without Knowing It”

Mark 16:1-8

Have you ever run into someone famous? In 1968 I went to a Baltimore Orioles game with a neighbor and his dad. As we got into the stadium, the dad noticed a player out of uniform. I really didn't know who he was, but I got his autograph on a pennant the dad bought me. Little did I realize that the pitcher had arm problems and wasn't playing. He had shown promise as a 2nd year player in 1966, but then got hurt. Little did I realize that his arm got better, and he became the best pitcher in Orioles history—Hall of Famer, Jim Palmer!

Life can hit us every now and then with amazing things like that. But for the most part our lives are about the routine—getting up for work and classes, keeping appointments, cooking and doing laundry, chauffeuring kids to all their activities. So when we read in the Bible about stories filled with miracles and amazing things, it doesn't often seem to relate to our routine lives.

Yet, look at the story of Jesus' resurrection, the most amazing thing that ever happened. Mark's story begins with women buying spices “after Sabbath” which means Saturday evening. They couldn't do that before then because it was Sabbath until dusk, time when you couldn't shop. But we see them doing it as soon as they can, not wanting to wait until stores opened up Sunday morning. Why didn't they go to the tomb that night after getting the spices? They couldn't because it was dark outside. There were no electric lights in those days. But as soon as they could, at the crack of dawn, they went.

This shows how the women were doing what they could. They couldn't turn back the clock and prevent Jesus' death. They couldn't bring Him back to life. But at least they could give Him a decent burial. Yet, it was at that moment, when doing what they could as followers of Jesus, God revealed His greatest moment—Jesus' resurrection from the dead!

What the women were prepared to do became a seeming waste of time. There was no body to prepare for burial. Yet, what they were about to do is an important part of Mark's story. It shows us in a very real way what was on the mind of Jesus' followers when He died. The 11 disciples were in hiding, fearing they might be the next to be killed. And the women were doing what they thought they could do. But what wasn't on any of their minds is the possibility that Jesus would rise from the dead. The women's focus on preparing the body and their shock when they see the empty tomb and the angel tell them Jesus was alive. Their actions show us clearly that Jesus' resurrection was in no way planned by the disciples. It was the work of God alone!

Also by going to the tomb to finish the preparation of Jesus' body meant that they were the first to the tomb. The first disciples to see the empty tomb, to hear what the angel said, and later in Mary Magdalene to see Jesus arise, were women. If the story of Jesus' resurrection was something invented by the disciples, then why would they tell the story with women as the first to experience Jesus alive from the dead? Mark's Gospel tells us these women were

“hysterical,” a word which is based on the Greek word for “woman.” In that worldview women weren’t trusted as legal witnesses. But the fact that women were the first witnesses to Easter shows again that it was the work of God!

So much of what we do can seem like a waste of time, that it really doesn’t matter. There are over 8 billion people on earth. Do you know how many that is? Think of how long it would take to count that if you counted 10 for every second. If you did that for 24 hours straight it would take you 100 years. There are 32 teams in the NFL with 53 on each team for a total of 1,696. That is .000056% of the population of our country. And that is for a sport that has 4.5 times the number of players that basketball teams have. And most of those players are not well known.

Online you can watch people quizzing each other about who is on whose list—the best athletes, richest entrepreneurs, or most talented. You’ll notice that lists tend to center on recent people. For instance when mentioning the greatest actor no one says anything about Lawrence Olivier or Paul Schofield because they have been forgotten in time. Who of us even knows the names of our great, great grandparents?

So what difference do we make? Why are we here? Why were those women at the tomb? To serve God. Unlike those women we know how their story turned out. Jesus rose from the dead. They didn’t need to prepare a body. Yet, they became witnesses to His resurrection. God turned their service from one of working with death, to sharing eternal life!

But we do not know what will happen tomorrow or the next. We do not know how our lives will play out. But unlike those women who went to the tomb that morning we know it turned out Jesus rose from the dead. That is our assurance that we, too, will rise from the dead on that last day. Until that time we don’t know how it will all play out. We can feel like those women going to the tomb, doing what we can in situations that can seem hopeless: when a son or daughter drifts away from the church and tells us “I don’t believe anymore;” when the doctor says, “It’s cancer;” when the pink slip comes our way; when we feel the world caving in on us. We do what we can to serve God by serving others. And like those women going to the tomb, God can and will work through us, even and especially when we don’t know it.

On a spring break service trip with students to Mexico we were visiting at a mission with a man who retired as a police captain. We spoke to him through one of our students who had spent a semester in Spain. When we asked him how he got involved with the church, his definite response was “Queso!” That is Spanish for cheese. The church mission was distributing cheese to the poor which brought him into contact with them. From there it grew until he became actively involved. A seemingly routine act of serving God by serving others made the difference.

Easter is certainly the assurance that we will rise on the last day. In the funeral service we speak of the “sure and certain” hope of the resurrection when God will change our lowly bodies. But Easter is not just about the end; it is about now! In Romans 6 when Paul describes

baptism he says that “we were buried by baptism into Jesus’ death.” Then he goes on to say, “that just as he was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father.” We might expect him to have said, “We too will rise on the last day.” But he says, “We, too, may walk a new life.” Notice the difference—“we will rise” (future tense) and “we may walk” (present tense). Right now what we do may seem so often like a waste of time that will soon be forgotten. It doesn’t seem to matter. But it does to God!

So we go on in life with our often mundane tasks. But there is a difference. We are not just biding our time until the end. We are using what God has given us to help others. And as we do, God can use us just as decisively as He did those women on the way to the tomb.