

The Great Kingdom Offensive

Mark 15:42-16:8

When Paul wrote to the Philippian church, urging them to live submissively after the pattern of Christ, he wrote these beautiful words that may have come from one of their own hymns.

⁵Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

⁶Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
⁷but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

⁸And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!

– Philippians 2:5-8

These words describe what theologians call the “condescension of Christ.” Just how thoroughly did God in the flesh empty Himself? When a stone sealed a tomb outside of Jerusalem many years ago, this condescension was thorough. The rage of fallen humanity against goodness and righteousness could not have been expressed more furiously. Satan had won an apparent victory. God had turned His face away from Jesus, abandoning the would-be King. The devil had proven that meekness is no way to establish a kingdom. To die by the cruelest means of execution a depraved human mind could dream up was as much of a defeat as Jesus could have endured.

But the Kingdom of God was waiting to launch its own great offensive against Hell’s gates. And, when that blow came, it was the only blow required. When Jesus rose from the grave, He defeated death and the sin that had foisted death upon the human race. We live in a world where even a believer might question whether or not the power of sin has been broken, but it has. Every war has mopping up that is required. Still, when the kingdom of God first broke through into this world by the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, it became clear that His final victory was secure.

I. The Burial of Jesus of Nazareth (Mark 15:42-47)

Jesus was crucified at the third hour of the morning on a Friday. Time-keeping was not as precise in the days before Greenwich Mean Time and modern timepieces. The third hour was three hours after sunrise as determined by watching the sun’s location in the sky. It was about 9 AM. At about noon, the land of the Jews was covered with a strange darkness that lasted until about three in the afternoon. This is about when Jesus died, after only about six hours on the cross.

The Jews reckoned days from evening until evening. Sunset marked the start of a new day. The evening that was approaching according to Mark would signal the beginning of the Sabbath. This is why the day was called Preparation Day. No work was to be done on the Sabbath, so any arrangements required for keeping the Sabbath, such as baking an extra day’s worth of bread, had to be done on this day for preparation. This Sabbath would be an especially High Sabbath, for it was the Sabbath of the Passover week. There would be little time for anyone to make burial arrangements for Jesus before the start of this holy day, essentially, less than three hours.

Because of the coming holy day, the Jews did not want the bodies of Jesus or of the men crucified with Him left on the crosses. This would have suggested a curse, not just upon the victims but upon the entire land. To accommodate them, Pilate ordered *crurifracture*. The Roman executioners would break the legs of the crucified ones. The victim would no longer be able to use his legs to push his body upwards so as to expand his chest and draw breath. He quickly suffocated. But, when the soldiers came to break Jesus' legs, they found Him already dead. This fulfilled an Old Testament prophecy that not one of His bones would be broken.

Each of the four gospels provides a tiny glimpse of Joseph of Arimathea. Mark calls him "a prominent member of the Council." Matthew adds that he was rich. Luke emphasizes his sense of justice and how he opposed the actions of his fellow councilmen in railroading Jesus with lies and rumors during an illegal nighttime trial. John sheds the most light, telling us that he was actually a secret disciple of Jesus, just to a point that he did not risk his standing or safety. However, when Jesus died, Joseph found an extra measure of courage. He was "waiting for the kingdom of God." Whether or not Joseph had ever entertained notions that Jesus of Nazareth might be *Messiah*, he knew that the kingdom had nothing to do with a vitriol that would push for the death of Someone so innocent as this Galilean Rabbi. Elements of affection for Jesus and disdain for the actions of his peers came together, compelling him to act.

Joseph knew that Jesus was dead before Pilate knew it. He also knew how vilely Jesus' remains would be treated by the Romans. They might just toss the body, still nailed to the crossbar, over Jerusalem's southeast wall and into the simmering garbage dump called *Gehenna*. They might just leave Him to the birds, the critters and the elements on Golgotha. It was called "the Skull." Who knows what human remains were left lying around? The best case scenario was for burial in a field by His disciples, but they were in hiding. Joseph stepped in and nobly asked for possession of the body. Pilate was surprised to hear that Jesus was already dead and without the *crurifracture*. Typically, it took anywhere from 36 to 72 hours for a man to die on a cross, but we know that Jesus had already spoken of His power to lay His life down and to take it up again. Pilate simply confirmed the death and released the body to Joseph.

Jesus received an aristocrat's burial. The linen purchased by Joseph in which Jesus was wrapped was costly. John records that that Joseph had a partner in this kindness. Nicodemus, the Pharisee who had earlier visited Jesus by night also provided an extravagant gift – about 75 pounds of "a mixture of myrrh and aloes" (John 20:39). These spices were placed in strips of cloth and the body was wrapped in them. It was then likely shrouded in the costly linen. After the body was prepared, it was placed in Joseph's own tomb. Matthew and Luke call it a new tomb. John adds that no one had ever used it. This suggests that it was intended as a family tomb. Obviously, Joseph hadn't used it, but apparently, neither had any of the relatives for whom it was built.

Typically, a tomb was closed when a large round millstone, six feet or better in diameter, was rolled down into a little trench that had been dug across the opening of the tomb. Once the stone was in place, it would require several strong men to roll it up out of that trench and away from the opening so that any other family members could be interred. When that stone rolled into its resting place, it very much seemed like the end of the story of one Jesus of Nazareth.

But, this seemingly definitive end to Jesus was not satisfactory to those who had pressed for His death. Matthew tells how some of the chief priests and Pharisees were nervous about something Jesus had said earlier: "After three days I will rise again" (Matthew 27:64). His disciples might try to pull a fast one. They argued that His disciples might try to steal the body and propagate a rumor of resurrection. So Pilate put at their disposal a Roman guard just to make sure that no false rumors of Jesus being raised from the dead could possibly occur. He also authorized that an official seal be placed on the tomb. The might of Imperial Rome would see to it that Jesus stayed put.

II. The Resurrection of God's Anointed King (Mark 16:1-8)

Joseph, the prominent Sanhedrinist, had access to the circles of power in Jerusalem not shared by the women and the unschooled fishermen from Galilee who called themselves followers of Jesus. Joseph and Nicodemus had provided as elaborate of a burial for Jesus as anyone could have. The Galileans surely must have appreciated that Joseph had rescued Jesus' body from the indignities of the Romans, but it was still not the same as paying their own last respects. Jewish conventions for burial required no more spices, but the women yearned to journey through their own grief.

On late Friday afternoon, Jesus was placed in Joseph's tomb within three hours of his death. The women returned to wherever they were staying, perhaps Bethany, before sundown Friday. They observed the Sabbath until sundown Saturday. Then, they went out to purchase spices. Some merchants opened their shops into the evening on Saturday after the Sabbath had ended. Three of the women purchased spices to take to the tomb the next morning. Then apparently, they retired for the night, but they were back on their way to the tomb of Jesus by the crack of dawn.

The last thing these women were thinking about was Jesus' promise to rise again. They just hoped to find some men out so early that they might persuade or hire to open the tomb, giving them access to the body of their beloved rabbi. But, as the tomb drew into view, they saw that the stone had already been rolled away. Possibly, Mary Magdalene bolted at this point to inform Peter and John that someone had taken the body of Jesus. The other women curiously entered the tomb and were alarmed to find "a young man dressed in a white robe." Matthew clarifies that, in fact, this young man was an angel. Luke adds that he had a companion.

In the night, an angel had rolled back the stone and sat on it. He was arrayed in garments as white as lightening. The guards were so terrified that they passed out cold. Apparently, they had come around by dawn and had run off trying to figure out how to stay out of trouble with Pilate. By the time the women arrived, the angel had a less terrifying look, but his words were amazing:

"Do not be alarmed ... You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him." - Mark 16:6

The angel spoke of an appointment in Galilee. This was meant for all of Jesus' disciples. When Paul later defends the resurrection of Jesus, he speaks of a time when 500 eyewitnesses of the risen Lord were gathered in one place. He was probably referring to this Galilean appointment of which the angel spoke. Before that gathering occurred, Jesus would appear to His Apostles as well as to these women. He would also appear to Peter, a meeting that Luke alludes to and that Paul confirms happened. We know this meeting occurred, but we are not privy to the details.

It is touching that Jesus would appear to Peter alone. No one ever fell in the eyes of the community of disciples any more ingloriously than Peter. All four Gospels tell of Peter's fearful denial that he even knew Jesus. But, even if our prying eyes were not meant to see it, the very fact that the angel would use this occasion of resurrection to single out Peter and send him a word of encouragement should convince us that Jesus is much less concerned with our failures than He is with our stubborn unwillingness to allow Him to forgive us and to put us back together.

Mark records that when the angel had finished speaking, the women fled the scene, unable to speak because they were too rattled. But, they would not remain silent. When we lay the four Gospel records of the Resurrection of Jesus side by side, a scenario something like this develops:

Mary Magdalene had run off to tell Peter and John that someone had taken Jesus' body. Those two disciples sprinted to the tomb. John outran Peter to the site, but he did not enter. He just looked in to see what could be seen from the outside, which were empty linen strips. When Peter arrived, he ventured into the tomb. He saw not only the linen strips, but also the costly shroud, neatly folded and set to the side. What grave robber would take a naked body and leave the costly linens? John immediately believed that Jesus had been raised to life. Peter was not so sure.

The two men left the tomb, but Mary Magdalene returned. The angels also had returned. She repeated her concern to them that someone had taken Jesus' body. Then, she turned to a man behind her who she thought might be the gardener and repeated her concern again. Perhaps, because of her tears, she did not recognize this man, but when He spoke her name, "Mary," she immediately knew she was in the presence of the risen Jesus and answered, "Rabboni!" (or Teacher)

As the other woman walked along the road to where they were staying, Jesus appeared to them. Then, He found Peter. Later that day, He appeared to two disciples walking to Emmaus. Finally, on the evening of that same first day of the week, Jesus appeared to the other Apostles with the exception of Thomas, who could not be convinced that Jesus was alive. One week later, Jesus again appeared. This time, Thomas was present. Jesus went to Galilee where He ate with several of His Apostles by the lake. Then, He appeared to the 500 that watched Him ascend into heaven.

III. Life in the Kingdom of God

There is no doubt whatsoever of what the authors of the four Gospels, not to mention, the Apostle Paul expected their respective readers to conclude. Paul summarizes it this way:

³For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. ⁶After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. – 1 Corinthians 15:3-8

So why is there ever any inclination on the part of anyone who calls himself "Christian" to explain the Resurrection of Jesus Christ as anything but the literal defeat of sin, death and hell by the Son of God Who bodily marched out of His tomb? Some so-called "churchmen" teach that Easter is more important than whether Jesus physically was raised from the dead. They talk about the Spirit of Christ blossoming in us, much as new life returns to the earth each Spring. Clearly, anything left to Easter without the bodily resurrection of Jesus is frivolous and wholly unimportant by comparison

The Apostles had no interest in any such drivel. Something much more significant than that transformed distraught and terrified people into joyful and courageous heralds of a salvation from God. They had met and had been commissioned by the living Christ.

"The most powerful historical proof of the resurrection is the 'resurrected' disciples. Dull, defeated people became fearless, adventuresome leaders. Cowards became courageous; the timid became triumphant; the inept did the impossible. 'He is risen!' became the joyous chant of a new life without limits." - Lloyd Ogilvie

Without confidence in the bodily resurrection of Christ, everything about Christianity crumbles. Any hope as to what lies beyond death's door is superstitious fantasy *UNLESS* God has already proven that He can bring the dead to life. Jesus is the first fruits of resurrection. We have eternal hope because after our Redeemer gave His life for our sins, He defeated the penalty of those sins. Hell's strongholds crumbled when Jesus exited the grave. The sting of death was destroyed.

Of course, resurrection is not just about life after death. When we believe in our hearts that God raised Christ from the dead, we also embrace baptism, which pictures death, burial and resurrection. This resurrection is into "*newness of life*," a life empowered by the same dynamic that raised Jesus. This power of "new life" is our greatest asset in our struggle against sin.

Faith, repentance and baptism activate resurrection power. Minds destroyed by greed, bitterness, vanity, rage, pornography – these can all come back to life by the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. Any life that seems ruined can be renewed. Those who were written off by the religious elite of Jesus' day – prostitutes, tax collectors, sinners – all found restoration in Him.

That may sound like the Gospel as it is supposed to be preached to unbelievers, but more and more, it must be proclaimed to those who claim that they do believe, but who have never surrendered their sin burdens to any power greater than their own. That is why after days or even months of good behavior brought on by your own self-discipline, you suddenly find yourself in places you don't want to be, doing things you don't want to do.

In psychology, "perseveration" is a brain dysfunction that causes people to persist in some behavior, totally illogically, even when that behavior is doomed to failure. This condition is often brought on by traumatic brain injury. But, there must also be such a thing as "spiritual perseveration," something that causes even some Christians to keep repeating the same futile courses of self-reliance that never achieve victory in their struggles against sin.

This spiritual equivalent of perseveration has nothing to do with brain injury, but with the fact that it can take an amazingly long time for a believer to come to the end of his own strength. The power of Christ's Resurrection is intended to also function as the power for kingdom living, that newness of life by which the believer sees himself as dead to sin and alive to God. The power of sin's futility was broken by Jesus, and He invites you to join him on resurrection ground, where that same power is available for you in your struggles.

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