

“THE DOUBLE MIRACLE”

by Steve Hammond, Sunday, April 21, 2019

Mark 16:1-8 and Luke 24:36-49 at NFBC

//4 But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. 5 As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. 6 “Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “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 16:4-6

//45 Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. 46 He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”//

—Luke 24:36-49 NIV

What could be better than this? Easter, the celebration of the day when God raised up his Son, Jesus, from the dead – never to die again! A preview of the Great Day of the Lord; the first fruits of a great harvest for the kingdom of God, when all who belong to Christ will themselves be raised up by the same power demonstrated on this day in Jesus. This is the day of resurrection! Is there anything better, greater, more worthy of your attention and celebration?

No. There’s nothing greater.

But there is one thing that is equal and worthy of our attention... and even a certain kind of reverent celebration. It is the cross, the crucifixion of this same Jesus raised on Easter. The cross of Christ was not a mere prerequisite, or some necessary evil, to be done in order to make way for the resurrection. Then expected to fade away once that was accomplished. Not at all. The cross is itself very much the focus of the Gospel Story of Jesus. The cross is the finished accomplishment of Jesus for the atonement between God and Man. The resurrection doesn’t rescue Jesus and the rest of us. Instead the cross is the vehicle of rescue, with Jesus at the helm. And the resurrection is the earliest dawning of that first day where one awakens after that rescue has been secured. There is a peace and joy and wonder to the dawning of that day. But it is not a greater day than the one of blood and sacrifice by which one is saved.

I have chosen the two Gospel scriptures for today's message to represent all the accounts of the resurrection in the Gospel. Mark is especially interesting because he has just spent two long chapters, 14 & 15, focusing on the Passion of Jesus – his death and all that preceded it. Then in chapter 16 he gives us only eight verses. Eleven more verses were added and reflect much of what can be found in Matthew, Luke and even John. But Mark itself gives the readers just enough to experience the same mixture of hope and fearful wonder at hearing the angelic word of Jesus' resurrection.

The cross would surely be impossible for any of us to appreciate without the reality of the resurrection. But that same resurrection would not be appreciated either, were it not for what came before it: the Triumphal Entry; the cleansing of the temple and the subsequent conflicts; the pointed teachings, the Last Supper; Gethsemane and the scattering of the disciples; the trials – of Jesus, but also of Peter; the brutal scourging; the crucifixion and solemn burial.

Lest you think Mark was unique in his emphasis on the cross, Matthew has 20 verses in chapter 28 on the resurrection, after two long chapters on the Passion narrative. Luke also spends two chapters on the Passion and one on the resurrection. And John is the most generous with chapters 12 through 19 being dedicated to Jesus' last earthly days. And then two chapters on the resurrection accounts.

If you counted the verses instead of chapters, you would get 654 verses on the Passion of Christ, and 133 (or 144) on the resurrection. This isn't to show superiority or inferiority either way. It's to highlight something we might otherwise overlook, especially with the more natural appeal of a resurrection over a crucifixion. Scripturally speaking, these two events are of vital and equal importance. If Christ were not crucified our sins would still be waiting for the perfect Lamb of God. If Christ has not been raised, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:17, "...your faith is futile; you are still in your sins." The cross and the resurrection go together, even though they can be spoken of and experienced separately.

So this Easter I'm bringing *both* the resurrection and the cross to you. A number of you participated in the Seder supper on Maundy Thursday, where the cross of Jesus is clearly elevated, making him the ultimate Passover Lamb protecting us from the angel of death and freeing us from the slavery of sin. Some of you also went on the Cross Walk where the 14

stations of the cross were represented in various churches and even at the bell in the middle of town. I wonder if today you expected to hear even more about the cross!

But Jesus himself brought the cross up on his resurrection day. Remember the two men on the road to Emmaus? Jesus words to them were about the necessity of the Messiah's suffering to come first, and then his glory to follow. Remember the Bible Study Jesus gave his disciples? It's in our scripture from Luke today. And it's the last thing recorded by Luke before the ascension. Though the details of that study are not listed in detail, they are generalized in verse 44, "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." And then later in verse 46, "The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day," The cross is right there, in the suffering, right before the rising from the dead. And as you look through the many scriptures which could well have been used by Jesus for his Bible Study, the suffering is always right there along with the glory. Sometimes it dominates to the point where the glory is difficult to see. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his promised son, Isaac; Psalm 22, and Isaiah 53 being examples.

But just in case some of you might be thinking I'm short-changing the resurrection by my bringing the cross so much to your attention today (I'm not really worried you're thinking that), I would like to present the cross and resurrection of Jesus to you as a double miracle. The cross is not an ordinary thing followed by a miracle; it is itself a miracle, followed by another miracle. For here we have the double barreled miracle of God's saving work recorded in the full Gospel of Jesus Christ. It goes like this...

Consider the miracle of Jesus' death. Yes. The miracle of his death. You have to consider this in the light of who Jesus truly is. He is God in human flesh; he is the way, the truth and the life of God himself. And you just don't kill someone like that. You might as well be plotting to kill "truth" itself. The Nazi's during WWII were very good at propaganda, twisting the truth, telling lies, murdering millions and trying to cover it up. But none of their hiding and propaganda could actually change the truth one iota. The truth was still the truth. They could not kill and be done with the truth as if it were no longer the truth. We see them in the light of day today, but they were just as true in the darkness of yesterday.

Yet, Jesus was judged as untrue by the world and sentenced to be executed. And then he died. Horribly crucified, as if he would be erased from history and reality altogether. Forgotten forever.

But calendars of history have done a strange thing. They hold the death date of the One who is the way, the truth and the life of God... and they lift it up for all the world to behold. They even call it “Good Friday.” This death of Jesus is itself every bit as much a miracle of God as is the miracle of his resurrection. There is a strange unity revealed in the miracle of the cross and the miracle of the empty tomb.

Consider how if Jesus were just an ordinary man, then his death would be completely expected. It would be an inevitability in life. His resurrection, though, would be shocking. And, of course, that is the perspective of most people. Yet Jesus, being divine, would have his life, not his death, be what’s expected. One would of God life never-ending, eternal. It’s what God is and does. One would never expect God to experience death—ever. His death would be the unexpected thing, the impossible shock to behold. The same kind of shock as that of a miracle.

But at first it would be like a miracle gone bad.

Surely that must have been how the disciples felt, to the degree they knew who Jesus truly was.

And surely the full depth of the pain and suffering of this miracle could only be known by God himself.

But it wasn’t a “miracle gone bad” at all. It was the way, the truth and the life of God saving us sinners. It was finished. And it worked miraculously. Now the living truth of it simply had to be raised up. Death itself is swallowed up in victory. The real impossibility proved to be death trying to hold Jesus in the grave.

Christ has died, yes, for our sins! And yes, he is risen!

The life and love of God given to us in Jesus Christ.

Shocking miracles—both.