

Mark 16 Are you looking for Jesus?

Introduction

Truth is stranger than fiction on many occasions. At first sight there are some stories we assume must have been invented or inflated, but on occasions the information provided is completely accurate. 'EU snaps up Gaza croc woman' was a BBC news headline on Monday 26 March 2007. What images does this conjure up in your mind? Gaza is part of the Palestinian territories but not exactly known for its reptile population! What could possibly have happened here? Incredibly a woman was stopped by border customs officials who were suspicious that although she might have been as large as her clothing size suggested, it was somewhat questionable. When she was asked to remove her large outer garments the guards found three living crocodiles strapped to her body. The three crocodiles 40-50cm /15-20 inches long were hidden under her dress. An EU spokeswoman, Maria Chavarri, for the border police, said 'no-one had ever been found guilty of smuggling live crocodiles under their clothing before, this truly beats a few extra duty-frees'.

On the following day the BBC News bulletins showed some incredible pictures of a giant male cane toad, the size of a small dog, captured in Australia's northern territory. These poisonous toads have been responsible for the death of crocodiles, after they had eaten some of the toads. The captor of one of these giant toads, Graeme Sawyer, was reported as saying: "He is huge. I would hate to meet his big sister!" (BBC News 27.3.07).

Real life is stranger than fiction. The events of that first Easter were beyond the wildest imaginings of almost, if not everyone, close to it in Jerusalem that weekend over 2,000 years ago. On the day we call Good Friday Jesus was confirmed as dead by 3pm and placed in a stone tomb on the outskirts of the city by sunset. They thought it was all over and no-one could have blamed them for it. Mark 16:1-13 records the initial responses of followers of Jesus early on the Sunday morning, the first Easter Sunday morning. What was their response? (Mark 16:1-8): *When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. 2 Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb³ and they asked each other, Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb? 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.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.'⁸ Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.*

1. Their Devotion (Mark 15:40-41, 47)

⁴⁰ *Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome. ⁴¹ In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there. ⁴⁷ Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid. Who was it that remained at Jesus' cross when the vast majority of followers of Jesus had gone into hiding? No speeches of devotion from these ladies to rival the oratory of the male disciples at the Last Supper. Here there was silent suffering as they supported the mother of Jesus helplessly observing the death of her eldest son.*

Who was it that observed where the body of Jesus was taken after Pilate the Roman governor gave it to Joseph and Nicodemus, leading Jewish figures who had taken responsibility for burial arrangements after His death, but had never had the courage when He was alive to identify with the cause of Jesus of Nazareth, because of the possible cost to their reputations or career? It was these women who were consistent in their loyalty and devotion. There are people in our society who are sceptical about the accuracy of the resurrection accounts in the Bible. They tell us: 'dead people cannot come back to life, it is impossible'. What they often don't know is that in that culture a woman was not acceptable as a witness in a legal case. Had the Gospel writers been writing fiction, rather than describing a historical event, there was zero chance the 'witnesses' would have been women. All would have been male in order for the story to have credibility. Therefore, for each of the Gospel writers to tell us that the people who had the honour of recognising that Jesus had risen from the grave were female could only be because this is exactly what had happened on Sunday 5 April AD33, 1979 years ago. The credibility of the male followers of Jesus may pick up later, but they hardly cover themselves in glory by their conduct up to this point in the story. However, we need to ask how we would have behaved in that context and under the pressures they were facing. Would we necessarily have done much better? We can never give a definitive answer to that question because those events have passed into history.

Jesus is looking today for such people men and women of conviction and dedication not afraid to stand for the truth, not afraid to face opposition for their beliefs, not afraid to be in a minority when what they believe is of vital importance. Not afraid to speak up when others are silent –can God count on you? This can mean in the first instance committing your life to Jesus. Have you ever taken that first step of public commitment to Christ –or is this day the day when you will acknowledge Jesus as your Lord and Saviour? As a believer is this the day when you will come forward and say I too will be willing to confess my faith in baptism as Jesus calls me to do –the first step of obedience for Christian disciples.

2. **Their Sacrifice** (Mark 16:1)

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. This was not all, Luke 23:56 records that prior to the start of the Jewish Sabbath *they went home and prepared spices and perfumes.* Funerals in the Middle East to this day take place remarkably quickly after a death. It is not uncommon for funerals to be arranged and carried out on the same day as a person's death, where this is possible. A mixture of the hot climate and Middle Eastern cultures had led to this practice becoming standard. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were two wealthy men who had done at least all that the law required in terms of taking care of the body of Jesus and arranging His burial. What these ladies did went beyond that in their love and devotion; not forgetting the high financial cost of their actions. Money and material things, however, was not the source of their motivation in life; doing what Jesus wanted was number one for them. Aromatic oils had been purchased to anoint the body of Jesus and spices to offset the odours from a decomposing body. As this was the third day after Jesus' death, only the most dedicated follower would engage in such a practise so late after death in that culture. In addition, it has to be remembered that no followers of Jesus were expecting His bodily resurrection, despite Him mentioning it on numerous occasions to them. The Bible portrays God's people honestly as they were, revealing their strengths and

their weaknesses. The fact that none of them was really convinced anything good would happen on that first Easter Sunday reminds us that they like us at times are weak in faith and having low expectations of what God might do in our midst and in our lives.

What about you and me, what is our motivation for living? What is it that gets you out of bed on a Monday morning? You need a motivation simply to resist turning over after silencing the alarm clock! What keeps you going when you have taken another knock or discouraging blow for what you believe or are trying to do? These events that first Easter remind us that God can take very ordinary people weak in faith and doubting what difference they can make for Him to accomplish far more than they might ever dream of or pray for.

Easter Sunday was the special date in the church calendar from the third or fourth centuries onwards when believers were baptised. The change came about after the official recognition of Christianity by the Roman Emperor Constantine. At that time many people flocked into the churches. They were put through preparation classes that lasted the best part of a year. If this seems a little excessive to us we need to remember how recently regular martyrdoms had been for these Christian Churches and on a pastoral level it was felt that extensive preparations would help prepare believers for the challenge of living in a hostile society. The identification with Jesus in His dedication to the call of God in His life is so vividly represented by what this ordinance signifies to us. Baptism symbolises a dying to self and giving God the old life as we go under the water; emerging out of the water it is a new start to live the future of our lives 100% for the Lord. Have you taken this step of faith yet? Or as a Christian baptised many years ago how are you getting on with keeping your promises? Do you need to ask God's forgiveness and pledge afresh to put Him first, to give Him the place to which He is entitled?

3. **Their Obedience** (Luke 23:56)

Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment (Luke 23:56). Too often when the subject of religion comes up some people immediately have the mental caricature of emotional women and hard-headed men addressing this subject, with only the former 'needing religion'. Nothing could be further from the truth. In the real world it is so often the women who are prepared to be honest with each other about their feelings or how life is going. By contrast too often men stick to safe subjects such as work, sport and the weather to avoid discussing what is really going on in their lives. Women are more willing than men on many occasions to stand up for their principles when men may be absent. It has often been commented that when candidates are sought by Christian mission societies for service in some of the toughest mission fields overseas, that a large majority of the candidates are women, in proportions greater than from a representative sample of church members. On the contrary here it was the male disciples who had gone all emotional and hidden themselves away after the death of Jesus had been confirmed. Then and now it takes real guts to take a stand for Jesus at school, university and in the workplace, where a majority of people will hold to different views.

These ladies knew exactly what they were doing. They were upset, but their emotions were under control. The trauma of the occasion did not disguise their determination to do what they could, nor did it stop them from observing the Jewish law regarding how they ought to conduct themselves on the Sabbath day. Their

devotion to Jesus was seen in the costly materials they had purchased to take to the tomb. Yet it was not an impulsive purchase as might be the case of some items in the trolley or basket we might obtain in the supermarket. Like the lady Mary (John 12) at Bethany who anointed Jesus with a jar of alabaster oil, a most expensive perfume, where some men criticised her actions for extravagance, Jesus' comments were challenging: *She did what she could* (Mark 14:8). *She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial.* If you or I was to die tonight –would a fair reflection on our Christian lives be 'he/she did what she/he could?' Only God and you /me knows the truth of the answer we might give to Him.

4. Their Reward (Mark 16:5-11)

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. 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.' ⁸ *Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid. 9 When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. 10 She went and told those who had been with Him and who were mourning and weeping. 11 When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen Him, they did not believe it.*

Who was it who received the wonderful news of the resurrection of Jesus? It was the followers of Jesus who had been most faithful to Him in these dark hours; Remember Jesus' words in Matthew 10:32-33: *Whoever acknowledges Me before men, I will also acknowledge him before My Father in heaven. But whoever disowns Me before men, I will disown him before My Father in heaven.* Jesus Christ is looking down into the hearts of each one of us today. Where do you stand? I thank God for those who have acknowledged Jesus as Lord and Saviour and have had the courage to tell others what they have done –have you taken the stand for Jesus, because He is also calling you to acknowledge Him **today**. The supreme honour on that Easter morning went to Mary Magdalene. John in John 20:10-18 records Jesus' special encounter with her. Listen to what John recorded of that occasion: *11 but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb 12 and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. 13 They asked her, Woman, why are you crying? They have taken my Lord away, she said, and I don't know where they have put Him. 14 At this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realise that it was Jesus. 15 Woman, he said, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for? Thinking He was the gardener, she said, Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him. 16 Jesus said to her, Mary. She turned towards Him and cried out in Aramaic, Rabboni! (which means Teacher).* The rewards of following Jesus are not measured in material terms, even though for some people their embracing of our faith enables them to leave behind destructive lifestyles that have impoverished their lives in a variety of ways and it is no surprise if they are better off in almost every way once they become disciples of Jesus. The greatest reward is having the assurance that we are pleasing the Lord Jesus and honouring Him in our daily lives and recognising that one day He will acknowledge us before His Father in heaven.

5. **Their Responsibility** to tell other people about Jesus (Mark 16:7-8; John 20:17-18)

In John 20 we have the account of how Jesus encouraged Mary to go and tell the other disciples of her meeting with the risen Lord. Until the good news was passed on they were missing its blessing. *17 Jesus said [to Mary], Do not hold on to Me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to My brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to My Father and your Father, to My God and your God.'*¹⁸ *Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: I have seen the Lord! And she told them that He had said these things to her.* Mark (16:7-8) indicates how hard this was for them in the first instance *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.'*⁸ *Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.* It took real effort to overcome their fears to talking to people about Jesus. You and I may have those fears as well at times, but we need to overcome them and tell other people the good news. When we struggle in verbal witness for the Lord Mark 16:8 reminds us that the first followers of Jesus also found it just as hard in their cultural context. Are there people or a person that God has been asking you as a Christian to share your faith with? If God is speaking to you about this just now –will you honour Him by pledging to get on with this today, or this week or as soon as possible!

Conclusions

These women showed total dedication to Jesus? Will you do the same whether a first step of commitment to follow Jesus or a pledge to give Him 100% as a Christian. Are you a private Christian struggling as these ladies did with telling others about your faith, but now is the time for public declaration of your faith –in baptism? Their sacrifice was something they accepted as part of following Jesus –was it something that encouraged Joseph and Nicodemus to take a stand? Will you give a good example to others in the way we follow Jesus? They were obedient just doing what Jesus asked them to do –that is all He asks of us too! Their reward to be the first witnesses of the resurrection; God honours those that honour Him that includes you and me, but we cannot say how that will take place, but be assured it will happen. Finally, they had the responsibility to tell others just as we do today as well, Amen.