

Easter (3/29/24) God on Trial: Vindication

Mark 16:1-8 (with 1 Corinthians 15:19-28) 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 tomb ³ 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.

Dear fellow victors in our risen Savior:

In 1996 during the Olympic Games in Atlanta, a man named Richard Jewell discovered a suspicious backpack by a park bench. His actions helped saved lives when the area was evacuated and then the three bombs inside exploded, yet one person still died. Police hinted to the press that it was believed Jewell was the one responsible, but there was no proof. The story was leaked and national headlines accused him of the bombing.

He was a national pariah, a suspected terrorist, but he denied any wrong doing. He would eventually be cleared as a man named Eric Robert Rudolph made a full confession. He was eventually proven innocent. In other words, he was vindicated; his claims of innocence were proven true.

If today's theme is "Vindication," who needed to be vindicated? Well, for starters, Jesus. After what took place on Good Friday, it sure looked like Jesus was wrong. He had been put on trial by the Jewish leaders and declared guilty of blasphemy and worthy of death. Pontius Pilate handed down the sentence: death by crucifixion. This was not only one of the most painful ways to die, but it was also one of the most shameful and disgraceful forms of execution, usually reserved for the worst of criminals.

As Jesus hung between two criminals, bleeding and dying, he looked so weak and powerless. If he were as good as he claimed to be, wouldn't God rescue him? If he were God as he claimed to be, couldn't he escape? But nothing happened. The women who had followed him watched as he breathed his last—like every other person who had ever hung on a cross. When it was all over, they watched as Joseph of Arimathea took Jesus' lifeless body and buried it in his own tomb.

Maybe you can relate. Someone you loved deeply has died. The funeral is over, and your friends and family are on their way home. As darkness settles on the day, it's too quiet, and you feel very alone. "Lord, I feel so lost and confused. I just don't understand."

It's not just the death of a loved one that can leave us feeling this way. Thoughts of our own death are always lurking in the background. Whether or not we're conscious of it, there's this sense that time is running out, our bodies are failing, or our minds are fading. Even for the young, there is anxiety about making the right choices—friends, love, college, and career. It's a million possibilities and the recognition that our time is limited. Against the backdrop of this brief life, our sinful choices appear like enlarged shadows, our every mistake magnified in our minds. How we have let down our Savior! Jesus wasn't guilty, but we sure are.

We might not know exactly what the women were *thinking* on Easter morning, but Mark tells us what they were *doing*. At break of dawn, they went to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body. But when they got there, they saw the stone rolled away and a young man in a white robe. " **'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.’ ”

If the women had expected Jesus to be alive, they wouldn't have gone to his tomb to anoint his body! **“Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb.”** But soon it would sink in. Later that day, Jesus would appear to them—and to Peter and the disciples on the road to Emmaus and the Eleven behind locked doors. And later to the Eleven plus Thomas and then five hundred believers at once. The early reports were corroborated again and again. The good news was true: “Victory!” was the headline. Vindication!

Easter is vindication. Jesus did look guilty on the cross. Yet by raising his Son from the dead, the Father put the exclamation point on Jesus' own words from the cross: **“It is finished.”** Vindication! Those sins are paid for—yours and mine.

Easter is vindication also for those who have placed their hope in Jesus—like Job of long ago who declared, **“I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth . . . yet in my flesh I will see God”** (Job 19:25,26). Jesus' resurrection is proof that Job was right. It's proof for us too. If Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, we do have hope beyond this life. Paul calls Jesus the **“firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep”** (1 Corinthians 15:20). So Jesus' resurrection is the promise of the resurrection for all his people: **“Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him”** (1 Corinthians 15:23). That day will be our ultimate vindication.

But even now, Easter is vindication for us as we live as people judged by this world. There has been a lot of talk about the decline of the Christian church in the United States. Fewer people in this country follow Jesus, church attendance is down, and its citizens are becoming more secular. Even Christians may say, “The church is dying.” Is that possible? How can the church be dying when it is the body of the risen Christ? Congregations may die and Christians may fall away, but as long as Jesus lives, so does his church. We have been proven right. We are vindicated!

For us, then, this is the feast of victory for our God. We may be afflicted by temptation and trouble and harassed by a hostile world. But we are on a triumphal march to glory. Along the way, our lives are imbued with eternal significance as we love God, our neighbors, and even our enemies, and as we testify to the truth. The march goes on in simple, humble, almost imperceptible ways until finally we sing the victory song with saints and angels in heaven.

Sin is forgiven. Death is defeated. Jesus is Lord. Christ and his people have been put on trial, and Easter brings the victorious verdict: Vindication. Alleluia! Amen.