Stranger than fiction

Text: Mark 15:42-16:8

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Mark 15:42-16:8

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 145, 313, 116b, ‘See what a morning’, 306

Series: Occasional (Easter Sunday)

Theme: In his brief gospel account of the burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Mark tells a strange, but true story which calls all who hear it to believe in the reality of the Risen Saviour and to confidently hope in the resurrection to come.

Proposition: Confidently trust in the reality of Christ’s resurrection from the dead – your faith is not in vain!

**Introduction**

What is at the heart of the Christian faith? Some people think it’s a lifestyle – a set of good morals. Some people think it’s a feeling – of inner peace. Some people think it’s knowing the Bible really well. Some people think it’s going to church – being part of a Christian community. What do you think? Moral behaviour, inner peace, Bible knowledge and regular church attendance are all part of the lifestyle of a faithful Christian, but they are not the heart of the Christian faith.

The single most foundational event of Christianity is not even that Christ Jesus is the only person ever to have had perfect morals, not that He alone brings true inner peace, not that all the Scriptures speak of Him and not that the church is His holy bride. The most central historical event upon which the Christian faith depends is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from death to life. Yet, some people think that Christians are hopelessly mistaken in their belief that life continues beyond the grave. They think that we who believe upon Christ follow a myth, a legend, a silly story from a bygone era.

**If** the message that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead was **not** true then the Christian faith would be empty and pointless, being devoid of any spiritual, moral or intellectual value This is what the Apostle Paul explained to the church in Corinth (1 Cor 15:12-14). He wrote “*If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied*” (1 Cor 15:19).

The historical reality of the resurrection of Christ is foundational to the certain hope that people like you and me can also be resurrected from our death to receive a new body for eternity. If Christ has not been raised from the dead then not only are His disciples, believing Christians, miserably deluded, they are also still in their sins (1 Cor 15:17). They remain under the wrath of God, expecting heaven after they die but actually heading for hell.

The purpose of this sermon is to show from Mark’s gospel that in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first of many who will likewise be resurrected at the end of this age. Brothers and sisters in Christ, you can confidently trust in the reality of Christ’s resurrection from the dead – your faith is not in vain! The gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus Christ can be said to be “stranger than fiction’ – to use the saying first coined by Lord Byron in the satirical poem Don Juan, 1823:

' Tis strange - but true; for truth is always strange;

Stranger than fiction; if it could be told).

Fiction is writing which describes imaginary events and/or people. We’re going to look closely at the non-fiction writing of Mark in our text under three headings:

1. The hasty burial
2. The missing body
3. The risen Saviour
4. **The hasty burial**

Have you ever needed to move quickly to get an important task completed for a tight deadline? There was not much time in which to bury the body of Jesus. He had died just after the ninth hour (about 3p.m.) on the Friday before the Jewish Sabbath which was called the ‘Day of Preparation’ (Luke 23:54). He had been hanging on the cross for six agonising hours (Mark 15:25). Sometimes the period of dying by crucifixion could last two or three days as a result of injuries, hunger, dehydration and exposure to the elements. In order to speed up the painful process of perishing, the legs of the condemned person were sometimes broken (ref. John 19:33) so that the person on the cross could no longer push their own body upwards in order to take a breath.

When Joseph of Arimathea asked Pontius Pilate for the body of Jesus, the Roman Governor was surprised that Jesus was already dead (Mark 15:44) as it would have been late Friday afternoon. However, Pilate was not going to accept the testimony of a Jew, even a high ranking one like Joseph who was ‘*a respected member of the Council*’ (Mark 15:43). When someone dies in New Zealand today our civil law requires that ‘a medical certificate of cause of death’ is completed for the death of persons over 28 days of age. This certificate must be completed and signed by a medical practitioner. There was a Roman practice of certification of death for those sentenced to capital punishment by crucifixion. The military officer in charge of the execution, who would be experienced in identifying that a person was dead, would verify that a criminal was no longer alive. The Roman centurion who had stood facing Jesus when he had breathed his last breath testified to Pontius Pilate that Jesus was indeed dead.

There was not much time left for the body of Jesus to be buried that afternoon. It was against the Old Testament civil law for Israel to leave a dead body on a cross overnight (Deut 21:23). Saturday, the next day, was a Sabbath – a day of rest on which the burial could not have taken place in accordance with the fourth commandment (ref. Luke 23:56b). This particular Saturday would be most special sabbath of the year – the one at the end of Passover week. There would have been no more than about three hours before sunset on the Friday when this Sabbath began.

Joseph needed to buy a linen shroud in which to wrap the corpse of Jesus. He would also have needed help taking the body of Jesus down from the cross. The disciples were not available, they had all fled. Nicodemus, a high-ranking Pharisee who had earlier met Jesus at night, helped Joseph and also brought a mixture of spices to start the embalming process of slowing down the decay of the body. The body of Jesus was placed into a newly cut rock tomb which was close to the place where Jesus had been crucified (John 19:42). This burial place belonged to Joseph and his family and was sealed with a large stone (Matt 27.60). In those days, the tombs of the wealthy had a rock grove cut so that a stone could be rolled into place to protect any bodies inside from animals or grave robbers. All the steps necessary to take the body of Jesus from the cross to the grave took place within the roughly three-hour period between the death of Jesus and sundown. This was a hasty burial which is recorded in all four gospels.

What are some of the details which make the true account in Mark’s gospel ‘stranger than fiction’? Joseph of Arimathea had been secret disciple of Jesus (John 19:38). He was a member of the Sanhedrin and must have been absent when the vote to execute Jesus was taken, for ‘all’ agreed to this wicked verdict (Mark 14:64). Joseph was a prominent member of the Council, Luke records that he was “*a good and righteous man who had not consented to their decision and action*” (Luke 23:50-51). Now, when it seemed that any hope in Jesus as the promised Messiah had been wiped out on the cross, Joseph ‘took courage’ (Mark 15:43) and went to Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus so that it could be buried in his own tomb. With this decisive action he was now a public disciple of Jesus. However, it is clear that he did not expect Christ to rise from the dead, because he bought clothing for the corpse and sealed it in his tomb.

He was exactly the right man at the right time to enable such a rapid burial for Jesus, assisted by another leading Jewish religious leader: Nicodemus. This hasty burial fulfilled the prophecy in Isaiah 53:9 “*And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death*”. All this took place so the prophesy of Jesus about Himself could be fulfilled: that he would be mocked, spat on, flogged and killed and after three days he would rise again (Mark 10:34). These details about the hasty burial of the dead body of Jesus are ‘stranger than fiction’ – they are reliably true, as is His missing body. Which brings us to our second point:

1. **The missing body**

Mark records that two women saw where the body of Jesus was laid to rest – Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses (Mark 15:47). When the Sabbath over, these women together with Salome and Joanna (who is mentioned in Luke’s gospel) went to anoint the body of Jesus with spices which they had bought, arriving very early on the Sunday morning. Like Joseph, they did not expect Jesus to rise from the dead.

When they arrived, they found that the ‘very large’ stone which had sealed the tomb had been mysteriously rolled away. There was also someone there to meet them inside the tomb, but it wasn’t Jesus! Instead there was a young man sitting down, wearing a white robe. White is not so much a colour description here but an indicator of the dazzling character of the glory of this being. He was in fact an angel, as the other gospel accounts make clear.

The messenger was there at the tomb to answer the unspoken question: “*Where is the missing body of Jesus?*”. The women’s surprise and distress must have been written all over their startled faces because the angel said “"*Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him*” (Mark 16:6). The is a reason why the body of Christ was missing; He had Risen from the dead and He is alive again!

Well before the time when he approached Jerusalem to be killed Jesus had said that His body would be in the grave for three days (Mark 8:31). The Jewish Sabbath was measured from sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday. As we saw earlier, the body of Jesus had been laid in the tomb on Friday (the day of preparation) before sundown. His dead corpse had remained in the grave during the Sabbath. Now it was Sunday - the 3rd day- He had come alive again before the women arrived. His body was missing from the grave because He had got up, left the grave clothes tidily behind and gone to Galilee where He would meet with His disciples.

The many predictions which Jesus had made about his own death and resurrection, before he was crucified, had come true. People saw this with their own eyes, and we have before us in the Bible their reliable eye-witness accounts of what they observed. Our text ends with the response of the women to what they had seen and heard in that ‘empty’ grave: “*They went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had gripped them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid*” (Mark 16:8). At first, they said nothing to anyone, but then the fear of these women turned to courage, and they did pass the angel’s message on. We know this from Matthew’s account: “*And they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy and ran to report it tell His disciples*.” (Matt 28:8)

What are some of the details which make the true account in Mark’s gospel ‘stranger than fiction’? The eyewitnesses to the empty tomb were women who were disciples of Jesus, butJewish law pronounced women ineligible as witnesses. If the account of the empty tomb was a fiction, men would have certainly been written in as the eyewitnesses.

There’s another strange thing. It’s not clear where the gospel of Mark actually ends. Your Bible likely has these words printed between chapter 16 verses 8 and 9: “*Some early manuscripts do not include 16:9-20*”. This gospel has come down to us in a number of old documents which are themselves copies of earlier ones. Some of the early manuscripts end here at verse 8, the later ones contain verses 9-20. It’s not clear where the original gospel actually finishes. It does seem somewhat strange that Mark would end his account with the words “for they were afraid”, without mentioning any post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. Yet the style of writing in v9-20 is unlike the rest of Mark’s gospel, suggesting a different author. Scholars are unsure as to whether v9-20 are part of the original gospel – which is why almost all Bibles include them – often in brackets with a footnote. It is possible that the ‘longer ending of Mark’ from verses 9 to 20 is ‘fiction’ in the sense that it may not be inspired Holy Scripture.

However, the account of the empty tomb, whilst being ‘stranger than fiction’ is reported in the other three gospels and is reliably true. The details are intricately interwoven in such a way as to be impossible to disprove. American homicide detective Jim Warner Wallace became a follower of Christ at the age of thirty-five after investigating the claims of the New Testament gospels using his skill set as a detective. A ‘cold case’ is an unsolved criminal investigation which remains open pending the discovery of new evidence. His book, ‘[Cold-Case Christianity](http://amzn.to/2AW8bc5)’, provides readers with ten principles of cold case investigations and utilises these principles to examine the reliability of the gospel eyewitness accounts.

These true historical records are ‘stranger than fiction’. The dead body of Jesus had been hastily buried before sunset on the Friday, had lain in the tomb until the Sunday morning and Jesus had then risen to life again, just as He had said he would. Which brings us to our third point:

1. **The risen Saviour**

John’s account tells us that when Peter and John both ran to the tomb later that Sunday, they saw linen clothes lying in one place, and the face cloth which had been on Jesus’ head, folded up separately by itself (John 20:6-7). Burial practice back then was to bind the body tightly in a linen shroud leaving upper part of shoulders and neck exposed and then to wrap a separate cloth around the head: a bit like a turban. These grave clothes were undisturbed – like the empty chrysalis of a caterpillar’s cocoon which a butterfly has left behind. It appears that the risen body of Christ had passed right through the grave garments, leaving them there in the otherwise empty grave.

A close friend of Jesus had once walked out of his grave after being dead four days when Christ cried out with a loud voice “*Lazarus come forth*” (John 11:43). Lazarus was brought back to life. He was revived to live again as a man of flesh and blood for a time before the grave claimed him back again.

But the resurrection of Christ was different from that of his friend Lazarus. The resurrection of Jesus was not the resuscitation of a dead body, but the complete transformation of Christ to be a man with a different kind of body who would never die again. Still human, still physical, but glorified: forever changed. The physical body of Jesus was able to appear, and to disappear, and to move unseen from place to place (Luke 24:31,36) passing through locked doors (John 20:26). His resurrection body was not a ghostly one, but a material one: composed of flesh and bones. His was a resurrection body which He invited His disciples to touch and see. A body which bore the marks of the nails on His hands and feet. A body into whose wounded side Thomas could place his finger. A body which consumed food in their presence.

Hundreds of real people saw with their real eyes the real body of Jesus alive after he had been dead and buried. These real people’s eyewitness accounts are recorded in the Bible so that ‘*you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name*’ (John 20:31).

The story of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is ‘stranger than fiction’. It is a true story. It is a story which still needs to be told and retold because the very words of this story as recorded in Scripture are the very power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (Rom 1:16). Remember the words that the angel said to the women early that first Resurrection Sunday morning: “*Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you”*. (Mark 16:7).

Peter is the only one of Jesus’ followers mentioned by name here. Peter was the self-confident ‘speak before you think’ disciple who was a loud spokesman for the others. At the end of the last supper which Jesus had with the twelve disciples Christ said to Peter: "*Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times." But he (Peter)said emphatically, "If I must die with you, I will not deny you.*" (Mark 14:30-31). Peter’s words turned out to be pure fiction when a servant girl identified him as being with Jesus. After Peter denied Jesus three times the rooster crowed twice, and Peter realized that the words which Jesus had spoken to Him earlier were not fiction. He then broke down and wept (Mark 14:72b). The Risen Jesus later met Peter, forgave him and restored him and called him again to ‘follow me’.

Where do you fit into this true story about the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is ‘stranger than fiction’? The people and events in the gospel story of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ are real, not imaginary, they are as real as you and your life.

Are you someone who has been a disciple of Jesus in the past, but like Peter, you have come under pressure to deny Him and you’ve deserted Him. You once followed Him, but now you’re separated from Him and perhaps you are now beginning to realise what you have lost. Perhaps like Peter you have despaired, broken down and wept because you have failed so badly. Perhaps you think that you are beyond His ability to forgive. You are not. Jesus is alive and invites you to come back to Him and be restored, renewed and re-engaged as one of His willing servants.

Are you someone who is devoted to Jesus; as Joseph of Arimathea was, as were the women who came to the empty tomb early that Resurrection Sunday morning. Yet though they were loyal to Christ, they did not actually believe that they would see Jesus alive again. Brothers and sisters in the Lord we will see Him face to face when He returns (1 Cor 13:12). Your faith is not in vain!

Perhaps you are a devoted Christian, but at times you doubt that Jesus is alive today. He is. He has sent His Holy Spirit to guide you in all truth (John 16:13) so that you will know that the resurrection of Christ is not fiction.

Perhaps you are someone who has heard some of the story of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead before, but you’ve never really stopped and thought about how it is ‘stranger than fiction’; not imaginary but real. Perhaps you’ve never seen how the gospel accounts of these historical events are so woven together than they cannot be sensibly and consistently understood as anything other than true reporting.

The resurrection of Christ from the dead is ‘stranger than fiction’. He is alive! Believe in Him today. Believe that He died in your place on the cross at Calvary. Believe that He has paid the necessary price for all your sins and that you are truly forgiven by God. Believe that Jesus has gone ahead to prepare a place for you in the New Heavens and New Earth. Believe that when you die you too will be raised to new life in Him.

His word of truth says: “*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him*” (John 3:36).

AMEN