

# 'And Looking Up They See That the Stone Is Rolled back.'- Mar 16:4

by G. Campbell Morgan

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*The resurrection of Jesus is the central fact of Christianity, and it is the proof that Jesus is the Son of God and the Savior of humanity.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 28:6, Mark 16:4, John 11:25-26, John 20:7, Acts 2:24, Romans 10:9, 1 Corinthians 15:55-57, Philippians 3:10-11, 1 Peter 1:3, Revelation 1:18

**Topics:** "Resurrection", "Faith in Christ"

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## Description

G. Campbell Morgan emphasizes the significance of the resurrection of Jesus as depicted in Mark 16:1-20, focusing on the moment when the stone was rolled back from the tomb. He highlights the initial confusion of the women who came to anoint Jesus' body, only to find the tomb empty and the grave-clothes undisturbed, which confirmed His resurrection. Morgan argues that the resurrection is the central fact of Christianity, vindicating Jesus' teachings and transforming the meaning of the Cross for His disciples. He asserts that the resurrection cannot be proven by human reasoning but is known through faith, and it serves as the foundation for the Christian faith and the hope of eternal life. Ultimately, the rolling back of the stone signifies the triumph of love and the promise of redemption for all humanity.

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## Transcript

Mar 16:1-20.

IN the first eight verses of this chapter we have a vivid picture of events in the earliest hours of the first day of the week, following that in which our Lord was crucified and buried. First, three women are seen on Saturday evening (that is, after six o'clock, when the Sabbath ended, and the first day began), buying spices for the anointing of the body of Jesus, which two of their number had seen laid in the tomb. The three who bought the spices were Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and Salome; and it is interesting to observe that these three were the women named as having watched the crucifixion from afar. After the passing of some hours-"when the sun was risen"-they came to the tomb, and the "they" here of Mark's record would seem to refer to the second Mary and Salome only, for John explicitly declares that Mary of Magdala had arrived earlier-"while it was yet dark." She had come to the sepulchre first; and the other two came a little later. She came "while it was yet dark"; they came "when the sun was risen." She also saw the stone taken away, but instead of waiting, and going into the grave, she ran on to bear the news to Peter and John, who evidently were living in separation from the other disciples,

declaring that they had taken away the Lord out of the tomb.

Be all that as it may, the story is in no way invalidated, the whole emphasis being on what these people expected to find, what they found, and the results which followed. As they came then, they remembered, the great stone which they had seen rolled against the door of the tomb, and "were saying among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the tomb?" They knew their physical weakness, and that it was a great stone-"exceeding great," and so they knew that they could not move it. Then they looked up, and as Mark says "they see that the stone is rolled back." These two women were evidently not of Mary Magdalene's temperament, for they did not jump to the conclusion that His body had been removed. Probably surprised, and certainly glad, they entered in with the spices to anoint the dead body of Jesus.

Then came the supreme astonishment. Instead of the dead body of their Master they saw "a young man arrayed in a white robe.

In the next eleven verses we have massed together some of the principal events of the next forty days, up to and including the ascension of the Lord. The last verse declares in yet briefer form, but with remarkable inclusiveness, the story of the days following His ascension. They went everywhere preaching; the Lord accompanying them, working with them, and confirming the Word by the signs that followed.

These last twelve verses constitute a battleground of textual criticism, and by many are rejected as not genuine. I do not propose to stay for a moment to discuss the matter. Suffice it for me to say that while recognizing the difficulties giving rise to the contention, I most strongly hold that they are certainly genuine, the weight of evidence both external and internal, compelling me to that conclusion.

To return to the text itself, "the stone is rolled back.

The fact indicated! The stone rolled back was not the supreme fact, but rather an indication of the fact, something which was intended to draw attention to the fact itself. The rolling back of the stone happened after the resurrection. It was not rolled back from the tomb in order that Jesus might pass out of the tomb. He had left the tomb before the stone was rolled back. Matthew gives a fuller account of the event, and says that there was a great earthquake, that an angel descended, whose appearance was as lightning, and his raiment white as the snow, and the keepers-the soldiers who had been obtained from Pilate to keep watch over the tomb-did quake and became as dead men. The coming of the angel was for the rolling back of the stone; not that Jesus might pass, out of the grave; but to show that He had gone.

When the stone was rolled back, what was there to be seen? An empty tomb, and undisturbed grave-clothes. These grave-clothes were lying in the very folds that they had been in, around the body of the dead Christ; and the napkin that had been on the head was laid separately-as John is particular to say-that is, as it would be separated from the other wrappings, as they were round the dead body of Jesus. Familiarity with Eastern customs will help us here. The wrappings around the dead were voluminous. They were enswathed in these bandages in the most careful and systematic and even scientific manner. What Peter and John saw when they looked into the grave was those grave-clothes lying exactly as they had been wrapped around His body; but His body was not there! It was that vision of the grave-clothes undisturbed, that convinced Peter and John that He was risen. If the grave-clothes had been disturbed, and carefully folded up, then they might have imagined that somebody had unwrapped them, and that the body of Jesus had been stolen, as certain people said it had; but the undisturbed wrappings in the tomb demonstrated to these men that He was risen. This then, was what they saw when

the stone was rolled back-an empty tomb, and undisturbed grave-clothes. Of these signs angels became guardians, until they had borne testimony to the disciples, which would settle forever the question whether our Lord was truly risen from the dead.

What then is the fact that was thus indicated? The very fact which the angel announced: "Ye seek Jesus the Nazarene. . . . He is risen: He is not here." Jesus of Nazareth had been raised from the dead; had emerged from all its material bondage and bandages; had passed into a new life, the same but entirely different; had proved Himself Victor over death, and Conqueror of the grave. That is the central fact of Christianity through all the centuries. If that is not true, Christianity is doomed.

It is the central fact of Christianity. It is the fact that cannot be explained save by revelation, and revelation has never explained the process of the resurrection. It has explained it in so far that it has declared that God raised Him from the dead. Whether that declaration be believed may depend upon our conception of God. If God be a prisoner in His own universe, having created an order in the midst of which He dwells imprisoned, so that He cannot move out of what we call the ordinary, then perhaps that never happened. Even then, before we can be reasonable in unbelief we must be sure we know all the ordinary! But if God is greater than His universe; if in brief, He is the God of the Bible, Who spake and it was done, Who commanded and it stood firm, Who upholds all things by the word of His power, and is able out of apparent nothing to bring cosmos and beauty into being, and to deal with chaos and disorder, and destroy them; if this be our God, then though we never have an explanation of the process of resurrection, we have a fact upon which we can rest. God raised Him from the dead.

I will go further, and declare that the resurrection is a fact that cannot be proved, except to the faith of the heart. The resurrection cannot be proved mechanically, mathematically, by the demonstration of our small clevernesses. It will always evade us. It never has been so proved; it never can be done. Man cannot prove God by these self-same processes. God is not to be demonstrated mathematically, mechanically; not even philosophically, unless our philosophy be the philosophy of revelation. We cannot prove the resurrection by reason. Therefore the apostle wrote at one time, "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth Jesus as Lord, and shalt believe in thy heart that God raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved: for with the heart man believeth unto righteousness." Belief with the intellect never produces moral and spiritual results. Belief with the heart does; that belief that rises out of a great agony, and a great sorrow, and a great shame, and fastens upon a declaration, and rises healed and helped that faith is the faith that demonstrates the resurrection. Apart from such faith we cannot prove it. No man knows Jesus rose from the dead, save the man who in helplessness of soul has trusted Him, and has received that spiritual, mystic, inner witness, that knows no denial, and laughs at criticism. That man knows that He Who died, and was buried, rose again, and ever lives to make intercession.

Not only is it a fact that cannot be explained; not only is it a fact that cannot be proved; it is also a fact that cannot be denied save by ignorance. I use that word sympathetically. If there is a man who does deny it, then he does so in ignorance. The word "ignorance" is derived from the Latin. We may use the Greek equivalent and say, It cannot be denied, save by agnosticism. The Greek word "agnostic" sounds more poetical than the Latin equivalent "ignoramus," but they mean the same thing; the man who does not know. We can respect such a person, and respect his honest agnosticism about this very fact; only it should be understood that the moment when agnosticism becomes an impertinence, is the moment when a man makes it a resting-place for his soul. When a man makes it a harbour of refuge, then he is really a prisoner in his own agnosticism. No intellectual soul finds its last resting-place in ignorance. The resurrection cannot be disproved by agnosticism. Such treatment can never disprove it. The resurrection

cannot be disproved by denying it. Nor can His appearances after the resurrection be disproved.

Some one may say: Yes, but do you thus escape your problem? You say the fact is proved by other facts. But the other facts are disputed as much as the fact which you make them prove. But, I inquire on what ground these subsequent facts are disputed. The appearances of Jesus of Nazareth, alive from the dead, after He had been most certainly crucified, are as well authenticated as any facts of history which we do not hesitate to believe to-day. When you deny them, by that denial you declare that all history is invalid. You may be right! Perhaps those things did not happen under Julius Caesar, which were said to happen in this little island of ours! Perhaps there is no history!

The final, and conclusive fact, however, is that the whole Christian propaganda is the last proof that He rose from the dead; for the whole of it has been based upon this belief, and inspired by this fact. Had there been no resurrection, what then? There had been no Christian Church, no Christian propaganda, no Christian influence. Everything for which the lonely Nazarene stood, lay murdered, dead, in the tomb when they rolled against it a great stone. His disciples had been scattered like chaff before the wind, and the whole movement had been stamped out. How did it live again? It lived again, and it lives, because He lived again, and lives!

Let us then pass on to consider some of the values resulting from the fact of the rolling back of this stone. Here I can only deal with certain aspects of the one inclusive result, which is Christianity. I want to name three aspects of that one result, which also have been continuous.

The result of the empty tomb, and the fact of the risen Christ which it indicated, was first, the transfiguration of the Cross for His disciples; secondly therefore, It was the vindication of His teaching for His disciples and all such as consider that teaching; and finally, it was for His disciples and for all time an interpretation of His Person.

These men, gathered round about Jesus His disciples, His apostles, and subsequently other disciples, these people first came into contact with His Person. It was the personality of Jesus which made, an appeal to these men in the earliest days. Then as they walked and talked with Him, they came to know His teaching. At last they knew His Cross. The resurrection transfigured the Cross, vindicated His teaching, and interpreted His personality. Their experience had been that of contact with His Person, attention to His teaching, and shame and shuddering in the presence of His Cross. Now, interpreted by the resurrection, they saw the transfiguration of the Cross; they knew the vindication of His teaching; and they received the amazing revelation of the deepest and profoundest fact concerning His Person.

The resurrection meant the transfiguration of His Cross, Remember once more how these apostles had feared the Cross. They feared it for Him. They feared it for themselves. Their fear was by no means low and mean. I used to criticize these disciples for fearing the Cross, but I have given up doing so. I used to deduce a good many lessons therefrom about our own fears of the Cross. I think those lessons are needed still, but I think the illustration was false. The more I study these Gospels, and follow these men, the more I sympathize with them in their shunning of the Cross. I do not think that it was selfishness made Peter say, "That be far from Thee, Lord." It was pure affection for his Lord. He feared the Cross. To him it was intolerable to think that Jesus could be mauled to death by brutal, men. I think they feared for themselves also, but on no selfish level. If He were going to die, where were all their high hopes? He had talked of a Kingdom. All that must come to an end if He died. They did fear the Cross. From the moment when He began explicitly to declare it to them, they could hardly bear to walk and talk with Him. That is

manifest in all the accounts of His last months with these men. They only saw the wrong of the Cross. They were right in so far as they saw. There is nothing so shameful in all human history as the Cross of Jesus. There is nothing that reflects in such unmistakable and deadly manner upon the human heart as the Cross of Jesus. Oh, the vulgarity of it! the utter devilishness of it! If we lose that early sense of the horror of it, then we are losing a good deal more than we realize. It was a terrible thing! When the disciples saw that it really happened; that brutal men caught Him, mauled Him, bruised Him, murdered Him; they felt that it was all over, and they fled.

Now observe in the second place how these men came to glory in it. "God forbid that I should glory, save in the Cross of Jesus Christ my Lord." That was the writing of the apostle, born out of due time, who nevertheless was not a whit behind the chiefest apostle. He was thinking for the whole of them. The apostles gloried in it for Him, and gloried in it for themselves. They counted it all joy that they were considered worthy to suffer shame for the name. What had happened? The resurrection made them look back, and look again, and yet again; and the rough, brutal, devilish Roman gibbet, began to bloom and blossom and flame and flash, with the love of God. If there had been no resurrection, there would have been nothing but the black tragedy of a murder. The resurrection revealed to these men, and has revealed to us for all time, that in that dark hour, God wrought in the darkness for light, through death unto life, in bondage for the creation of liberty. Come, "behold, the place where they laid Him! He is risen: He is not here." "The stone is rolled back." We go again to Golgotha, to Calvary, to the green hill, and there lay our intellectual clevernesses in the dust, and worship:

"For God comes down our souls to greet,

And glory crowns the mercy-seat."

But again, that resurrection was the vindication of His teaching. We may mass the teaching of Jesus in certain regards, His teaching concerning relative values, His teaching concerning moral standards, His teaching concerning redeeming motives. Along these lines His teaching proceeded through all the three years; line upon line," precept upon precept, here a little and there a little, He had been dealing with these things.

Concerning relative values He perpetually insisted upon the supremacy of the spiritual over the physical ; calling men always into that attitude where they sought first the Kingdom of God, remembering that all the things of material necessity should be added to them; calling men to know no fear of men that only kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do; persistently declaring to men that the spiritual is supreme over the physical, and as insistently claiming the sacredness of the material. There was nothing in the teaching of Jesus approaching the Gnostic heresy that declared that the flesh is inherently evil. Plato could only get rid of sin by getting rid of the body. Jesus retains the body; and declares that God feeds the body as well as the soul, that the body is as sacred a thing as the soul, since the soul makes it its sanctuary. He never castigated His body; He never inflicted flagellations upon His flesh. That foolish practice was reserved for a decadent Christianity to discover. He lived a life that was natural and beautiful in the physical and the material. They had taken that fair and beautiful body, and brutally murdered it, and put it in the grave. But said the angel, "He is not here, He is risen"; and in that rising His teaching was vindicated. He did not fear those who should kill the body. He knew well that they could do no more. His victory over death was His vindication of the supremacy of the spiritual. It was also a vindication of His conception of the sacredness of the material. If the body were an evil thing, when He emerged into the spiritual life, after the resurrection, He would have left the body; but He took the body also; and from that

moment unto this, all human bodies are what the Church has called them, "sacred dust." When He came back and here is where intellectuality will break down He came in a risen body to eat broiled fish with His disciples; to be up in the morning when men are fishing, to light a fire and prepare a breakfast I Do not cut out those last chapters of John, I charge you again. Keep them where they are; for they are necessary. The supremacy of the spiritual, and the sacredness of the material were both vindicated by the fact of His resurrection.

Again, concerning moral standards, He had taught the glory of holiness; but He had also claimed the power to forgive sins. He stood among the sons of men the most insistent Demander of purity; yet to sinning men and women He had said, "Thy sins are forgiven thee"; "Hath no man condemned thee? Neither do I condemn thee: go thy way; from henceforth sin no more." He had taught two things apparently contradictory; the necessity for absolute purity, and yet the possibility of so forgiving the sins that out of the sense of forgiveness there should spring a new moral incentive. By the resurrection that teaching was vindicated. By the resurrection the glory of holiness was revealed. Said Peter on the day of Pentecost, "It was impossible that He should be holden of death." Why? Because in Him is no sin, and by His resurrection sin was destroyed. Yet more than that-and this is the supreme thing to every human heart. By that resurrection the possibility of forgiveness was vindicated, for the resurrection is the sign and symbol to men everywhere that God has accepted that mystery of atoning work for the redemption of humanity. The actual experimental fact of forgiveness is a new moral incentive. A man says, I am forgiven, and goes on sinning, and we know that the truth is not in him. A man says, I am forgiven, and I hate sin and will turn myself from it; I may flounder and fall, but so help me God, I am against it myself; that man is telling the truth ; and out of his sense of forgiveness a, moral inspiration has sprung up. All that was vindicated by the resurrection. And once again: His teaching concerning redeeming motives was vindicated. He had taught the beauty of sacrifice; and no one had believed Him. He had declared the strength of love; and they had murdered Him, and found Him weak enough to die, as they said in unutterable contempt. Now behold Him, alive from the dead! In the resurrection is the vindication of the beauty of sacrifice, the vindication of the ultimate triumph of the sacrificial life. In the resurrection is the wonder of eternal love. Love is stronger than death, and mightier than the grave. That motive of compassion which we referred to as one of the lost things if He were dead, flamed again, in light and power and beauty, by the way

of the resurrection.

Finally we come to that which in some senses is supreme, but which may now be dismissed briefly; by the resurrection these men came to a new interpretation of His person. How far had they gone before His Cross? They had travelled a long way. They knew the Man Jesus, they honoured Him, and they loved Him. They knew that the Man Jesus was the Christ. They had accepted His Messiahship, they had followed Him as Messiah, and obeyed Him as such. They had gained an intellectual conviction that He was the Son of God, as Peter himself declared at Caesarea Philippi, "Thou art the Son of God." But an intellectual conviction is never a spiritual and moral dynamic, unless it have with it something else, mightier than intellect.

What now happened? I go again to the writings of Paul. Speaking of Jesus in the beginning of his great Roman letter he says that after the flesh He was of the seed of David, but that He "was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead." I like to take that Greek word for "declared," and Anglicize it. This is what he said, "He was horizoned the Son of God with power." He was placed upon the horizon in a new light, so that men saw clearly, as they see the sun in its rising, Who He was. By that resurrection they discovered this deepest truth concerning His personality. Presently eight days afterwards

in the upper room, a magnificent man, an agnostic, but honest withal, and broken-hearted withal, did say in the presence of that fact that Jesus was alive, "My Lord and my God." They all came for ever after to speak of Him with reverence as "the Lord Jesus Christ,"

So "the stone is rolled back." Therefore all our fear, as we saw "a stone against the door of the tomb" was groundless. The conception of God abides. The ideal of humanity not only remains, but is attainable. The passion to redeem is operative, and has been through all the centuries. The religion of Jesus triumphs; faith as its foundation, love as its structural power, hope as its finality. Because these things are so, all gravestones are temporary things, for they must all be rolled away.

Thus ends our study of Mark. In the first sermon I preached on this Gospel, dealing with Mark's own description of his writing as "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God," I quoted as applicable to the whole Gospel, some very striking words of Mazzini. Let me close with them, as summarizing the whole story, as we have tried to consider it.

"He came. The soul the most full of love, the most sacredly virtuous, the most deeply inspired by God and the future, that men have yet seen on earth-Jesus. He bent over the corpse of the dead world, and whispered a word of faith. Over the clay that had lost all of man, but the movement and the form, He uttered words until then unknown; Love, Sacrifice, a heavenly origin. And the dead arose, a new life circulated through the clay, which philosophy had tried in vain to reanimate. From that corpse arose the Christian world, the world of liberty and equality. From the clay arose the true Man, the Image of God, the precursor of humanity."

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