

not only for our souls but also for our bodies to live in heaven. Christ ascended into heaven as a pledge that he will take us to himself. Of this promise the Holy Spirit remains as earnest.

If unbelieving fear cripples and godly fear energizes, we need more godly fear. In his book "Hipster Christianity" (subtitled, "When Church and Cool Collide"), Brett McCracken says this: "A healthy fear of God is totally lost on contemporary Christianity, which sees him as more of a 'buddy-friend-therapist-guru' than the creator and sustainer of the universe. More and more young people are growing dubious of God-lite and prefer thinking of him as a commanding, dominating, dangerous God who deserves our deferential fear."

He then adds this quote from J.I. Packer: "The pitiable Savior and the pathetic God of modern pulpits are unknown to the old gospel. The old gospel tells men that they need God, but not that God needs them...it does not exhort them to pity Christ but announces that Christ has pitied them, though pity was the last thing they deserved. It never loses sight of the divine majesty and sovereign power of the Christ whom it proclaims but rejects flatly all representations of him that would obscure his free omnipotence."

One of the saddest attributes of modern Christians is lethargy, the state of being sluggish, or indifferent. Those plagued by lethargy need to (figuratively) go the tomb, believe that Christ is raised and now rules, tremble in amazement, and be energized for faithfulness to his Great Commission.

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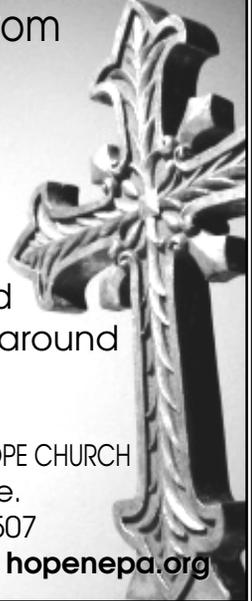
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# PROCLAMATION

Promoting robust, religious thought in the tradition of orthodox, historic, Christianity

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## FROM THE GRAVE TO THE SKY

### GAINING GODLY FEAR FROM CHRIST'S LIFE AFTER DEATH

BY WILLIAM BOEKESTEIN

Have you ever thought about the power of fear? Men will do things when they are scared that they would never do if they were at ease. Fear can be an energizing splash of cold water on a face drooping with drowsiness. There is good reason why the Scriptures, particularly in the Old Testament, describe vital religion as the "fear of God."

Still, we tend to think of fear only negatively. Franklin Roosevelt famously stated: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." The Gospel accounts of the forty days following Christ's death would amend that motto: The only things we have to fear

are *unbelieving* fear and *God* himself. Mark 16 opens a window into the power of godly fear as it spans the time from Jesus' burial to his disciples' ministry following his ascension.

Christ's Awakening (vv. 1-8)  
*The Piety of Three Women* (vv. 1-3)

In the early, dew-drenched morning three female disciples (Luke 8:3), approached Jesus' tomb to apply additional ointments to his body. Their love

for their Savior was tempered by worry: "Who will roll away the stone from the door of the tomb for us?" (v. 3). The women forgot that Christ would rise third day (ch. 10:34). Little faith sees problems where they don't actually exist. The stone had already been moved (v. 4)!

*The Presence of Angels* (vv. 4-7)

The open tomb surprised the women. But when they saw the angels they fell face down in fear (Luke. 24:5). Their fear is not a reflection of their being "weaker vessels" (1 Peter 3:7); even the



war-hardened Roman guards shook and fainted (Matt. 28:4) when they saw the angels who flashed like lightning (Matt. 28:3) and shone like the sun blazing off fresh snow (Luke 24:4). Despite their frightful appearance, the angels' first task was to speak words of comfort from God: "Do not be alarmed" (v. 6).

Second, the angels affirmed the reality of Jesus' resurrection. They pointed to the grave clothes (John 20:6,7) through which Jesus' body had risen. The tomb's stone was rolled away not to let Jesus out but to let witnesses in and alleviate their unbelieving fear!

Third, the angels gave instructions for faithfulness (v. 7). "Tell His disciples—and Peter—that He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see him as he said to you" (Cf. Mark 14:27-28). What gracious words. The nod to Peter is especially touching considering his recent lapse (14:66-72).

### *The Women's Pursuant Action (v. 8)*

The women fled from the tomb in a state of wonder and fear.

According to many scholars Mark's Gospel ends at verse eight. I believe God's preserving of the "long ending" of Mark authenticates the remaining twelve verses. But *what if* verses 9-20 were removed? The "short ending" is striking: "They were afraid!"

Christ's resurrection filled these women with the kind of fear greatly needed today. When we think about the resurrection, we might only think about going to heaven with our friends. But we should also tremble in awe before the God who has crushed the great enemy, death, and who will judge everyone who refuses his rule.

The women's fear did not derail their mission. Unbelieving fear cripples; godly fear energizes.

### **Christ's Appearances (vv. 9-14)**

At this point, Jesus' disciples should have gone to Galilee to meet him as he had instructed (Matt. 26:32). But their faith was little, their unbelieving fears were great. Knowing their little faith, Jesus lingered in Jerusalem for a week to bolster his followers' confidence.

While the women prepared to leave the tomb to find the other disciples (Cf. John 20:11-18), Jesus appeared to Mary. He comforted her grieving heart and steeled her to face a doubting audience. Later, Jesus appeared to two disciples who also met with disbelief after reporting their encounter with the resurrected Lord (vv. 12-13).

When the eleven remaining disciples were gathered, Jesus rebuked them for doubting his heralds' reports (v. 14). Like the disciples we might resist the testimony of others because we think so highly of ourselves. How many times have we shrugged off a word from God because we didn't like the message (or the messenger)?

But Mark's focus on doubt also communicates comfort. Doubt is not praiseworthy in believers, but it is a reality as demonstrated by Jesus' closest friends. God graciously gives us the Word and sacraments because of our weakness and failures, in order to increase our faith by feeding us with the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

As the disciples grappled with their little faith, and with the wonderful, fearful reality of the resurrection, Christ issued his Great Commission.

### **Christ's Assignment (vv. 15-18)**

As the disciples huddled around a table in a secret room, the risen Lord entered through shut doors to give his marching orders. He had arrested his disciples' attention! A healthy fear of the risen Christ is essential to a faithful response to his evangelistic imperative. If we don't have the fear of God we will view the Great Commission merely as a good suggestion.

Jesus' commission contains two parts. The first part is a commandment to preach the gospel. Our message is not morality but the offer of free grace for sinners based on Christ's merits. This gospel is a two-edged sword. He who believes, and confirms his faith with baptism, will be saved. But he who does not believe will be condemned.

These eleven men couldn't go into *all* the world and speak to *every* creature (v. 15). That's the job of the Christian church and individual believers in every age. There are people in your life who will never meet a minister or sit under the formal preaching of God's Word. You may be their evangelist.

The second part is a promise of God's abiding care for his faithful followers (vv. 17,18). These verses foreshadow what would happen when Jesus' authority was transferred to his disciples. They would cast out demons, heal the sick, speak in new tongues, and not be harmed by serpents and poison. Like Elisha receiving the mantle of Elijah (1 Kings 19:9-14), as the apostles spoke on his behalf Christ would confirm his blessing through signs.

But in these unusual verses God still speaks to the modern church. Faith in the gospel is self-authenticating. The

fruit of faithful living will testify to God's miraculous working in believers' lives. God calls us to live courageously, trusting him for protection. This does not authorize us to throw caution to the wind. But it does assure us that God supports his troops.

Mark's last verses summarize Jesus' ascension and the outworking of his Commission.

### **Christ's Ascension**

Forty days after his resurrection Christ physically departed. He was received up into heaven as a visible affirmation that his redeeming work had been accomplished and that he was taking up his exalted reign over all things. Jesus passed through the heavens (Heb. 4:14) to sit at God's right hand (Heb. 9:24) to fulfill his eternal ministry of intercession for those who come to God through him (Heb. 7:25).

But true to his promise to never forsake his disciples Christ remains spiritually present. No mention of Pentecost is made in the last two verses. But Mark's claim that the previously trembling disciples went out and preached everywhere (v. 20) can only be explained by the coming of the Holy Spirit. He is the "other counselor" whom Christ had promised (John 14:16, Acts 1:7,8). Believers today have the same spiritual presence of Christ that made the disciples braver than ever.

Jesus walked this earth as a true human, having a real human body and soul. When he returned to heaven he did not shed his humanity the way a snake sheds its skin. The disciples saw a real person go up to heaven. What an encouragement for us whose hope is