**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**MARK-074**. **THE INCREDULOUS DISCIPLES by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *And when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had bought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint Him. 2. And very early in the morning, the first day of the week, they came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun. 3. And they said among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre? 4. And when they looked, they saw that the stone was rolled away: for it was very great. 6. And entering into the sepulchre, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a long white garment; and they were affrighted. 6. And he saith unto them, Be not affrighted: Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: He is risen; He is not here: behold the place where they laid Him. 7. But go your way, tell His disciples and Peter that He goeth before yon into Galilee: there shall ye see Him, as He said unto you. 8. And they went out quickly, and fled from the sepulchre; for they trembled and were amazed: neither said they anything to any man; for they were afraid. 9. Now, when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom He had cast seven devils. 10. And she went and told them that had been with Him, as they mourned and wept. 11. And they, when they had heard that He was alive, and had been seen of her, believed not. 12. After that He appeared in another form unto two of them, as they walked, and went into the country. 13. And they went and told it unto the residue: neither believed they them."*

*Mark 16:1-13*

It is not my business here to discuss questions of harmonising or of criticism. I have only to deal with the narrative as it stands. Its peculiar character is very plain. The manner in which the first disciples learned the fact of the Resurrection, and the disbelief with which they received it, much rather than the Resurrection itself, come into view in this section. The disciples, and not the risen Lord, are shown us. There is nothing here of the earthquake, or of the descending angel, or of the terrified guard, or of our Lord's appearance to the women. The two appearances to Mary Magdalene and to the travellers to Emmaus, which, in the hands of John and Luke, are so pathetic and rich, are here mentioned with the utmost brevity, for the sake chiefly of insisting on the disbelief of the disciples who heard of them. Mark's theme is mainly what they thought of the testimony to the Resurrection.

**I. He shows us, first, bewildered love and sorrow.**

We leave the question whether this group of women is the same as that of which Luke records that Joanna was one, as well as the other puzzle as to harmonising the notes of time in the Evangelists. May not the difference between the time of starting and that of arrival solve some of the difficulty? When all the notes are more or less vague, and refer to the time of transition from dark to day, when every moment partakes of both and may be differently described as belonging to either, is precision to be expected? In the whirl of agitation of that morning, would any one be at leisure to take much note of the exact minute? Are not these discrepanciesmuch more valuable as confirmation of the story than precise accord would have been? It is better to try to understand the feelings of that little band than to carp at such trifles.

Sorrow wakes early, and love is impatient to bring its tribute. So we can see these three women, leaving their abode as soon as the doleful grey of morning permitted, stealing through the silent streets, and reaching the rock-cut tomb while the sun was rising over Olivet. Where were Salome's ambitious hopes for her two sons now? Dead, and buried in the Master's grave. The completeness of the women's despair, as well as the faithfulness of their love, is witnessed by their purpose. They had come to anoint the body of Him to whom in life they had ministered. They had no thought of a resurrection, plainly as they had been told of it. The waves of sorrow had washed the remembrance of His assurances on that subject clean out of their minds. Truth that is only half understood, however plainly spoken, is always forgotten when the time to apply it comes. We are told that the disbelief of the disciples in the Resurrection, after Christ's plain predictions of it, is psychologically impossible. Such big words are imposing, but the objection is shallow. These disciples are not the only people who forgot in the hour of need the thing which it most concerned them to remember, and let the clouds of sorrow hide starry promises which would have turned mourning into dancing, and night into day. Christ's sayings about His resurrection were not understood in their, as it appears to us, obvious meaning when spoken. No wonder, then, that they were not expected to be fulfilled in their obvious meaning when He was dead. We shall have a word to say presently about the value of the fact that there was no anticipation of resurrection on the part of the disciples. For the present it is enough to note how these three loving souls confess their hopelessness by their errand. Did they not know, too, that Joseph and Nicodemus had been beforehand with them in their labour of love? Apparently not. It might easily happen, in the confusion and dispersion, that no knowledge of this had reached them; or perhaps sorrow and agitation had driven it out of their memories; or perhaps they felt that, whether others had done the same before or no, they must do it too, not because the loved form needed it, but because their hearts needed to do it. It was the love which must serve, not calculation of necessity, which loaded their hands with costly spices. The living Christ was pleased with the odour of a sweet smell, from the needless spices, meant to re-anoint the dead Christ, and accepted the purpose, though it came from ignorance and was never carried out, since its deepest root was love, genuine, though bewildered.

The same absence of calm practical common senseis seen in the too late consideration, which never occurred to the three women till they were getting near the tomb, as to how to get into it. They do not seem to have heard of the guard; but they know that the stone is too heavy for them to move, and none of the men among the disciples had been taken into their confidence. Why did they not think of that before? what a want of foresight!says the cool observer. How beautifully true to nature!says a wiser judgment. To obey the impulse of love and sorrow without thinking, and then to be arrested on their road by a difficulty, which they might have thought of at first, but did not till they were close to it, is surely just what might have been expected of such mourners. Mark gives a graphic picture in that one word looking up, and follows it with picturesque present tenses. They had been looking down or at each other in perplexity, when they lifted their eyes to the tomb, which was possibly on an eminence. What a flash of wonder would pass through their minds when they saw it open! What that might signify they would be eager to hurry to find out; but, at all events, their difficulty was at an end. When love to Christ is brought to a stand in its venturous enterprises by difficulties occurring for the first time to the mind, it is well to go close up to them; and it often happens that when we do, and look steadily at them, we see that they are rolled away, and the passage cleared which we feared was hopelessly barred.

**II. The calm herald of the Resurrection and the amazed hearers.**

Apparently Mary Magdalene had turned back as soon as she saw the opened tomb, and hurried to tell that the body had been carried off, as she supposed. The guard had also probably fled before this; and so the other two women enter the vestibule, and there find the angel. Sometimes one angel, sometimes two, sometimes none, were visible there. The variation in their numbers in the various narratives is not to be regarded as an instance of discrepancy. Many angels hovered round the spot where the greatest wonder of the universe was to be seen, eagerly desiring to look intothat grave. The beholder's eye may have determined their visibility. Their number may have fluctuated. Mark does not use the word angelat all, but leaves us to infer what manner of being he was who first proclaimed the Resurrection.

He tells of his youth, his attitude, and his attire. The angelic life is vigorous, progressive, buoyant, and alien from decay. Immortal youth belongs to them who excel in strengthbecause they do his commandments. That waiting minister shows us what the children of the Resurrection shall be, and so his presence as well as his speech expounds the blessed mystery of our life in the risen Lord. His serene attitude of sitting on the right sideis not only a vivid touch of description, but is significant of restfulness and fixed contemplation, as well as of the calmness of a higher life. That still watcher knows too much to be agitated; but the less he is moved, the more he adores. His quiet contrasts with and heightens the impression of the storm of conflicting feelings in the women's tremulous natures. His garments symbolise purity and repose. How sharply the difference between heaven and earth is given in the last words of verse 5! They were amazed, swept out of themselves in an ecstasy of bewilderment in which hope had no place. Terror, surprise, curiosity, wonder, blank incapacity to know what all this meant, made chaos in them.

The angel's words are a succession of short sentences, which have a certain dignity, and break up the astounding revelation he has to make into small pieces, which the women's bewildered minds can grasp. He calms their tumult of spirit. He shows them that he knows their errand. He adoringly names his Lord and theirs by the names recalling His manhood, His lowly home, and His ignominious death. He lingers on the thought, to him covering so profound a mystery of divine love, that his Lord had been born, had lived in the obscure village, and died on the Cross. Then, in one word, he proclaims the stupendous fact of His resurrection as His own act--He is risen. This crown of all miracles, which brings life and immortality to light, and changes the whole outlook of humanity, which changes the Cross into victory, and without which Christianity is a dream and a ruin, is announced in a single word--the mightiest ever spoken save by Christ's own lips. It was fitting that angel lips should proclaim the Resurrection, as they did the Nativity, though in either He taketh not hold of angels, and they had but a secondary share in the blessings. Yet that empty grave opened to principalities and powers in heavenly placesa new unfolding of the manifold wisdom and love of God.

The angel--a true evangelist--does not linger on the wondrous intimation, but points to the vacant place, which would have been so drear but for his previous words, and bids them approach to verify his assurance, and with reverent wonder to gaze on the hallowed and now happy spot. A moment is granted for feeling to overflow, and certainty to be attained, and then the women are sent on their errand. Even the joy of that gaze is not to be selfishly prolonged, while others are sitting in sorrow for want of what they know. That is the law for all the Christian life. First make sure work of one's own possession of the truth, and then hasten to tell it to those who need it.

And Peter--Mark alone gives us this. The other Evangelists might pass it by; but how could Peter ever forget the balm which that message of pardon and restoration brought to him, and how could Peter's mouthpiece leave it out? Is there anything in the Gospels more beautiful, or fuller of long-suffering and thoughtful love, than that message from the risen Saviour to the denier? And how delicate the love which, by calling him Peter, not Simon, reinstates him in his official position by anticipation, even though in the subsequent full restoration scene by the lake he is thrice called Simon, before the complete effacement of the triple denial by the triple confession! Galilee is named as the rendezvous, and the word employed, goeth before you, is appropriate to the Shepherd in front of His flock. They had been scattered, but are to be drawn together again. He is to precedethem there, thus lightly indicating the new form of their relations to Him, marked during the forty days by a distance which prepared for his final withdrawal. Galilee was the home of most of them, and had been the field of His most continuous labours. There would be many disciples there, who would gather to see their risen Lord (five hundred at once); and there, rather than in Jerusalem which had slain Him, was it fitting that He should show Himself to His friends. The appearances in Jerusalem were all within a week (if we except the Ascension), and the connection in which Mark introduces them (if verse 14 be his) seems to treat them as forced on Christ by the disciplesunbelief, rather than as His original intention. It looks as if He meant to show Himself in the city only to one or two, such as Mary, Peter, and some others, but to reserve His more public appearance for Galilee.

How did the women receive the message? Mark represents them as trembling in body and in an ecstasy in mind, and as hurrying away silent with terror. Matthew says that they were full of fear and great joy, and went in haste to tell the disciples. In the whirl of feeling, there were opposites blended or succeeding one another; and the one Evangelist lays hold of one set, and the other of the other. It is as impossible to catalogue the swift emotions of such a moment as to separate and tabulate the hues of sunrise. The silence which Mark tells of can only refer to their demeanour as they fled. His object is to bring out the very imperfect credence which, at the best, was given to the testimony that Christ was risen, and to paint the tumult of feeling in the breasts of its first recipients. His picture is taken from a different angle from Matthew's; but Matthew's contains the same elements, for he speaks of fear, though he completes it by joy.

**III. The incredulity of the disciples.**

The two appearances to Mary Magdalene and the travellers to Emmaus are introduced mainly to record the unbelief of the disciples. A strange choice that was, of the woman who had been rescued from so low a debasement, to be first to see Him! But her former degradation was the measure of her love. Longing eyes, that have been washed clean by many a tear of penitent gratitude, are purged to see Jesus; and a yearning heart ever brings Him near. The unbelief of the story of the two from Emmaus seems to conflict with Luke's account, which tells that they were met by the news of Christ's appearance to Simon. But the two statements are not contradictory. If we remember the excitement and confusion of mind in which they were, we shall not wonder if belief and unbelief followed each other, like the flow and recoil of the waves. One moment they were on the crest of the billows, and saw land ahead; the next they were down in the trough, and saw only the melancholy surge. The very fact that Peter was believed, might make them disbelieve the travellers; for how could Jesus have been in Jerusalem and Emmaus at so nearly the same time? However the two narratives be reconciled, it remains obvious that the first disciples did not believe the first witnesses of the Resurrection, and that their unbelief is an important fact. It bears very distinctly on the worth of their subsequent conviction. It has special bearing on the most modern form of disbelief in the Resurrection, which accounts for the belief of the first disciples on the ground that they expected Christ to rise, and that they then persuaded themselves, in all good faith, that He had risen. That monstrous theory is vulnerable at all points, but one sufficient answer is--the disciples did not expect Christ to rise again, and were so far from it that they did not believe that He had risen when they were told it. Their original unbelief is a strong argument for the reliableness of their final faith. What raised them from the stupor of despair and incredulity? Only one answer is psychologicallyreasonable: they at last believed because they saw. It is incredible that they were conscious deceivers; for such lives as they lived, and such a gospel as they preached, never came from liars. It is as incredible that they were unconsciously mistaken; for they were wholly unprepared for the Resurrection, and sturdily disbelieved all witnesses for it, till they saw with their own eyes, and had many infallible proofs. Let us be thankful for their unbelief and its record, and let us seek to possess the blessing of those that have not seen, and yet have believed!