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

**MARK-076**. **THE ANGEL IN THE TOMB by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"5.* *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."*

*Mark 16:5, 6*

Each of the four Evangelists tells the story of the Resurrection from his own special point of view. None of them has any record of the actual fact, because no eye saw it. Before the earthquake and the angelic descent, before the stone was rolled away, while the guards perhaps slept, and before Love and Sorrow had awakened, Christ rose. And deep silence covers the event. But in treating of the subsequent portion of the narrative, each Evangelist stands at his own point of view. Mark has scarcely anything to say about our Lord's appearance after the Resurrection. His object seems mainly to be to describe rather the manner in which the report of the Resurrection affected the disciples, and so he makes prominent the bewildered astonishment of the women. If the latter part of this chapter be his, he passes by the appearance of our Lord to Mary Magdalene and to the two travellers to Emmaus with just a word for each--contrasting singularly with the lovely narrative of the former in John's Gospel and with the detailed account of the latter in Luke's. He emphasises the incredulity of the Twelve after receiving the reports, and in like manner he lays stress upon the unbelief and hardness of heart which the Lord rebuked.

So, then, this incident, the appearance of the angel, the portion of his message to the women which we have read, and the way in which the first testimony to the Resurrection affected its hearers, may suggest to us some thoughts which, though subsidiary to the main teaching of the Resurrection, may yet be important in their place.

**I. Note the first witness to the Resurrection.**

There are singular diversities in the four Gospels in their accounts of the angelic appearances, the number, occupation, and attitude of these superhuman persons, and contradictions may be spun, if one is so disposed, out of these varieties. But it is wiser to take another view of them, and to see in the varying reports, sometimes of one angel, sometimes of two, sometimes of one sitting outside the sepulchre, sometimes one within, sometimes none, either different moments of time or differences produced by the different spiritual condition of the beholders. Who can count the glancing wings of the white-winged flock of sea-birds as they sail and turn in the sunshine? Who can count the numbers of these bright-harnessed angels, sometimes more, sometimes less, flickering and fluttering into and out of sight, which shone upon the vision of the weeping onlookers? We know too little about the laws of angelic appearances; we know too little about the relation in that high region between the seeing eye and the objects beheld to venture to say that there is contradiction where the narratives present variety. Enough for us to draw the lessons that are suggested by that quiet figure sitting there in the inner vestibule of the grave, the stone rolled away and the work done, gazing on the tomb where the Lord of men and angels had lain.

He was a youth. The oldest angels are the youngest, says a great mystic. The angels excel in strengthbecause they delight to do His commandments, hearkening unto the voice of His word. The lapse of ages brings not age to them who wait on the Lordin the higher ministries of heaven, and run unwearied, and walk unfainting, and when they are seen by men are radiant with immortal youth. He was clothed in a long white garment, the sign at once of purity and of repose; and he was sitting in rapt contemplation and quiet adoration there, where the body of Jesus had lain.

But what had he to do with the joy of Resurrection? It delivered him from no fears, it brought to him no fresh assurance of a life which was always his. Wherefore was he there? Because that Cross strikes its power upwards as well as downwards; because He that had lain there is the Head of all creation, and the Lord of angels as well as of men; because that Resurrection following upon that Cross, unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places, opened a new and wonderful door into the unsounded and unfathomed abyss of divine love; because into these things angels desire to look, and, looking, are smitten with adoring wonder and flushed with the illumination of a new knowledge of what God is, and of what man is to God. The Resurrection of the Prince of Life was no mystery to the angel. To him the mystery was in His death. To us the death is not a mystery, but the Resurrection is. That gazing figure looks from the other side upon the grave which we contemplate from this side of the gulf of death; but the eyes of both orders of Being fix upon the same hallowed spot--they in adoring wonder that there a God should have lain; we in lowly thankfulness that thence a man should have risen.

Further, we see in that angel presence not only the indication that Christ is his King as well as ours, but also the mark of his and all his fellowssympathetic participation in whatsoever is of so deep interest to humanity. There is a certain tone of friendship and oneness in his words. The trembling women were smitten into an ecstasy of bewildered fear (as one of the words, affrightedmight more accurately be rendered), and his consolation to them, Be not affrighted, ye seek Jesus, suggests that, in all the great sweep of the unseen universe, whatsoever beings may people that to us apparently waste and solitary space, howsoever many they may be, thick as the autumn leaves in Vallambrosaor as the motes that dance in the sunshine, they are all friends and allies and elder brethren of those who seek for Jesus with a loving heart. No creature that owns His sway can touch or injure or need terrify the soul that follows after Christ. All the servants of our King in heaven and earth are one, and He sends forth His brightest and loftiest to be brethren and ministers to them who shall be heirs of salvation. So we may pass through the darkest spaces of the universe and the loneliest valleys of the shadow of death, sure that whosoever may be there will be our friend if we are the friends of Christ.

**II. So much, then, for the first point that I would suggest here. Note, secondly, the triumphant light cast upon the cradle and the Cross.**

There is something very remarkable, because for purposes of identification plainly unnecessary, in the minute particularity of the designation which the angel lips give to Jesus Christ. Jesus, the Nazarene, who was crucified. Do you not catch a tone of wonder and a tone of triumph in this threefold particularising of the humanity, the lowly residence, and the Ignominious death? All that lowliness, suffering, and shame are brought into comparison with the rising from the dead. That is to say, when we grasp the fact of a risen Christ, we look back upon all the story of His birth, His lowly life, His death of shame, and see a new meaning in it, and new reasons for triumph and for wonder. The cradle is illuminated by the grave, the Cross by the empty sepulchre. As at the beginning there is a supernatural entrance into life, so at the end there is a supernatural resumption of it. The birth corresponds with the resurrection, and both witness to the divinity. The lowly life culminates in the conquest over death; the Nazarene despised, rejected, dwelling in a place that was a byword, sharing all the modest lowliness and self-respecting poverty of the Galilean peasants, has conquered death. The Man that was crucified has conquered death. And the fact that He has risen explains and illuminates the fact that He died.

Brethren, let us lay this to heart, that unless we believe in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the saying He was crucifiedis the saddest word that can be spoken about any of the great ones of the past. If Jesus Christ be lying in some nameless grave, then all the power of His death is gone, and He and it are nothing to me, or to you, or to any of our fellow-men, more than a thousand deaths of the mighty ones of old. But Easter day transfigures the gloom of the day of the Crucifixion, and the rising sun of its morning gilds and explains the Cross. Now it stands forth as the great redeeming power of the world, where my sins and yours and the whole world's have been expiated and done away. And now, instead of being ignominy, it is glory, and instead of being defeat it is victory, and instead of looking upon that death as the lowest point of the Master's humiliation, we may look upon it as He Himself did, as the highest point of His glorifying. For the Cross then becomes His great means of winning men to Himself, and the very throne of His power. On the historical fact of a Resurrection depend all the worth and meaning of the death of Christ. If He be not risen our preaching is vain, and your faith is also vain. If Christ be not risen, ye are yet in your sins. But if what this day commemorates be true, then upon all His earthly life is thrown a new light; and we first understand the Cross when we look upon the empty grave.

**III. Again, notice here the majestic announcement of the great fact, and its confirmation.**

He is risen; He is not here. The first preacher of the Resurrection was an angel, a true evangelist. His message is conveyed in these brief sentences, unconnected with each other, in token, not of abruptness and haste, but of solemnity. He is risenis one word in the original--a sentence of one word, which announces the mightiest miracle that ever was wrought upon earth, a miracle which opens the door wide enough for all supernatural events recorded of Jesus Christ to find an entrance to the understanding and the reason.

He is risen. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is declared by angel lips to be His own act; not, indeed, as if He were acting separately from the Father, but still less as if in it He were merely passive. Think of that; a dead Christ raised Himself. That is the teaching of the Scripture. I do not dwell here, at this stage of my sermon, on the many issues that spring from such a conception, but this only I urge, Jesus Christ was the Lord of life; held life and death, His own and others', at His beck and will. His death was voluntary; He was not passive in it, but He died because He chose. His resurrection was His act; He rose because He willed. I have power to lay it down, I have power to take it again. No one said to Him, I say unto Thee, arise!The divine power of the Father's will did not work upon Him as from without to raise Him from the dead; but He, the embodiment of divinity, raised Himself, even though it is also true that He was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father. These two statements are not contradictory, but the former of them can only be predicated of Him; and it sets Him on a pedestal immeasurably above, and infinitely apart from, all those to whom life is communicated by a divine act. He Himself is the Life, and it was not possible that Life should be holden of Death; therefore He burst its bonds, and, like the ancient Jewish hero, though in far nobler fashion, our Samson enters into the city which is a prison, and on His strong shoulders bears away the gates, that none may ever there be prisoners without hope.

Now, then, note the confirmation of this stupendous fact. He is risen; He is not here. The grave was empty, and the trembling women were called upon to look and see for themselves that the body was not there. One remark is all that I wish to make about this matter--viz. this, all theories, ancient or modern, which deny the Resurrection, are shattered by this one question, What became of Jesus Christ's body? We take it as a plain historical fact, which the extremest scepticism has never ventured to deny, that the grave of Christ was empty. The trumped-up story of the guards sufficiently shows that. When the belief of a resurrection began to be spread abroad, what would have been easier for Pharisees and rulers than to have gone to the sepulchre and rolled back the stone, and said, Look there! there is your risen Man, lying mouldering, like all the rest of us. They did not do it. Why? Because the grave was empty. Where was the body? They had it not, else they would have been glad to produce it. The disciples had it not, for if they had, you come back to the discredited and impossible theory that, having it, and knowing that they were telling lies, they got up the story of the Resurrection. Nobody believes that nowadays--nobody can believe it who looks at the results of the preaching of this, by hypothesis, falsehood. Men do not gather grapes of thorns, nor figs of thistles. And whether the disciples were right or wrong, there can be no question in the mind of anybody who is not prepared to swallow impossibilities compared to which miracles are easy, that the first disciples heartily believed that Jesus Christ was risen from the dead. As I say, one confirmation of the belief lies in the empty grave, and this question may be put to anybody that says I do not believe in your Resurrection:--What became of the sacred body of Jesus Christ?

Now, note the way in which the announcement of this tremendous fact was received. With blank bewilderment and terror on the part of these women, followed by incredulity on the part of the Apostles and of the other disciples. These things are on the surface of the narrative, and very important they are. They plainly tell us that the first hearers did not believe the testimony which they themselves call upon us to believe. And, that being the state of mind of the early disciples on the Resurrection day, what becomes of the modern theory, which seeks to explain the fact of the early belief in the Resurrection by saying, Oh, they had worked themselves into such a fever of expectation that Jesus Christ would rise from the dead that the wish was father to the thought, and they said that He did because they expected that He would? No! they did not expect that He would; it was the very last thing that they expected. They had not in their minds the soil out of which such imaginations would grow. They were perfectly unprepared to believe it, and, as a matter of fact, they did not believe until they had seen. So I think that that one fact disposes of a great deal of pestilent and shallow talk in these days that tries to deny the Resurrection and to save the character of the men that witnessed it.

**IV. And now, lastly, note here the summons to grateful contemplation.**

Behold the place where they laid Him. To these women the call was simply one to come and see what would confirm the witness. But we may, perhaps, permissibly turn it to a wider purpose, and say that it summons us all to thankful, lowly, believing, glad contemplation of that empty grave as the basis of all our hopes. Look upon it and upon the Resurrection which it confirms to us as an historical fact. It sets the seal of the divine approval on Christ's work, and declares the divinity of His person and the all-sufficiency of His mighty sacrifice. Therefore let us, laden with our sins and seeking for reconciliation with God, and knowing how impossible it is for us to bring an atonement or a ransom for ourselves, look upon that grave and learn that Christ has offered the sacrifice which God has accepted, and with which He is well pleased.

Behold the place where they laid Him, and, looking upon it, let us think of that Resurrection as a prophecy, with a bearing upon us and upon all the dear ones that have trod the common road into the great darkness. Christ has died, therefore they live; Christ lives, therefore we shall never die. His grave was in a garden--a garden indeed. The yearly miracle of the returning life re-orient out of dust, typifies the mightier miracle which He works for all that trust in Him, when out of death He leads them into life. The graveyard has become God's acre; the garden in which the seed sown in weakness is to be raised in power, and sown corruptible is to be raised in incorruption.

Behold the place where they laid Him, and in the empty grave read the mystery of the Resurrection as the pattern and the symbol of our higher life; that, like as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. Oh to partake more and more of that power of His Resurrection!

In Christ's empty grave is planted the true tree of life, which is in the midst of the "true" Paradise of God. And we, if we truly trust and humbly love that Lord, shall partake of its fruits, and shall one day share the glories of His risen life in the heavens, even as we share the power of it here and now.