

Devotion to the Dead

40 There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the Less and of Joses, and Salome, 41 who also followed Him and ministered to Him when He was in Galilee, and many other women who came up with Him to Jerusalem. 42 Now when evening had come, because it was the Preparation Day, that is, the day before the Sabbath, 43 Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent council member, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, coming and taking courage, went in to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. 44 Pilate marveled that He was already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him if He had been dead for some time. 45 So when he found out from the centurion, he granted the body to Joseph. 46 Then he bought fine linen, took Him down, and wrapped Him in the linen. And he laid Him in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock, and rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. 47 And Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses observed where He was laid.

Mark 16:1 Now when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, that they might come and anoint Him. 2 Very early in the morning, on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen. 3 And they said among themselves, "Who will roll away the stone from the door of the tomb for us?" 4 But when they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away-- for it was very large. 5 And entering the tomb, they saw a young man clothed in a long white robe sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. 6 But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid Him. 7 "But go, tell His disciples-- and Peter-- that He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, as He said to you." 8 So they went out quickly and fled from the tomb, for they trembled and were amazed. And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.
(Mar 15:40-8)

Christians the world over are celebrate the Resurrection every Lord's Day. They will proclaim that He is Risen. But then, tomorrow, a strange thing will occur. They will go back to living as if Jesus is as dead as the dead prophets of other religions. That is not to say they will necessarily go and live debauched lives, or do flagrant evil. It is simply that they will live like any other member of any other religion, committed to certain practices, devoted to certain acts, but unconcerned whether there is a living reality behind their religion. The life or death of Jesus will be inconsequential to what they do or do not do.

On that last Friday of Christ's life, and on that Sunday morning, we find a group of people who were devoted to the dead. The One they loved was now dead, but they still wanted to show love and devotion to His memory, by doing various things for Him. But as we see them, we may see something about ourselves. We may see the parallel of being devoted, and being interested in religion, but having no expectation of power or reality behind it.

As we look at this passage, we would do well to ask this question, "What difference would it make to my religion if Jesus was still in the Tomb? Would anything change in the external things I do and don't do, would anything change in the internal experience of my thoughts and desires and goals and prayers, if Jesus was merely my dead religious hero?" Or maybe we could put it this way, "Am I devoted to the dead, or to the living?"

I. A Description of Devotion to the Dead

42 Now when evening had come, because it was the Preparation Day, that is, the day before the Sabbath, 43 Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent council member, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, coming and taking courage, went in to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. 44 Pilate marveled that He was already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him if He had been dead for some time. 45 So when he found out from the centurion, he granted the body to Joseph. 46 Then he bought fine linen, took Him down, and wrapped Him in the linen. And he laid Him in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock, and rolled a stone against the door of the tomb.

We read first of Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph was one of the council members. That is, he was a member of the Sanhedrin, that group of 70 which had condemned Jesus to death. Matthew's Gospel tells us he had become a disciple of Jesus. Luke's Gospel tells us he was good and just, and had not consented to the decision to have Jesus murdered. Nevertheless, according to John, he had been a secret disciple, out of fear of the Jewish leaders. Both he and Nicodemus had been believers, but had been quiet or perhaps less than vocal about their faith.

And now Jesus was dead. When it is apparently too late, Joseph steps up. He takes courage, but now only when the Pharisees have had their way. If no one had offered, then the body of Jesus almost certainly would have been thrown into a common grave, as the bodies of crucified criminals were. So Joseph, who was wealthy, offers a tomb he owned and had not used.

By doing this, he was now going to jeopardise his standing with the rest of the Sanhedrin. But it seems almost like too little, too late. And perhaps that's how he felt. "I didn't take my stand when Jesus was alive. At least now I will honour Him in death."

He asks Pilate for the body of Jesus. Pilate is surprised, because crucifixion often took days, not mere hours. But once he had confirmed the death of Jesus from the centurion, Pilate granted the body to Joseph, who bought fine linen. Nicodemus joined him – these two secret disciples – and they placed some spices on the body, rolled the stone over the tomb, and went home.

Now, turn your attention to the other group of devotees to the dead.

40 There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the Less and of Joses, and Salome, 41 who also followed Him and ministered to Him when He was in Galilee, and many other women who came up with Him to Jerusalem.

47 And Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses observed where He was laid. Mark 16:1 Now when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, that they might come and anoint Him. 2 Very early in the morning, on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen. 3 And they said among themselves, "Who will roll away the stone from the door of the tomb for us?"

These three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome watch the crucifixion from afar. They watch where Jesus is buried. And on Friday, or possibly on Saturday after sunset, they buy spices to go and complete the anointing of Jesus' body. And very early on Sunday morning they head off to the Tomb, desiring to do this one last act of service for Jesus.

Their only question among themselves is, how will we access His body? How will we gain entrance to this tomb, since that stone required several men of strength to move it? This is not enough to stop them. They probably figured they would find some passer-bys to help them.

But here they head, going to anoint His body. There is no expectation in them that He will have risen. There is no hope in their hearts, no faith, no remembrance of His promise. They expect to find the body of Jesus because they believe He is dead, and now they are going to kindly and dutifully do one last act of kindness to their dead Jesus.

So now step back and look at Joseph, and these three women. Consider how they explain what it is to be devoted to the dead.

II. A Definition of Devotion to the Dead

They performed acts of service without faith. These people were very kind, and very generous. They were sacrificial, and in some ways, quite brave. This tomb was no doubt costly. The linen and the spices that Joseph bought, and that the women bought were expensive. To ask for the body and volunteer to bury it was dangerous. For the women to go to a tomb guarded by Roman soldiers was quite brave.

And I don't think Bible is condemning them at all. It is honouring their love. But it is also showing how their service was without faith. It was incomplete. Because even though they were kind, and generous, and loyal to the memory of Jesus, they had no expectation of the resurrection. They had no belief that He would *not* be found there.

Remember, Jesus had predicted His own resurrection again and again. I counted nine times in the Gospels when He told them that He would rise again the third day. He told everyone this in parable and metaphor form when He said that if the Temple of His body be torn down, in three days He would raise it up. He told everyone that the sign of His Messiahhood would be like that of Jonah being in the belly of a fish three days and three nights.

So much so, that even Christ's enemies understood it. Matthew's Gospel tells us that they went to Pilate and said *"Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise.' Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night and steal Him away, and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead.' So the last deception will be worse than the first."* (Mat 27:63-64)

But somehow, these sweet people had no such expectation. They did not expect God to work in a marvellous way. They did not recall the words of Christ. They did not recall His promises, or expect Him to keep it.

They were serving a man in a tomb, serving His memory. Serving His ideals, but oblivious to whether or not He was actually alive. They kept on serving, whether Jesus was dead or alive.

I daresay there are millions of people like that in the world calling themselves Christians. Whether or not Jesus is actually alive makes little difference to their habits and acts. They consider themselves to be the followers of Jesus, so they will keep doing certain rituals and acts. They will attend church on certain days. They will keep certain commandments. They will perform acts of kindness, and give themselves to being charitable, merciful, decent people. They will serve others, and try to stay on the conservative side of morality. They will consider themselves to be good people, and compare themselves with criminals and vicious murderers, and be thankful that they are not as they are.

But in reality, they may as well be devoted to the dead. Nothing in their experience requires a living Saviour, and nothing changes if He is dead. Nothing is affected if Jesus is as any other dead prophet is. Christianity just happens to the brand of religion they prefer, whether or not there is a living substance behind it is immaterial to them.

But I want you to understand that this is not Christianity as the Bible teaches it, and there is no other Christianity besides the one that emerges from the Bible.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul makes the case that there is no such thing as a resurrectionless Christianity. He shows how a dead and still-buried Jesus would be four fatal blows to Christianity as we know it.

1) If Christ Has Not Risen, The Gospel is Empty

1 Corinthians 15:12-14 *Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. Take away the resurrection of Christ, and the preaching of the gospel is empty, and believing in the gospel is empty. It's pointless declaring it, and it's pointless hearing it. The message amounts to nothing, and people who believe it believe in nothing.*

2) If Christ Has Not Risen, the Apostles Are Liars.

1 Corinthians 15:15 *Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up -- if in fact the dead do not rise.*

The New Testament is a massive fraud because every book of the New Testament assumes and depends upon the resurrection.

3) If Christ Has Not Risen, There is No Salvation

1 Corinthians 15:16-17 *For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!*

1) Christ can only free us from our sins if He is not guilty of any sin Himself. He can only be our substitute if He is holy. And if He is holy, then the wages of sin, which is death, cannot keep Him. He must rise, because He is without sin. But if he stays in the tomb, then He has actually sinned and has come under the curse of Adam. In that case, He is not a substitute for us, and we are still in our sins.

2) Christ can only free us from our sins if He is alive to hear our prayers and give us mercy. When Jesus told us that He is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through Him, it must mean that He is the one we must go to and through. If He is the mediator, then He must be alive for us to ask Him for mediation.

4) If Christ Has Not Risen, Christians Have No Hope

1 Corinthians 15:18-19 *Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.*

Without Christ's resurrection, forget about Heaven. Christians who have died are dead, and probably in Hell. And we, who are alive, are most miserable because we live life taking up our cross, sacrificing, denying ourselves, when there is nothing to hope for, and we are doing it for no reason.

I want to put it to you this way: if the resurrection is optional to your Christianity, then you are not a Christian as the Bible defines it. If the actual living or dead status of Jesus means little either way, you have not believed the biblical Gospel, you are still in your sins, and your devotion to Christianity is like the women going to anoint a body, like people walking around the tomb of a dead prophet.

But gladly, our account doesn't end there. Their devotion to the dead came to an end that morning. It came to an astounding and shocking end, and was replaced with a living faith.

III. The Demise of Devotion to the Dead

4 But when they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away-- for it was very large. 5 And entering the tomb, they saw a young man clothed in a long white robe sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. 6 But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid Him. 7 "But go, tell His disciples-- and Peter-- that He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, as He said to you." 8 So they went out quickly and fled from the tomb, for they trembled and were amazed. And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

As they come to the tomb, they see the stone rolled away. They see the Roman guard has fled. And as they enter, they see a young man, clothed in white, undoubtedly the angel that Matthew records as having rolled the stone away, and frightened off the guards.

He didn't roll the stone away to let Jesus out; he rolled the stone away to let the witnesses in.

He says to them in their shock, "Don't be alarmed. I know what you came to do. I know who you are looking for. But you are looking in the wrong place. You are seeking the living among the dead. He is not here! See, look at the vacant place where they laid Him! He has risen."

How much of what the angel was telling them had they *not* heard from the lips of Jesus? But it had not clicked, it had not ignited, and only now were they seeing.

And then the angel tells them to report this to the disciples, and to repeat what Jesus had already told them: He would meet them all again in Galilee.

As they go out, these women are transformed. They came to anoint a corpse. They came to express their devotion to the dead. Now they leave, trembling, amazed, afraid, running.

Here's the difference between dead religion and a living encounter with the living God. The One you can do according to your own wishes, and save your own conscience. The other leaves your heart-pounding, will amaze you, will sometimes scare you, will bewilder and astound you. When you are truly born again, truly made into a new creature, when you become a Christian as the Bible describes it, there is no more predictable, routinized religious acts which can dispose of the living Christ.

Suddenly, it is all about Him – He lives, and He sees you, and He knows, and you live in His presence. The difference between religion and a living relationship is night and day.

The living Christ makes for a living faith, and living walk with Him. What difference would it make to my religion if Jesus was still in the Tomb?

Ask yourself these questions:

1) Do you expect His presence when you worship? Jesus said after His resurrection: *and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.* "Amen. (Mat 28:20) When you worship Him, whether in private, or whether at church, do you expect to experience the personal presence of Christ? Not a visible manifestation, but the presence of Jesus mediated by the Holy Spirit, as the Word is preached, and sung, and prayed, as we meditate on him, then new hearts see Him. They know He is here, and is communing with His people. Do you know that? Do you experience that?

2) Do you expect Christ to answer your prayers? Jesus said "*If you ask anything in My name, I will do it.* (Joh 14:14)" Do you speak to Him, not as to yourself, but as to someone that you expect will answer in tangible, living ways? Do you ask, and expect? Are you bold enough to ask specifically enough to be disappointed, and then to ask Him about the disappointment, and likewise to expect, and then thank Him when it comes through? Or are your prayers so vague that no one would know if God ever answered?

3) Do you expect Him to save souls around you? Jesus said " *And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.*" (Joh 12:32) He was speaking of His death and resurrection. He died and

rose, and now promises to build His church. He promises that faith will come by hearing and hearing of the word of Christ. If your salvation was a miracle, why do you think the power dried up after you? If He is alive and interceding in heaven, should you not expect Him to save those He died for?

4) Do you expect Him to change your life? Jesus promised His disciples that after His departure, the Christian life would look like this: *"I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. (Joh 15:5)*

If the branch is actually in the Vine, and the Vine is alive, then life-giving sap will flow into those branches, and it will bear fruit. If the branch stands in right relationship to the Vine, and cooperates, and yields, some fruit-bearing is inevitable.

If the living Christ is in you, do you not expect that He will change you? Your anger, irritability, your discontent? Do you not think He wants to and can break that habit: oversleeping, overeating, overspending, dependence on comfort foods, dependence on nicotine, dependence on pills, dependence on the praise of man? Do you not think He can break the chains of covetousness and lust of the eyes and lust of the flesh and pride of life? Does He not want you to develop the fruit of the Spirit? Does He not wish to change your speech, and your thought-life, and your parenting, and your marriage, and your worklife, and your serving in church, and your leisure habits? Why so little expectation of His saving power now? Why is it all about the past, if He is still alive? If He has been convicting you of needed change, and He is alive, can he not do it? A risen Christ will keep on saving His people from their sins, and a living, saved people will keep on desiring more and more of His changing, saving power.

You say you are a Christian. You say you remember the time you became a Christian. Since then, have you known His presence in worship? Have you seen Him answer your prayers? Have you watched Him save souls around you? Have you seen Him change you?

This is what we expect when you encounter the living Christ. You are amazed, astounded, afraid. You do not hang around a tomb, adjusting the empty burial cloth. You do not keep pouring on spices where no one lies. You get up and go, spreading the Gospel, telling others, seeking change for yourself, going on to meet Him, looking for answers to prayer. This is a living faith.

It is only a living faith that brings others to life. Devotion to the dead may be admirable. It may be commendable. It may to some, seem attractive. But that's all it is.

Give that up. Come and receive the living Christ.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. (2Co 5:17)