Rolling Stones

Sunday, April 23, 2017

Ezekiel 37:13-14 Mark 16:1-7 Romans 6:5-10

A chance encounter between Mick Jagger and Keith Richards on a train led to the forming of the Rolling Stones in 1962—two years after the Beatles got their start. The Beatles were characterized by uniforms, a clean-cut image, and clean lyrics as many other boy bands of the era. The Stones started down that path but quickly made the decision to roll in a different direction: identifying with the “bad boy” rebellious counterculture of the 1960s, they shunned uniforms and went with an unkempt look and unclean lyrics and stage presence—even placing an image on stage reminiscent of the Asherah poles of Israel’s pagan-tarnished history. Fiercely maintaining their independence from the wholesome image of earlier bands, they pursued a life of “sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll”—giving weight to the warnings of many a grandmother concerning the slippery slope of “the devil’s music.” They became the poster boys for a life of excess and, yet—no matter how hard they tried—could not get any \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_? “Satisfaction” (you know I couldn’t leave it alone). Drug arrests awaited them at almost every tour stop and tensions within the band pulled at their seams. Keith Richards found himself trapped in heroin addiction. What he thought was choosing a life of freedom had entombed him. He struggled to pull himself out—finally leaving the woman he loved (also addicted) and the mother of his three children in order to make an earnest attempt at getting clean.

I know that Easter was last week, but can we take Andy’s advice and linger a moment now at the *empty* tomb of Christ?

The prophet Ezekiel told us it was coming. “`Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.’” (Ezekiel 37: 13-14)

And in Mark, we see the fulfillment of that prophecy:

* Why are the women going to the tomb? To anoint Jesus for burial. Remember that they had to wait because Saturday was the Sabbath, so they could not work or handle a dead body—especially on the Sabbath of Passover week.
* How do they know where to go? They had watched Jesus’ entombment which is important in disputing suggestions that perhaps the tomb was empty because the women had gone to the wrong tomb. No; they know exactly where they were going.

As they walk, the women start asking each other how they are going to get in. Who is going to roll the stone away? It’s interesting that they brought the spices but didn’t think through how they would manage the very large (estimates range from several hundred pounds up to two tons) stone that had also been sealed by the Roman guards at the insistence of the Jewish religious leaders. And there is a further complication: to get these tombstones in place, channels were carved out in the ground of the rock floor so that the stone would be easier to roll down in place—which means it would take far more people to move the stone out than to roll it in. So, the women are concerned about getting the stone removed, but what do they find when they got there? An empty tomb with the stone rolled away and a “young man” in unearthly white. The women are alarmed. The word used here expresses strong emotion but does not indicate terror or elation—it is emotionally neutral, so we only know that they were “startled” and that the angel tells them not to be alarmed. Of course, fear in this moment would certainly be normal. When Heaven inserts itself into world history, it is startling and—often—quite alarming. The women had no expectation of finding Jesus alive. They had come to prepare his body for decomposition by covering him with perfumes and then leaving the bottles around his body. Yet, God upended their human expectations.

The angel asks them, “Are you looking for Jesus of Nazareth?” Look at the triple affirmation here:

* Not here
* Risen
* This is where they laid him. See? Empty bench. Was here. Gone now.
* What’s next? The angel tells the women to “Go tell the disciples and Peter.” But why does he single out Peter? Isn’t Peter a disciple? The translation reads more like “including Peter.” These two words are a beautiful expression of grace and restoration because Peter had just denied Christ three times, and he and the other disciples might well have thought that he would no longer be considered a disciple.

Once a month, I have lunch with a former professor who is an incredibly impressive man. He’s a retired colonel who served two tours of duty in Vietnam and was a nuclear warfare planner for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. His job was to draw up warfare plans for much of Europe. A remarkable and intimidating man, but having gotten to know him over the years, he has become a close friend, and I love him dearly—yet when we meet, I’m nervous to pray over our lunch. I just say a quick one to myself when he’s not looking—afraid I may offend. And I leave feeling like a coward—like we know Peter felt. God is doing something in my life right now, though, that’s leading me to a braver place. At our last lunch, I asked if he would mind if I prayed, and he was surprised because I had never done that before but not opposed. He said that he, himself, used to pray. It opened up a door to a deeper conversation that I have been praying about for some time.

The angel directs the women to tell the disciples that Jesus is going ahead of them into Galilee where they will see Him just as He told them. The word here means “leading”—Jesus is *leading* them to a new place.

So, what else do we need to know to help us understand this account in Mark? In this time and culture, there were two forms of writing: factual reporting and mythology. Mark takes great pains to distinguish this as an account of a factual event. He give us:

* The time, the day, the details of the preparation of Jesus’ body
* The problem of removing the stone
* The discovery that it already has been
* The repeated confirmation that Jesus’ body is gone
* The reference to meeting Him in Galilee
* The women. If Jesus’ followers were devising a fictional account of the resurrection, they would not have used women as the witnesses. Women were not respected in this age and were thought to be hysterical. They were not even allowed to give testimony in court. Other historians of the day, trying to discredit resurrection claims, used this to try to accomplish their aim. It actually helped them a little at the time but is a strong argument now for the validity of the account. If the disciples were making all of this up, they would have used men as the witnesses.

Mark wants us to understand the resurrection as historical reality unfolding in real places and in real time on a real calendar shutting out any thought that the resurrection is just a metaphor representing new hope or the disciples’ determination to carry on the ministry and message of Jesus when the disciples did not yet even understand what that was and never would have had Jesus not resurrected and appeared to them. At this point, the disciples just wanted to keep their heads down and get out of this situation alive. The resurrection of Christ was real and such a pivotal event that Sunday became the Church’s day of worship instead of the Jewish Saturday Sabbath. Even enemies of the early Church did not dispute the empty tomb—they just didn’t know what to make of it.

So, what should *we* make of it? Typical of Mark, he repeats himself for emphasis: Death was defeated—Jesus is alive! He is risen! He is not here. And then there was grace for Peter, and there is grace for us. The prophesied resurrection is finished—it was not halfway. Jesus’ death was not the end, and His resurrection is for all of us.

But life is still messy. The untidy conclusion of Mark at verse eight inspires at least three other endings added by others to give a more satisfactory ending. Why did he leave us hanging with the women leaving but saying nothing to anyone until they get to the disciples? Mark loves to leave us at these cliff-hangers so that we will insert ourselves into the story and ask, “Why?” The man they had loved and followed had been crucified and entombed but is alive and risen from the grave. Why did fear keep them silent? Why did they not tell everyone they met along the way? And why does life not always unfold the way we expect?

We no longer have Jesus here with us in the same physical sense that the earliest followers did; we have to follow in faith. There are tough situations we don’t understand. But trials and struggles can transform us into the image of Christ:

* Every difficulty.
* Every painful relationship.
* Every encounter with illness or age.
* Every exam failure.
* Every office, school, or home conflict is an opportunity for us to realize that we are free from sin and from our old nature. Let’s look at Romans.

Romans 6:5-10

In this passage, Paul talks about being united in death and resurrection. What does that mean, Paul? Our old self (sin nature) has been crucified with Him. Sin ruling the body might be done away. We no longer have to be slaves to sin. We are free! “Free” means that we have free will—that we have choices. We can choose life or death. We can also choose to act in ways that free us from the consequences of making decisions outside the will of God—which is sin. And we can live. If we died with Him, we also live with Him. Death no longer has mastery over Him nor over those who have died with Him—meaning those who embrace a relationship with Him. By *His* death and resurrection, we are free from sin and the grave.

When our first parents decided to embrace what they thought was freedom, sin entered the world causing our separation from God and the need for death. Why? God’s nature is so holy and perfect that sin cannot survive in His presence. Had He not withdrawn from us, His very nature would have destroyed us. Therefore, we became mortal so that the sinful body could one day fall away and release the soul for resurrection. If we have died with Christ, then we share in His resurrection and live. Jesus, as the second Adam, brings life. Jesus died to sin once for all and now lives to God—as can we. The *sin nature* is gone, crucified and *not* resurrected, but how do we live sinless lives when the flesh still lives and calls to us? We remember who we are: that we are free. Freedom means having choices. If we are free to choose wrongly, we are also free to choose rightly. Paul says that “all things are permissible but not all things are profitable” (1 Cor. 6:12 and 10:23). The problem is that we have gotten ourselves entrenched in desires and behaviors that have entombed us. We follow our passions, our insecurities, our loneliness, our pride, our fear, our indifference into dark places, and we allow our mistakes and our weaknesses to trap us there. We either feel so broken that we don’t feel we can ever be whole again—that God sees us with disappointment and disgust, or we see ourselves as basically good people who really don’t need much saving and begin to discount Jesus’ sacrifice for us and treat Christianity as a way to just polish up our morality—to make us a little bit better people. God did not sacrifice His son to polish us up a little. Jesus died so that we could be free and perfect. And there’s a third option: we’re comfortable in our cave and do not want to come out. We see the pursuit of our desires rather than God’s as freedom, and it seems beautiful to us—a way that seems like life to us but, in the end, leads to death.

But how do we dislodge something beautiful from the human heart? By replacing it with something more beautiful. I’m going to borrow a great analogy from Ben Stuart, Executive Director of Breakaway Ministries out of Texas A&M University: Romeo, Juliet, and Rosaline. Do we even remember Rosaline when we think of Romeo and Juliet? Rosaline was Romeo’s first love, and he says that the sun has never seen a more beautiful sight than Rosaline. Until he meets Juliet. After sneaking into her back yard, he looks up to her window and says:

*But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?**It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.**Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,**Who is already sick and pale with grief,**That thou her maid art far more fair than she*

In other words: “Rosaline who?”

The stones we hide behind are channeled in, and we cannot dig our way out nor roll those stones away by ourselves. But we don’t have to. We simply say to Jesus, “I am broken, and I cannot fix myself.” And He says: [*You don’t have to; I already have. Just trust me. The life I offer you is so much more than the one you’re chasing, and you are free to choose it. I paid the price so that you would have the option. Sin and doubt do not have a hold on you any longer*.] Choose to live in true freedom rather than living like someone who is still in the grave. If you don’t know about this man who changed the course of human history, you owe it to yourself to investigate and find out what all the fuss is about. No one else has impacted history like He has, and He wants to roll away the stone keeping you from Him and have a relationship with you. If you do know Him, let Him rescue you from the places that keep you from enjoying the freedom of life outside the tomb. “And then you will know that He is the Lord, when [He] has opened your graves and brought you up from them. He will put His Spirit in you and you will live,…and you will know that He has done it.”