

## JUST AS HE SAID

There's a certain irony in Luke chapter 23 verse 54. 'It was Preparation Day, and the Sabbath was about to begin.' The day on which Jesus was crucified and buried was Friday, the day before the sabbath, the seventh day, the Jewish holy day. Because no work was allowed on the sabbath there was a lot to prepare. Anything that would normally involve work such as cooking or shopping had to be done before 6 o'clock on Friday night because that was when the Jewish sabbath began. It ran from 6 o'clock on Friday evening to 6 o'clock on Saturday evening.

For men it wasn't too bad but, as we know, a woman's work is never done. So for women Friday afternoon was something of a mad rush to get everything ready for the sabbath. It was Preparation Day.

That particular Friday had been far from normal. The events that had taken place were an assault on the emotions: the announcement of the verdict on Jesus, the dreadful struggle up the Via Dolorosa, the cruelty of the cross and the mockery of the people, the eerie darkness from mid-day to 3 o'clock, the final breath of the victim, the evidence of the water and the blood when that spear was so viciously rammed into his side. And then his body was taken down from the cross.

Joseph of Arimathea had taken steps to secure the body of Jesus and have it buried in his own tomb. It was a magnanimous gesture but maybe the women wondered if he had done the job adequately. It would give them more comfort to be able to do something for Jesus in death, to take spices and make sure the body was properly embalmed. After all, it was the brink of the sabbath. There had been no time to do anything properly.

All this, and then there were their own domestic preparations. That's the context of verses 54 to 56. 'It was Preparation Day, and the Sabbath was about to begin. The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it. Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment.'

At 6 o'clock on Saturday evening the Sabbath was over. But they didn't go to the tomb then. No doubt there were all sorts of things to do at home. Not only that, it would not be safe for women to be out during the hours of darkness. But very early the next day they were up and out and off to the tomb. Chapter 24 verse 1: 'On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb.'

What they found when they got there was the last thing they were expecting. 'They found the stone rolled away from the tomb.' Mark tells us that this had been a cause of anxiety. 'Who will roll the stone away?' We're talking here about a massive boulder, rolled down a slope to cover the entrance to the cave which was the Lord's burial place. Both the weight of the stone and the steepness of the incline would have made it impossible for the women to move it.

But they had made their preparations. They were determined. Nothing was going to stop them. And now, incredibly, the stone was rolled away, and in they went. That was when they made their second unexpected discovery. Verse 3: 'but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.' They were dumbfounded. What was it all about?

This wasn't at all what they were expecting. And then something even more amazing happened. 'While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: "The Son of Man must be delivered

into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again." Then they remembered his words' (verses 4–8).

They wondered ... and then they remembered. What I want you to notice is those words spoken by the men in shining clothes. 'Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee.' All this has happened just as he said.

If we look back in Luke's Gospel to chapter 9 verse 21 we read, 'And he said, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." Shortly after, Jesus began his final journey to Jerusalem.

Later in chapter 18 verses 31 to 33 Jesus is near the end of his journey to Jerusalem and we read, 'Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again."

Now the women are at the empty tomb on Easter Day. All sorts of thoughts are racing through their minds but they are told, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee.'

Luke underlines the significance of this in three other incidents that had taken place very recently. They all concerned preparations.

First there was the triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. As they approached a village near Jerusalem Jesus sent two disciples to make preparations. This is what he said. 'Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it' (Luke 19:30–31). Then we read, 'Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them' (verse 32).

The second incident concerns the preparation of the Passover which Jesus ate with his disciples on the night he was betrayed. We turn to Luke chapter 22 verses 8 to 12. 'Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover." "Where do you want us to prepare for it?" they asked. He replied, "As you enter the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him to the house that he enters, and say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher asks: Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large upper room, all furnished. Make preparations there.'" And then in the very next verse we read, 'They left and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.'

Are you seeing a pattern here? 'Just as he had told them ... just as Jesus had told them.'

Now, the third incident, this time more disturbing. In Luke chapter 22 verses 31 to 34 we read that Jesus predicted the failure of Peter. "'Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.'" But he replied, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death." Jesus answered, "I tell you, Peter, before the cock crows today, you will deny three times that you know me.'" The sequel is just a few verses away in the very same chapter, verses 54 to 62. After Peter had denied the Lord, not just once, not just twice, but three times, the cock crowed.

In verses 61–62 we read, 'The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the cock crows today, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly.'

Satan has desired to sift you as wheat. Be prepared. But he wasn't, and he failed the Lord, just as Jesus had told him.

When the women came to the tomb on Easter Sunday morning they had made preparations, but they were the wrong preparations. They were very loving, very well-meaning, but they were the wrong preparations. Jesus was not dead. He was alive – just as he had told them. They were preparing to preserve him in death. Jesus had told them to be prepared to see him again alive.

On this Easter Sunday in the year 2005 we come to reconsider the evidence for the resurrection. There is historical evidence: the empty tomb, the missing body, the transformed disciples. But that may not be enough.

There is eye-witness evidence. The first person to see Jesus was a woman, Mary Magdalene, as Mark 16 verse 9 makes clear. The first witnesses of the empty tomb were women. I can tell you that no one making up this story in that male-dominated culture would have made the key witnesses women. Look up 1 Corinthians chapter 15 and check out who's missing among the list of witnesses to the resurrection.

Paul writes (verses 3 to 8): 'For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance : that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also...'

Who's missing? The women. Back to Luke chapter 24 verses 9 to 11. 'When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.'

Nevertheless they checked it out, and when the two disciples on the way to Emmaus were trying to explain the extraordinary events of the day they said, 'Some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said' (verse 24).

Just as the women had said. Historical evidence. Eye-witness evidence. To this we must add Scripture evidence. Jesus made it clear that this was paramount. Luke 24 verse 27: 'Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.' And again in verses 44: and 45: 'He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.'

But above all these things there is something else that makes our faith secure and our hope a reality. The death and resurrection of Jesus took place *just as he said*. Not one word of his has failed. Not one promise has proved untrue. He is described in the book of Revelation as 'the faithful and true witness' (3:14). Where he has given his word we can depend on it.

The message of Easter is this. Take Jesus at his word.

John 5:24. I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.

John 14:1–3. Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God ; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.