

Easter 2026
2 Kingdoms
Mark 15:16-23

Today we'll be celebrating the victory of Jesus as the resurrected King by reading from Mark 15. The very 1st Easter Sunday- Resurrection Sunday- ushered in a very different type of world, one that is in direct opposition to the type of world that we currently live in today. And it's my hope this morning that we are able to re-calibrate, re-tune our lives to life in that different world, as we recall the events surrounding Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection- that ushered in this new paradigm of God's Kingdom life.

I benefitted this past week from reading some of the teaching from a historian and Bible teacher by the name of Ray Vander Laan, and I want to share with you some historical, cultural context that he presents that will help us better understand and apply what we read from Mark 15.

Jesus lived on earth during the time in which the Roman government ruled a large portion of the world. You're probably somewhat familiar with ancient Roman culture and governance- maybe you've seen some movies- Ben-Hur, Spartacus, Gladiator- more than likely you probably somewhat understand the idea of a "Caesar," the ruling emperor guy in charge of all the Roman territories. The term Caesar originated with Julius Caesar, who ruled Rome, but who was eventually assassinated, and his son, Augustus, became the next ruling "Caesar." The Gospel account of Luke tells us it was this Caesar Augustus who was ruling at the time of Jesus' birth. Now, Caesar Augustus had the Roman Senate Governance *and* Roman religious leaders officially declare to the world that his deceased father Julius Caesar had ascended into the heavens to take his place amongst the Roman gods. In other words, Jesus was born into a world, into a

culture, into a government, into a predominant religious world environment- that believed their “king” (their emperor, their Caesar) was the divine son of a god.

Historically, throughout the Roman Empire, the Caesar was in fact referred to as “lord and god.” And whenever a Caesar was crowned, there was a specific, traditional, inaugural ceremony that took place- one that had developed over time, that originated in the Greek and Roman demonic god temples, then adopted by military commanders, later fully embraced by these Roman Emperors. It looked like this- there was a large gathering of soldiers at the Praetorium- that’s the word for the palace or the military base complex where the Caesar or the government/military leader lived. And then they would get permission from the religious leaders to borrow one of the robes that adorned the life-sized Roman god statues, typically the robe from the statue of Zeus (also known as Jupiter), and the soldiers would then drape this robe over the Caesar or military commander. They would also give him a scepter, and crown him with an olive wreath that was a sign of him being divinely appointed.

From there, they would then parade through the city, and the celebrated victor was given a bull to lead, and next to the bull was a slave, carrying a tool that would later be used to kill the bull as a sacrifice to Jupiter/Zeus (the most revered Roman/Greek god), it was typically a poleaxe- a spear/axe looking weapon. So there was this huge procession- the man wearing a robe and a crown, holding a scepter, leading the bull, along with another man carrying the instrument of death, and then all the soldiers, parading through the capital city of Rome, from the palace, all the way to a place called Capitoline Hill. Capitoline Hill is one of the 7 hills of Rome, and it was considered as one of the most important places in all of the Roman empire- the temple of Jupiter/Zeus was located there, and it was the place of the highest

governing authority. It served as the head of the religious *and* the political empire of all the Roman territories.

Our own Capitol Hill in Washington DC is named after this very Capitoline Hill. The root meaning of the word Capitoline is head- the legend is that when the Romans were building the temple there, a man's head was found, but it also came to signify the idea of "head" as in the place that leads, the head tells the rest of the body what to do- the head is in charge. And then when this procession arrived to this capitol city, Head Hill, the celebrated leader might be offered some sweet wine, which he would pour out as an offering.

Then the bull was sacrificed there at the temple of Jupiter/J Zeus, and the Caesar would ascend the stairs of the temple and the crowd would start chanting something like "Hail Caesar, lord and god!" Soldiers would bring out prisoners and the Caesar would order them executed as a testimony to all watching, demonstrating that he had the power of life and death.

Now, this is all part of the historical context we need to consider as we read what the gospel authors wrote concerning their testimony of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Even the word Gospel- we immediately associate that word as a religious word meaning the good news of salvation of Jesus Christ. But the word gospel during the time of Jesus was typically more associated with announcements coming from the government. The government would announce the good news of a coronation of a new Caesar, or the good news of a heir to Caesar being born, a victory in war, or any other sort of imperial announcement- this is what was referred to as *gospel*. So what the gospel writers witnessed, and reported in writing, flew very much in direct opposition to the surrounding culture, government, and religion. These authors lived under a Caesar who claimed to be the son of a god, who claimed to be lord and god, who could call for their death with a snap of their fingers-

yet these authors didn't bad mouth the current government, culture, or false religions- rather they instead very tactfully and boldly made the case that, "No, the Son of God is the One born humbly in a manger, who gave His life for others through His execution on a cross." They basically said, "here's the *real* Gospel- the real kingly good news that is worth announcing."

How crazy of a message- the Gospel writers, in the world's eyes, had their Savior, Lord, God, King, executed as a troublemaker by the Caesar who called himself lord and god. How easy it would have been for this message to be completely dismissed by those who would say, "see, Jesus wasn't Lord and God- Caesar is obviously lord and god because he put *your* Lord and God to death."

But Mark wasn't scared. Look how he starts his book, **chapter 1, verse 1**: "*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*" He's going to tell it like it is, whether the government, culture, or spiritual thought around him agrees or disagrees. Turn with me now to Mark chapter 15. Jesus has just been put on trial by Pilate, and turned over to be crucified. **Verse 16 and I'll read through verse 21...**

So here we have a procession, that starts at the Praetorium, the palace, with a bunch of soldiers- as would the procession to celebrate a military victor or to celebrate a newly inaugurated Caesar. What do they do next- they grab a robe, or *cloak*, and dress him with it. Who knows, maybe it even came off of one of the Roman temple statues. They place a crown on His head- not of olive branches, but of thorns. They salute him, though mockingly, crying out "Hail, King of the Jews!" A scepter is not given for Him to hold, but one is "given to Him" in the form of a stick beating Him. They grab someone to basically serve as a slave, to carry the instrument of death- not a poleaxe, but a cross, and in this case it's not going to be a bull sacrificed. And then where did they bring him, and what did they do next- look with me at the next 2 verses... **(22-23)**

The military parade arrives not to Head Hill, not Capitoline Hill- but the name means the same exact thing, just in a different language- it's *Golgotha*, a word based on the Aramaic root word meaning skull or head, and the site is actually elevated on a hill. So they arrive to this Aramaic Head Hill, and they offer him wine, and Jesus refuses to take it. Instead of ascending stairs to a temple, Jesus ascends up on a cross that would become the pathway- not to arrive to the temple of Jupiter or Zeus- but rather the cross would become the pathway to arrive to the Heavenly Temple of the real, living, all-powerful creator *God*. Two other prisoners are there, and all 4 Gospel accounts mention these 2 others, but Luke's account gives us the most detailed report. Unlike what would typically happen at this point in the inaugural ceremony, Luke records that Jesus- instead of calling for execution of a prisoner to prove His power- He instead grants life to a prisoner, stating that he would be with Jesus in paradise. **(Luke 23:43)**

I can't help but think that Mark, in his account here, is attempting to highlight the truth of who Jesus is, not just to the Jewish people of that day, but even to those who would be considered enemies- the Romans. I can't help but think, that just maybe, Mark is telling the reader, whoever that may be, that even though it was done mockingly- this whole scene is not one of defeat, but rather one of Caesar-like, king-like, military champion-like victory. In an upside down way, Jesus was proclaimed the real hero Caesar King champion. And some of the people there who witnessed everything came to this conclusion. This procession, leading to Jesus' crucifixion on the cross, this Roman inauguration in which typically a bull would be sacrificed- on the day of passover on which a Jewish *lamb* would be sacrificed- Jesus became that Roman *bull* and Jewish *lamb* sacrifice so that *all* of humanity could have the opportunity to be a part of His eternal kingdom, instead of chasing after the failing kingdoms the Romans and the Jews were attempting to build.

The Romans took notice- Mark records a Roman Centurion, a military leader who swore alliance to Caesar “son of god,” this Roman soldier, upon witnessing all that took place, responds in saying, **verse 39**, “*Truly this man [Jesus] was the Son of God!*” The Jews took notice as well- Mark records in **verse 29** those mocking Jesus, saying He had said He’d destroy the temple and rebuild it. They were like, “Ha, ha, guess you don’t get to do that you liar! You’re going to die now and the temple is still standing!” But in **Verse 38** Mark records “*And the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.*” Surely this must have caught the attention of those steeped in Jewish traditions. Scripture tells us that Jesus was referring to Himself as the temple that would be destroyed and rebuilt in 3 days, but the temple *was* literally destroyed not too many years later, not one stone left on another; and yet in this very moment as Jesus died, the temple was in fact *figuratively* destroyed. Not just the figurative temple of Jesus’ body- but in a figurative sense the literal temple was destroyed too. The whole purpose and meaning of the literal physical temple was rendered complete. Jesus fulfilled it’s purpose- there was no longer a physical place separated by a curtain where God was accessed only by certain people at certain times. No, upon Jesus’ death, that curtain was torn by God’s hand, from the top down to the bottom. Jesus now provided open access to God and to His Kingdom through His death- Jerusalem with open borders, as we looked at a couple weeks ago in Zechariah 2.

Then, in quite amazing fashion, Jesus fulfilled His own prophecy, 3 days later He “rebuilt the temple,” rising from death back to life. Like the other Gospel authors, Mark records all the first witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection- Mary Magdalene, Jesus’ mother Mary, Salome, the 2 walking on the road to Emmaus, but Mark in particular highlights that the disciples didn’t believe these first witnesses, and Jesus eventually appears and confronts them, reprimanding them for not believing and having hard hearts. And here’s what he says to them in **chapter 16, verses 15 and 16...**

Then verses 17 and 18 list some of the signs that would be associated with those Jesus was sending out as His representatives, and then **verse 19**, without much detail, describes His ascension into Heaven. The book of Acts gives us some more details of this event, but Mark here chooses to emphasize and focus on one very important detail that further supports this whole Roman procession inauguration account. Verse 19 says Jesus was received up into heaven, to where exactly? To the place of *sitting at the right hand of God*. That is describing the place of ultimate authority and command. Jesus here is exalted above every name, above every power, above every religion, above every government, above every tradition- taking His rightful place of rule as the coronated Roman Caesar-King, taking His rightful place of rule as the coronated Jewish Messiah-King; and the path to that place of victory was not achieved through military conquest. His kingdom power, rule, and authority was granted not by crushing worldly enemies, or by attacking those who disagreed with Him, or by building political empires- but rather through humbly sacrificing Himself for others.

Earlier in his book, Mark records Jesus saying *“If anyone wants to come after Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it.”* **(Mark 8:34-35)** This charge probably wasn’t *just* an invitation for us to be willing to suffer for what we believe. But it’s probably also a charge for us to realize that the way the kingdom of Jesus comes, is through us willingly, selflessly loving even our enemies- as did Jesus.

This is what the gospel meant to these early believers, in the wake of Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension into Heaven. They carried the Kingdom power- a power that was not in a worldly sense strong, a power not backed by military might, not backed by popularity, not backed by a nation state, not backed by a strong economy. It was backed and empowered by humble sacrificial love displayed through

these attempting to follow Jesus' example. This is what grew, and what forever changed the world as a result of resurrection Sunday. The early church was willing to love their neighbor, even love their enemies- Jews, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Africans, Asians- it didn't matter, the Kingdom was for *everyone* who would chose Jesus. A Kingdom not defined as a worldly border territory place, but a Kingdom defined as a "wherever the king's will is done" place. This is the Kingdom we need to be fighting for, wherever we are- at work, at home, at church, at play, at school- we live in and are growing His Kingdom as we allow His will to be done in us and through us everywhere, as we also await a very literal coming of His Kingdom- a very real place that we will one day experience.

I very often think of what John recorded for us, as Jesus appeared before Pilate, and Pilate asks Him "Are you the King of the Jews?" **(John 18:33)** This would have been the perfect opportunity for Jesus to reply something like, "well, yes, but first there will be this group known as the Crusaders who will free Jerusalem from invaders, and then there will be this nation formed in 1776 and then another in 1948 and they together will set the world up for my Kingdom to be fully realized here in Jerusalem, through conquering enemies, setting up the right borders, acquiring all the right resources, serving justice, building the right buildings- and *then* I'll return and rule as King..." Pilate gave Jesus the best setup, a perfect opportunity for Jesus to define Himself in relation to this world we live in, in these type terms, to go on record and set the political world kingdoms and nations straight for centuries to follow.

But no, Jesus didn't say anything like the example I just gave. In fact, He said something *very* contrasting- here's Jesus' response, **John 18:36-** "*My Kingdom is not of this world.*" Whaaaaaat? He clarifies even further in the following statement: "*If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would be fighting...*" In other words, the Kingdom Jesus brings, that He is King over, that He invites us into, the Kingdom that He tells us to live for- is *not* one that can be defended physically. It can't be spread or be ushered in by wars, violence, conquering. And just

in case Pilate and we didn't get it the first time, Jesus repeats, at the end of the verse: "*My kingdom is not of this realm.*"

In the first few centuries that followed after Jesus' death and resurrection, something very peculiar happened. Christianity actually became quite popular, and it actually gained power, and became very influential in the governing worldly kingdoms of that time period. And at first you might think that would be a good thing, but all of a sudden Christianity had the power to pressure and force people to do things, to conquer, and shame, and make war in the name of Christ- and the selfless love power demonstrated by Jesus lost its appeal and effectiveness. And I don't know if, historically, Christianity at large ever really recovered from that time period.

That temptation to use Christianity as a means to prosper worldly kingdoms is still alive and well in today's world. At the very least, with tensions over politics here in the USA, tensions in politics overseas, the endless wars and rumors of wars, the sides to choose from, the temptation to spiritualize government decisions, the craving to fulfill Biblical prophecy, the push to side with a political party- these things appear to be at an all time high for their ability to distract followers of Christ from living for the real Kingdom, the Kingdom of Jesus, that is *not* of this world.

Anyone ever heard of Billy Graham? One of the most revered names in modern Christianity, Billy Graham faithfully preached and shared Jesus' Gospel message to literally millions if not billions of people over the course of his lifetime. Billy Graham started an organization, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (the BGEA), with the intent of that organization carrying on his Gospel focused ministry, and it is now lead by his sons, Franklin and Will Graham. The official publication of the BGEA is Decision Magazine, and it goes out to millions of Christians in over 75 countries. Typically included in the

magazine are really good articles about people standing up for their faith, and enduring through persecution, and stories about the Gospel message going out to different countries and people groups.

But in recent years, whether right or wrong, there has been much more of a Christian *political* focus from the BGEA and from Decision Magazine. Encouragement for Christians to back certain political candidates, coverage of tours that rally Christians to vote, articles from pastors defending political moves. And I was recently quite shocked by the latest edition of Decision Magazine- I have it here with me, fresh off the presses, arrived a couple weeks ago. On the front cover are two flags, one that represents Christianity, and another that represents a middle eastern country. 2 different kingdoms, one is spiritual, eternal, ruled by Christ; and one is physical, temporary, ruled by men. And the articles that follow, page after page after page, are intending to convince the reader that they should support fighting for the flag that represents the middle eastern country.

Listen, I'm not trying to make a political statement for or against war, or for or against one country or another- I'm not here to talk geopolitics. Nor am I wanting to mud sling on other Christians, Christian organizations, or governments. And I'm not saying Christians shouldn't be involved in politics- but I am here to warn you on this Easter Sunday of what seems to be a very large pull from even mainstream popular Christianity that is trying to make following Jesus about kingdoms of this world, when Jesus Himself, in the moments before His death said very explicitly that His Kingdom is not of this world, His Kingdom is not one that can be defended physically, His Kingdom is not of this physical realm.

Not only did Jesus give us this message in His last few moments before death, but even *after* His resurrection, in the moments just before His ascension into Heaven- He left us *again* with the same message. Of

all the things from Jesus' previous teaching, of all the important things He *could* have said, this message about the difference between His Kingdom and the kingdoms of this world was the topic He chose to leave His followers with. The book of Acts, chapter 1, tells us that Jesus' followers were all together with Him, and they asked Him the question that was burning in their hearts, the question they had been thinking about non-stop since a week earlier on Palm Sunday, the question that caused their hope to be dashed to the ground when He was crucified; yet now that He was resurrected, that question burned even *more* intensely, hope was being re-ignited- here's the burning question recorded in **Acts 1:6**, "*Lord, is it at this time that You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?*" In other words- "Jesus, now that you're here again, can we get back to the mission of overthrowing a government and building back up an earthly kingdom and national identity?" Here's Jesus' response, **verses 7-8...**

And then He ascends into Heaven. At first glance, Jesus' response seems to skirt around answering their question, but no, He very clearly answers their question- it was just worded very graciously and tactfully. He replies that they didn't need knowledge about the timing of earthly kingdoms, they didn't need to be thinking about building a physical earthly kingdom nation state- in contrast, His answer is that He wants them to go out *away* from a physical earthly kingdom nation state so that they can build the *spiritual* Heavenly Kingdom nation state. They're like: "Let's assemble the people, let's take over here, let's rebuild Israel, let's set up this kingdom;" and He's like, "Nah, I'm dispersing you to the furthest remotest areas of the earth for you to build *My* Kingdom."

The question I want us all to consider this morning, on Easter Sunday, as we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, is- which kingdom are we helping to build? His Kingdom- or some form of our own earthly kingdom? We say we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus and the eternal Kingdom life He ushered in through His conquering of death, but

there sure are a lot other kingdoms competing for our attention. There's all the earthly kingdoms, each fighting for it's own benefit, we're also tempted to fight for our own personal kingdoms- our own personal successes, happiness, careers, retirements, etc. Even with issues and problems that we realize are *spiritual* in nature, we're often tempted to fight those issues and problems with just worldly resources.

I'm going to ask some different questions now that will serve as tests, as indicators for us to realize what kingdom we, in everyday life circumstances, are building. You don't have to answer these out loud, but just ponder them in your mind as I read them, putting yourself up to the test. Here they are, are you ready?

-When something goes wrong that you have no control over, is your first response to pray about it, or find another person who can fix it?

-When you get sick, is your first response to pray about it, or seek medication? (I know God uses medicine too, that's not my point, the point is what is your *first* response)

-When you are confronted by someone who says you have done something wrong, is your first response sorrow, humility, and repentance; or is it defense, deflecting, and downplaying?

-When your expectations get crushed, does your mind go to thinking about how God might be stretching you and planning something different and better; or does your mind go to thinking about criticizing others or yourself, getting stuck in negative emotions?

-When someone is punished for something wrong they did, do you feel a burden for God to get ahold of their lives, bringing them to repentance, forgiveness, restoration and salvation; or are you just pretty content that the "bad guy" got what they deserved?

-When you encounter someone different than you, are you willing to get to know them, or are you more prone to judge them according to general stereotypes?

-When you sense God leading you to do something or even stop something, do you listen and obey Him even if it's uncomfortable; or do you ignore that prompting and stay in your comfort zone?

Now, I ask these questions, not because I've personally mastered them and want to shame anyone, but I ask them rather as a little bit of a check for us all- *including* myself. I think many of us would probably answer a lot of these questions with the later, more worldly kingdom answer- instead of the first, Jesus-Kingdom focused answer. And if I'm correct in assuming that, for those of us who feel like most of our answers were the more worldly kingdom answer- I think then that an appropriate response from us would be to attempt to die to that type of worldly kingdom mindset, and be resurrected to a new life, Kingdom of Heaven mindset. May we be joined with Christ this morning in His resurrection and in His pursuit of a different type of world- His Kingdom.