

“New Future” (Mark 13:32-37)

As we come to the end of April we are reminded that many students are winding down their school year. It has been a challenging year in many ways, with new class schedules, masks, and no extra curricular activity. But for some, this is graduation year. There will be no large graduation ceremonies, no banquets or dances. But these are important days nonetheless.

Imagine, if you can, that one of the students is chosen to be the class valedictorian. This person is to present a speech to the rest of the graduating class and their families. It is truly a position of great honour. Imagine, if you can, that person missing their cue – either on the stage or online – to present their speech because they fell asleep! It sounds impossible, doesn't it?

The reason we see this as unlikely to happen is that it is far too important of an event to be missed in this way. No doubt the student presenting the valedictorian address will be so nervous that they will likely not be able to sleep – or eat!

Many people will sleep through an even more important event. It is an event that will change the course of history. It will be the dividing line between a great future and a terrible future. Nonetheless, many will be asleep, and miss out on the great future that was within their grasp.

The event I speak of is the return of Jesus. When Jesus returns he will gather believers from the four corners of the earth to be with him forever. Those who have not put their faith in him for salvation will be ushered into an eternity without Christ, one of torment and pain. Their destiny will be hell.

Yet a simple heartfelt prayer of faith would have rescued them from this terrible fate. A commitment to follow Jesus, to walk with him through life would rescue them from this disaster. It will not be religion that rescues them. It will not be good deeds. Only faith in Jesus and obedience to Him will open the door to our future home in heaven.

Many will not be ready because they fell asleep spiritually. Some never woke up. They would be the ones who turned their backs on Jesus and the Gospel of salvation in His name. Then there are those who were awakened by the Spirit of God, but in the waiting, in the passing of time, they got their eyes off of the goal, off of Jesus, and they fell asleep spiritually. They might be very active at work, in the community, in their relationships, but when it comes to their spiritual life, they have fallen asleep. And we know how the parable of the foolish and wise virgins ends: those who fell asleep and were not ready when the Bridegroom returned missed out on the wedding. The door was shut and they were locked out.

“Stay awake!” These are some of the parting words Jesus left with his disciples before he went to the cross. They are the last words in chapter 13 of Mark's Gospel. Your translation may say, “Watch!” or “Stay Alert!” but in the end they mean the same thing: “Stay awake!”

Read with me the last six verses of Mark 13.

This whole chapter is about Jesus telling his disciples what is to come. It all starts with a simple comment by one of the disciples: "Look, teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!" (v. 1)

The disciple is pointing to the Temple building, and truly it was magnificent. Made of white marble and decorated in gold, massive in size and dimensions it was visible for miles. It was the crown jewel of Jerusalem. And if we look at the context of this comment, Jesus has been in the temple for some time, teaching, defending his ministry and confronting the religious leaders there. For Jesus the temple stood for a religious establishment that was on the way out. For the disciple, the temple was the place where the Messiah would most likely set up his throne. Didn't Jesus just ride into Jerusalem on a donkey, as a king? Didn't Peter just confess that Jesus was the Messiah and Jesus agreed?

So wouldn't it be proper for Jesus to set up his throne in this massive, beautiful, indestructible temple? Maybe the disciples should start choosing rooms for their offices!

Jesus' response to the disciple was less than encouraging. He said, "Do you see all these great buildings? Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." (v. 2)

Then Jesus leaves the temple, and makes his way to the Mount of Olives. As an aside, this is a very symbolic move, for the presence of God was being withdrawn from the temple. It had become too corrupt.

So the disciples ask, when will this happen? What will be the sign that this disaster you speak about is near?

Jesus goes on to tell the disciples what they are to look for:

- false Christs (vss. 5-6)
- wars and rumours of war (vs. 7)
- nations will rise up against each other,
- earthquakes and famines

And these, Jesus says, will be the beginning of birth pangs. The end is still to come. The image of the birth pang is very descriptive, for every woman knew exactly what he meant (and she could explain it to the men!) As a woman is nears the time when she will give birth, she goes into labour. She starts to have contractions, which start small and very far apart. She may even miss the first ones. But these birth pains will grow in intensity and strength, getting closer and closer and more powerful until they are almost unbearable. At that point the woman knows she is about to give birth!

Jesus is saying that Jerusalem will see these signs and they will grow in intensity until her end arrives. That end would arrive in AD 70 when Rome marched into Jerusalem and totally destroyed it, just as Jesus said.

Even before the fall of Jerusalem, Jesus' followers would be arrested and persecuted. Nonetheless, the gospel would go out to all nations. We saw both of these fulfilled in the history of the church in the book of Acts.

The persecution would intensify so much that family members would betray each other. Finally, when "the abomination which causes desolation" appears, run! This title, taken from Daniel 9:27, refers to someone defiling the temple of God, which Caligula attempted to do, and the Roman legions succeeded in doing. Jesus warned the people to run, to flee Jerusalem, but sadly, in AD 70 when the Romans attacked, people fled into the city. 1.5 million people were trapped in that city, and they were starved, they fought each other, and they were killed by Roman soldiers. Of those 1.5 million people less than 100,000 survived. As verse 20 points out, if God had not stopped the slaughter there would not be one survivor.

In the chaos people looked for someone to follow, someone to deliver them, making the scene ripe for many false messiahs and false prophets. So Jesus tells his followers, "Be on your guard." (v. 23) In verse 30 Jesus says, "This generation will not pass away until all these things have happened."

If this was all that was in the chapter, we might conclude that Jesus was just talking about the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Jesus gave the people a clear warning of what was to come. Also, he was telling his disciples that the temple they thought was so beautiful and massive would be destroyed. This will not be where the messiah sets up his throne. Do not put your hope in worldly places or institutions.

Then Jesus introduces his disciples to events that would take place even after the destruction of Jerusalem. Jesus quotes from Isaiah about the days when the king of righteousness comes. It tells of the signs in the sky – in the moon, sun and stars.

"At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens." (vss. 26-27)

This is clearly looking forward to the second coming of Jesus, when he comes in clouds of glory to take his people home to heaven. I note that throughout this chapter Jesus talks about "you seeing..." this or that, meaning the disciples would live to see the signs he described. But when Jesus describes the coming of the Son of Man he simply says, "the people will see him..." We are talking about a future event.

Then in verse 28 Jesus talks about the fig tree, saying that just as we can see summer is near when it starts to bud, so we can know the coming of Jesus is near when we see the signs.

"Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door." (vs. 29)

Jesus is saying, "Those signs I told you about that would foretell the destruction of Jerusalem – look for them again, and when you see them increase and become more severe, "look up for your redemption is drawing near..."

Do we ever hear of wars? Earthquakes? False prophets? False Messiahs? Are Christians arrested? Are Christians martyred? Are children rebelling against their parents? Is there pestilence and sickness? Is there famine? Read through Matthew, Mark and Luke's Gospels and your list of what to look for gets quite long.

On the other hand, the things still to be fulfilled is a short list. With each passing year we sense the end is drawing nearer and nearer. Jesus told his disciples that no one knows exactly when he will return, only our Heavenly Father knows, but we are called to be alert! To be ready!

Jesus says it is like a man who goes away and leaves the house in the hands of his servants, each with their task to do. When the man returns the servants should be doing their assigned tasks, and the one at the door will be watching. We are the servants, and we have a task to do: we must tell as many as possible the good news about Jesus and the salvation he provided through his death and resurrection.

Since we do not know when Jesus will return we must stay alert. We must not be found sleeping! We will be ready!

The Apostle Peter wrote about the coming of the Lord in his letter to the churches, and said that as we wait we must live "holy and godly lives ... found spotless, blameless and at peace with God." (1 Peter 3:11,14)

I cannot tell you when Jesus will return – though I can tell you it feels like it could be soon.

I cannot tell you about all the events that will lead up to his coming, or if what we are seeing today are those events. But it sure feels like it.

I cannot tell you exactly what heaven will be like, but I know it will be wonderful beyond words.

I do know the last words of Jesus recorded in our Bibles are these: "Surely, I am coming soon!" (Revelation 22:20)

For those who are ready, those watching for his return, we have a wonderful future ahead for us. This is the message of this chapter – Jesus knows the future, and for those who walk with Jesus there is a wonderful new future ahead. Jesus said, "I go and prepare a place for you, and I will come again to bring you to where I am..."(John 14:3)

This morning – are you awake? I mean really awake spiritually? Are you ready for the return of Jesus? If you are not, do not hesitate to get ready through confession, repentance and faith in Jesus for forgiveness. Do it today. You may not have tomorrow. Jesus is coming again.