

The Resurrection of the King
Matthew 28:1-15
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The phrase “life-changing” gets thrown around a bit casually these days. New technology will “change your life”, a new job or a new relationship are “life-changing”. A great diet or exercise program, or a new medicine that addresses our aches and pains. And in one sense, life does change with every little thing that happens. But true “life change” - where old foundations and assumptions crumble, and new belief systems and paradigms take root in their place - those are rare. Those 15 verses that were just read describe an event that not only was “life-changing” for those who were around when it happened, but it has been life-changing down through the centuries, and it is just as radical and transformative today.

And as often happens when our lives and our beliefs change, it’s often not brought about by our own efforts, but we are confronted by someone or something outside ourselves. Often we need someone else to challenge us and explain that what we used to think was wrong and that we need to have a new understanding. So as Mary and Mary come back to the tomb on Sunday morning, they meet someone they didn’t expect, an Angel who explains everything to them.

I. An Angel Explains Things To Them (vv. 1-7)

1 Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. 2 And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. 4 And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. 5 But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. 6 He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you.”

Why do Mary and Mary go back to see the tomb, this tomb where their friend and spiritual leader for the past few years was buried? Probably for the same reason that any of us goes and visits the grave of a loved one, to remember and to be connected again somehow. Remember that they had been sitting there when Joseph of Arimathea had rolled the stone in front of the entrance, so now they return to just remember Jesus in their deep mourning and grief. And what they expected to find was the reminder that the world is cruel and evil, and that wicked men can silence the good, the true and the beautiful. But what they actually found was nothing of the sort. They found out that good triumphs over evil eventually.

Do you remember what happened in the last chapter when Jesus died? Right before the Temple curtain ripped in two and the dead walked out of their graves? Look back at 27:51 “The earth shook, and the rocks were split.” And verse 54: “When the centurions saw the earthquake.” When Jesus died, the earth shuddered. We don’t know what it measured on the Richter scale, but it was probably high. And did you catch what happens in this chapter when Jesus is raised from the dead and the tomb opens up for Him? Verse **2**: *And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.* I mean, we’ve known that the winds and seas obey Jesus, but this is a whole other level as the whole earth trembles first at His death and then at His resurrection!

Verse 3-4: **3** *His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow.* **4** *And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men.* I can't imagine meeting someone whose appearance is like lightning. I hope you don't just think that the women ran into a nice looking man with a little white glow around him. This was a being who was so fierce and so startling that it basically made the Roman soldiers pass out from fear. There was no mistaking this being as anything other than supernatural.

For some reason the women do not pass out from fear like the soldiers do. Perhaps the angel appeared differently to God's people than he did to God's enemies. He very quickly tells the women that what they expected to find is no longer the reality. Let's read again the content of the angel's message in verses 5-7: **5** *But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified.* **6** *He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.* **7** *Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you."*

"This place is empty; you're not going to find a risen Savior lying around here. Jesus was definitely crucified, put to death. But He's risen from the dead. He didn't fake His death, they didn't make a mistake. He died, but He told them that was what would happen. And now He's on the move; He's got places to be, people to see."

Look at the four commands that the angel gives them in verses 6 & 7: come, see, go, tell.

Come closer, into the tomb.

See the place where His body should be but is not any more.

Go quickly back to the disciples.

Tell them what you have seen, the truth that He is risen; and that He wants to meet up with them back in Galilee.

It is a compelling explanation and mission that the angel has given, and there is no indication that the two Marys hesitated or questioned anything, but turn to do exactly what he's told them.

And the same message is still given to you and to me, and to everyone throughout the ages who have read through this text: come, see, go, tell.

Come to the tomb yourself through the testimony of the Scriptures.

See the life of Jesus, the accounts of His death, and the evidence of His resurrection.

Then Go back to everyone you know, everyone who doesn't know this amazing truth yet. and Tell them what you have seen, what the truth is!

The rest of Matthew 28 contains the Great Commission, the command of Jesus to go make disciples of all nations. That's an amazing passage, always worth re-reading and reminding ourselves. But I see an equally compelling mission in these words from the angel, a directive for us to be witnesses to His resurrection, heralds of His truth, His ambassadors entrusted with the good news. It's never just "Come, see, then keep it to yourself." And it's also not "go, tell, but without any evidence or experience of it." No, it's "come and see for yourself, then take that truth and invite others in."

Following this first amazing encounter, the women have an even greater encounter as

II. Jesus Meets Them (vv. 8-10)

8 *So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.* **9** *And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him.* **10** *Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."*

Well, it's one thing to see an angel, a messenger from the Lord. It's quite another thing to see Jesus Himself. Even though the angel had told them not to fear, v. 8 says that they left the tomb with fear (mixed with joy). So Jesus places Himself on their path back to the disciples and tells them again, "Do not be afraid." And He repeats the command to go tell "my brothers" what's happened, and that they can expect to see me in Galilee. This is the first appearance of Jesus after His resurrection. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 that He appeared to over 500 people between His resurrection and His ascension.

And the two women take hold of his feet – I don't think they touch Him to make sure that He's really there, like doubting Thomas had to do; I think they just are so full of joy that they can't help themselves. Maybe they wanted to hug Him, but they are filled with such awe that they are on the ground and they just reach for His feet and worship Him in the beautiful posture of prostrating themselves before Him. If their resolve was not cemented after seeing the angel, it certainly is now that they've seen and touched their risen Lord.

But now we move in the text from belief to unbelief. And in verses 11-15, we see that the powers that killed Jesus have to come up with an alternative explanation for what happened that morning.

III. The Soldiers Contradict Them (vv. 11-15)

11 While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. 12 And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers 13 and said, "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' 14 And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." 15 So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

As the women leave the tomb to spread the truth of what has happened, the guards leave the tomb to cover up and deny that truth. Verse 4 said that the guards had become like dead men. I don't know if they passed out or what. They need to find out what the Jewish leaders want them to do with this new development. The guards know that they could be killed for failing to protect the tomb, even if there was nothing they could have done against an angel. So they tell everything that happened to the chief priests and elders, who don't seem to pause even for a moment to try to process the fact that these guards have seen something overwhelming and extraordinary. No, they just throw money at them, and spit out the lie they need to be circulated: that it was those disciples after all, it's all a big hoax. Actually this lie is the very thing that posting the guards at the tomb was meant to prevent: the disciples stealing the body. You mean those "brave" disciples who all ran away when Jesus was arrested, snuck past these armed guards and made no noise as they stole the body?

We remember the truth of Jesus' words in the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:30-31: the rich man says, "*...if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.*" (Abraham replies,) "*If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.*" And the religious leaders of the day continued in their rejection of Jesus, and their unbelief.

Even today, there are numerous ways that people explain away the resurrection.¹ I won't spend too much time on each of these but it's important to acknowledge them. I would suggest reading Josh McDowell's classic book *Evidence That Demands A Verdict*, William Lane Craig's *The Son Rises*, or Lee Strobel's *The Case for Christ* if you want to dive deeper.

¹ Derek Thomas' sermon "Christ and His Resurrection" at <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/conferences/we-would-see-jesus-2014-fall-conference>.

- 1) The “Swoon” Theory – that Jesus just looked like He was dead, but really He had just passed out and then was revived by the cool air in the tomb. Or that He had been drugged to slow down His heart and make Him appear dead. But Roman soldiers knew how to kill people, and they had confirmed that Jesus was dead.
- 2) “Wrong Tomb” Theory – that Jesus’ body was in a different tomb and the women and disciples came to the wrong one. But that would have been a pretty easy one to disprove, but the Jews and the Romans never produced Jesus’ body, which would still be there if the disciples made that mistake.
- 3) “The Women Were Confused” – the women met someone that looked like Jesus, but maybe it was one of His brothers or something. The problem is that He appeared to over 500 people!
- 4) You see what you want to see – people who really want to see something are emotionally & psychologically disposed to see that very thing. But the disciples weren’t expecting a resurrection, some can’t even believe it after they hear it.
- 5) The Biased History Theory – This can’t be true history because the Gospels and Paul’s letters are written by those who are biased to need this story to work. But all history and every journalist and writer is biased some way. If you approach the resurrection account this way, you must throw out all historical fact and treat them as theories.

All of these are just ways to justify not believing in the historical text. I appreciate the efforts of critical scholars and attempts to understand the Bible and explain its teachings. But if you come to the Scriptures with the presupposition that miracles and the supernatural cannot happen, that God has not or maybe cannot intervene in this world, then guess what? You’ll never believe the Bible’s explanations and accounts. So instead of picking and choosing what you like and don’t like, what you think is credible or incredulous, either throw it all out as a pack of lies or believe it! The Scriptures are not open to selective belief.

Conclusion

We cannot remain neutral on this question: either Jesus is who He said He was and that what is written in the historical accounts of the Gospel really happened, or this whole thing called Christianity is wrong and deluded and not worthy of your time. I’ve thanked atheists before for not pretending that there is a middle ground- if there’s no God, there’s no afterlife, there’s no reason for anyone to go to church. Eat, drink, and be merry; find meaning some other way. That’s essentially what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:16-19: *“16 For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. 17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19 If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.”*

If the resurrection is not true, then my beliefs, my whole ministry is based on a lie. But I’m willing to stake my life on this. And the disciples who were killed off one-by-one for their faith (often in brutal ways) staked their lives on the absolute truth and reality of the fact that Jesus was no longer dead, but that He had risen. Their lives were completely different from when they thought they had been following a false Messiah who was killed and couldn’t deliver on His promises, to when it was revealed to them that their Master was really the victorious Lord over all.

The crucifixion of Jesus that I preached on last week and the resurrection are a package deal. Christ’s death accomplished His substitutionary atonement, His paying the penalty for our sins by dying in our place. His resurrection defeated death, triumphing over the powers of sin and hell. To come to faith in Jesus Christ, to have your sins forgiven, to be justified before a holy God, and given eternal life, you must believe both. 1 Corinthians 15:1a,3 – *“Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached*

to you, which you received... For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures."

Aside from some high-profile deaths like Kobe Bryant and Kirk Douglas, I've already had two friends die in 2020. I praise God that they had faith in Jesus. It's a reminder that the one certainty in life is that it will be over someday. We may put it off for many, many years, or death may claim us soon, even unexpectedly. At that point, we will have no options left. Either I have surrendered my life to the Lord Jesus Christ and died with Him so that I will receive a resurrection body that will live on for eternity, or I will have to pay for my sins with my own soul, punished by spending eternity separated from God. God invites all of us to the new life that comes through the resurrection of Jesus. 1 Peter 1:3-4 reminds us that God *"has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading."*

What the angel and Jesus said back then, and still whisper to us today, is "do not be afraid." We are living through a very scary time right now. We are scared of how long this pandemic will last, of whether it will keep us from getting groceries, of whether it will claim the lives of people we know and love. We're getting scared to touch packages left at our door since we're hearing that the virus lives on surfaces. We're afraid to get close to a stranger. These are real fears and it's good to name your fears and admit them. I am not telling you to pretend or to act with stoic detachment.

But for someone with a resurrection worldview and faith, we have much cause to rejoice:

- Don't fear that evil will ultimately triumph,
- Don't think that this life is darkness with no light to overcome it,
- Don't fear death and the grave as the great enemies,
- Don't be afraid that your life has no purpose,
- Don't fear that your problems, your mistakes, your sins will keep you from God,
- Don't doubt that there is a great and holy God who loves you and forgives you on account of Christ's victory over death.

Our ultimate fears fall away in the light of the resurrection of Jesus! Amen.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you that we have access to the greatest power that the world has ever seen. That as we are united to Christ, we have the sure and certain hope that we will be resurrected to eternal life after death. Lord, strengthen our confidence in the truth of Your Word and the truth of Your resurrection. Give us the courage to come and see the evidence, to read the Scriptures and believe them by the power of Your Spirit. Then send us out to go and tell that news, to proclaim your resurrection to a lost and dying world that needs to know they can have life after death but are doing everything they can to deny it and explain it away. You are the only true, wise and holy God, thank You that You call us to be Your people. Amen.

Benediction: 1 Corinthians 15:54-57

54 When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." 55 "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" 56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Come and see, then go and tell!