

Easter Sunday: The Resurrection

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] Dawn is threatening to break one Sunday morning in Jerusalem some 2,000 years ago.

Still dark, a chill in the air, a few hardy souls making their way out of the city to their fields. Others feeding the chickens or lighting the fire to get breakfast on the go.

Others are preparing to travel home after the holiday week. Packages to prepare and farewells to endure. A small group of women silently and somberly make their way to the outskirts of the city to the home of a wealthy citizen.

But this is no social visit. They are heading to see the tomb where their master had been laid. The city is slowly waking from its slumber and yet remains largely silent.

What a contrast to the preceding days. But then the dogs begin to bark. A restless bark. Betraying a premonition of something.

[1 : 30] But no time to ponder what as suddenly the earth begins to shake. The travelers stop their packing. Neighbors in their gardens exchange worried glances as if to say without words, not again.

Just two days have passed since the earth shook. This was no tremor. No innocuous aftershock.

It was, in the words of a witness, a violent earthquake. And the women heading for the tomb huddled together, partly drawn by fear and partly simply trying to keep their balance and avoid being thrown to the ground by the violent trembling of the ground beneath them.

What is happening? The created world is giving its welcome to its creator.

The very plates of the earth trembling as the one who created them rises from the grave. The earth shook in horror and incomprehension at his death and now shakes in celebration at his resurrection.

[2 : 47] What is going on? Jesus of Nazareth, crucified on Friday evening, has risen from the dead on Sunday morning. And the very earth shakes in acknowledgement.

This resurrection clearly has transcendent and cosmic implications. Why this one in particular? Others had risen from the dead. Indeed, this same Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. What was different about the resurrection of Jesus?

We can maybe mention some truths in this regard in answer to this question. What was different about the resurrection of Jesus?

Well, it was different in its very nature. It was different in the fact of the involvement of the dead man. As the angels themselves had mentioned to the women, his resurrection was in fulfillment of his very own words.

[3 : 55] Just as he said, he rose again. This was not true of any previous resurrection. But not only had Jesus foretold his resurrection, there was a sense in which he was involved in it.

If we read in John's Gospel in chapter 10 and verses 17 and 18, we are confronted with quite astonishing language on the part of Jesus himself.

John chapter 10 and verses 17 and 18. What does Jesus say? He is speaking about him laying down his life of his own free will.

And he says in that regard, the reason my father loves me is that I lay down my life. And then what does he say? Only to take it up again.

And he continues, no one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. But not only so. He then goes on to say, I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.

[5 : 00] No previous resurrection was of that nature. That the very one who was to die would speak of his authority not only to lay down his life, which we can maybe understand, but of his authority to take it up again.

So very different in its nature. Now as we consider these words of Jesus, we are struck with how they contrast with the language normally associated with his resurrection, which is rather of it being

the work of the Father, the Father raising up Jesus from the dead.

And that is indeed the ordinary or normal language used in the Gospel accounts and in the Scriptures of the Father raising up Jesus. And yet here Jesus himself speaks of his authority to take his life again, having handed it over to death.

Perhaps, and I say perhaps, the picture is of one who had every authority to take it up again, and yet the Father was given, as it were, the privilege of vindicating his Son by raising him up from the grave.

Different in its nature. Different also in its nature in the sense that there was in the resurrection of Jesus a necessity or an inevitability about it that had not been true of any prior resurrection.

[6 : 28] What does Peter say in his address on the day of Pentecost that we've been considering in these past few weeks in Acts chapter 2 and verse 24, in the second part of the verse.

Acts 2, 24. Where Peter does use the language that we've said is the normal language in reference to the resurrection.

But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death. And then what does Peter say? Because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. That had not been true of anybody previously.

It was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. It was impossible for death to keep its hold on one who had not sinned, and so could not be held by the power of death.

This resurrection was different in its very nature. Different also in its implications on that dark, chill, and somber.

[7 : 28] At least that's how it began, dark, chill, and somber Easter morning. A victory over death and sin was gloriously confirmed and consummated.

It was indeed true that there was an inevitability concerning the resurrection of Jesus, and yet it was necessary for that inevitability to be demonstrated as he rose from the dead triumphant.

And as that victory, as that work, that saving work, had in a sense been concluded with Jesus being able to cry out from the tree, it is finished yet confirmed and vindicated with his resurrection on that first Easter morning.

And so this resurrection, different in its very nature, different in its implications, different in its consequences. The resurrection confirmed, as Paul is often at pains to stress as he presents his gospel message, the resurrection confirmed that all that this Jesus had said and claimed was true. When the New Testament preachers are seeking to give credence to their message, they resort often to this reality. They say, this is true. Why? Because Jesus has risen from the dead.

[8 : 51] He has given proof of these things. By raising from the dead. His identity as the eternal Son of God. His prerogative and power to forgive sin.

Your sin and my sin. His offer of eternal life for all. For you and for me. This offer of free life and eternal life for all who would follow Him.

All of these things are true. Why? How can we be sure they're true? Because Jesus rose from the dead. Because Jesus is alive and the truth of His claims is demonstrated by His resurrection.

This resurrection. This resurrection. Two thousand years ago. Different in its nature, in its implications, in its consequences.

And different in its enduring impact. Because the world continues to shake. Men and women continue to receive and experience the eternal life secured by this resurrection.

[9 : 59] Yes, even today we can be sure that there will be those who even today, for the first time, meet the risen Jesus and enjoy eternal life for the first time.

Even today. God grant that even in this place it would be so. But we can be sure that across this world that is God's world, even today, the world continues to shake.

The implications, the enduring impact of the resurrection of Jesus will be felt and is being felt and must be felt even today. Now in the light of all these things, what must we do?

What do you have to do as you are confronted this Easter Sunday with the risen Jesus? Jesus. One of the first things that we must do is believe.

Believe that Jesus did indeed rise again. And if you do already believe that that is so, that is a good thing and it is a necessary first step. But is that sufficient?

[11 : 11] Is it sufficient simply to grant intellectual recognition to this truth that yes, Jesus is alive, that yes, He rose again from the dead?

What I want to do as we continue and this will form the substance of what we want to consider this morning, I want to consider the response of the first witnesses of the resurrection.

As we have read in Matthew's Gospel, we are presented with witnesses of the resurrection. I want to consider how those witnesses responded to the empty tomb, how they responded to the risen Jesus.

and as we consider their response, that we would seek to identify with them and see in what measure we share the response that they had. Well, who were the first witnesses of the resurrection?

It is commonly said and I think I myself on more than one occasion have expressed myself in this way that the first witnesses of the resurrection, well, they're the women. Is that not so?

[12:16] Well, it's not so. The first witnesses of the resurrection are the guards at the tomb. They were the first to witness the empty tomb.

They were the first to be confronted with this reality. And so what we want to do is to consider first of all the guards and their response to the empty tomb and then continue and proceed to consider the women's response to the empty tomb.

What then can we say of the guards of whom we have read in the passage in Matthew's Gospel?

What did they see and experience? Well, they no doubt also felt the earth shake and they no doubt saw the angel.

Whether they saw him descending from heaven or whether they only saw him once he was before them we do not know. But they saw this angel who had come from heaven. They saw him roll the stone away and they were dazzled by his appearance.

We read of it there in verse 2 to 4 of Matthew 28. There was a violent earthquake but an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and going to the tomb rolled back the stone and sat on it.

[13:32] His appearance was like lightning and his clothes were white as snow. And there we read the guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

They shook not because the earth beneath them was shaking though that was so. But they shook at the very appearance of the one who was before them.

They shook and became like dead men. What does that present to us or what picture does that paint? The language doesn't seem to suggest that they fell to the ground in a state of unconsciousness.

When it says they became like dead men we could maybe imagine that they were prostrate and appeared to be dead but that doesn't seem to be what is being suggested. Rather they were paralyzed we might say zombie-like in the face of the angel.

They were there they were standing in front of them but the appearance the manifestation that was before them produced them in this reaction they were paralyzed with fear.

[14:36] They were terrified by what they saw before them and they became like dead men incapable of saying anything or of doing anything or of responding at that moment. We could pose the question and we do pose the question did they actually see Jesus?

We can't answer that question because the gospel accounts don't give us the answer to that question. We're not told. But they certainly were able to confirm that the tomb was empty and in due course we are told proceeded to tell the chief priests everything that had happened.

Read there in verse 11 while the women were on their way some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened and there's surely content and significance in the use of this word everything by Matthew.

They reported everything that had happened. And so whether they saw Jesus or didn't it is clear that they knew that Jesus was alive. They knew that he had risen from the dead and they reported everything that had happened.

It's also worth noting it may seem obvious to us because we come to the passage with our own already arrived at conclusions as it were but it's worth noting that neither the guards nor the chief priest saw any purpose in searching for a body.

[16:09] No search party was organized. Now if they doubted whether Jesus had risen from the dead that would have been the obvious thing to do. Well let's find this body that has been stolen. Let's find this body.

Where is it? And then we can squash all these horrendous rumors that are going to emerge. But no, no attempt is made to search for the body. Why? Because it would have been a fruitless task. The

guards would have said to the chief priest we're going to waste our time.

Why are we going to search for a body? There is no body. There is no corpse. He rose again. I don't know how. I don't know why. But he's alive. So all of this points to only one reasonable conclusion that the guards believed Jesus had risen from the dead.

But how do they respond to this truth? How did they respond to the empty tomb? Well, they believed. They believed that it had happened. They believed that Jesus was alive.

And they were powerfully impacted and shaken by the resurrection. But did they believe in Jesus? Did they become disciples of Jesus? There is maybe, and you might say we're clutching at straws, but it's perhaps legitimate to do so.

[17 : 25] There is maybe a ray of hope in the word that we find there in verse 11. While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened.

Some of the guards. Now, it may be that they delegated one or two to perform this task and all were of the same mind. But some of the guards, might it not be, can we not hope that maybe there were of those who witnessed this amazing event, the privilege of being at the very center of the history of humankind as witnesses of the resurrection?

Might it be that one or other came to believe in Jesus and to follow Jesus? We do not know. But certainly those guards who went to speak and to report to the chief priests, we do know how they responded because we have the information before us.

And we can come to the conclusion that certainly at this point in their life they did not believe in Jesus, they did not become disciples of Jesus. Jesus. Why not?

Why not? To know that this man who had been dead and they knew he was dead was now alive, why wouldn't they be moved to discover more about him?

[18 : 46] Why wouldn't they be drawn to seek him out and to follow him? Why not? Well, we're given in great measure the reason why. Fear of man, fear of man.

They were more concerned with what others would say, what others would say and do, than with the implications of the fact that Jesus was alive. They were afraid of what response there would be to them if they were to announce this truth that Jesus was alive.

They were afraid. They were afraid. maybe an understandable fear, but not only was there fear of man that held them back from seeking out and following Jesus, there was self-interest, grubby and sordid self-interest.

there we read in verse 12, when the chief priest had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, you are to save, and then the sorry tale that was concocted.

Sordid and tragic, pitiful, self-interest. They did their sums, these guards, they did their sums, and they reckoned that ignoring the resurrection was worth more than confronting the implications of it, and so they did not become disciples of Jesus.

[20 : 22] Fear of man, self-interest, but also we might add, they were blind to eternity. They didn't think about their own mortality as they were presented with one who had conquered death.

They didn't think, well, we are mortal men, we too will die one day. And what then of us? Could not this man who has conquered death have something to offer us in the face of our own mortality?

They were blind to eternal realities. They preferred not to consider their own mortality. I wonder if they just thought that if they could pretend none of this scary business had ever happened that life could get back to normal.

Life could just get back to normal. Well, that was the manner in which the guards, certainly those that we are told of, responded to the empty tomb, responded to the resurrection of Jesus.

And we say or we ponder, does their response seem strange? Does it seem incongruous? Is it hard to fathom? Perhaps in a measure, yes, but it's not so different today.

[21 : 39] There are those who believe that Jesus rose again from the grave, as there are those who do not believe that he rose from the grave. But there are those who do believe that he rose from the grave, but fail to deal with the implications of this truth.

They fail to come to terms with the fact that his resurrection confirms the truthfulness of his claims to be the Savior and Lord of all who would put their trust in him.

And why do they fail to deal with the implications? Well, fear of man, afraid of what others will say if they decide to follow Jesus, afraid of the reaction of family or friends or colleagues, afraid of the

implications for their cherished lifestyle and the way they like to do things and the way they like to think.

Should Jesus come and sit on the throne of their lives? And so they believe that he rose again, but they are not prepared to deal with the implications of his resurrection.

Afraid of being branded fanatical or overly religious, fear of man, self-interest, maybe not grubby sums of money that are offered that we might hold back from becoming disciples of Jesus, but they know that to follow Jesus involves carrying a cross, it involves renouncing sin, it involves submission and obedience to his will, and they don't fancy that.

[23 : 11] Oh no, I don't, I'm not into that in a big way. They do their sums and reckon it will cost too much. Now they are, and dare I suggest you are, if that is your condition, solemnly and tragically mistaken in their calculations, and yet these are the calculations that they make.

Fear of man, self-interest, and blind also with the guards of old, blind to eternity, blind to their own mortality, no time nor inclination to ponder eternal realities.

And is that not true of our society? No time to ponder these things. And so would the guards of old try and carry on living their lives as if nothing had happened.

Let's just pretend nothing happened, and let's just carry on as if nothing had happened. So much then for the guards, but what of the women?

What of the other witnesses of the resurrection on that first Easter morning? What can we say of them? How do they respond to the resurrection? Well, as we read the account, as we have done so, we can say first of all that they, with the guards, come to believe that Jesus is indeed alive, that he has indeed risen from the dead.

[24 : 47] They believe, in this case, the messenger who brings them this report, there in verse 6, we are told of the message that they are given by the angel, he is not here, he has risen, just as he said, come and see the place where he lay.

And they believe that report. There is in them, as we try and draw together the different gospel accounts, it is true that there is still in them, as is perfectly understandable, a measure of confusion as to what is going on, but essentially they believe that it is true what the angel reports to them.

But even this accepting of the message that they are given is one based on, even as I say in their emotional turmoil, I suppose you might describe it, there is a measure of consideration even of the evidence, for they are presented with evidence which convinces them.

There, as we've read in verse 6, the angel says to the women, come and see the place where he lay. The angel says, don't just believe what I'm saying, don't just rest on my words, have a look for yourself.

You were here, you were present when Jesus was placed in this tomb as one of the parallel accounts reminds us, you know that it is so, now have a look, see for yourself. And so the angel indulges them, we might say, even with evidence for them to consider.

[26 : 21] And they listen to the message and they consider the evidence and they come to the conclusion that it is indeed so. At this point they have not yet seen Jesus. They believe the messenger.

And well, two millennia have passed but this remains in great measure the way in which we become Christians even today. This is the way in which a man or a woman will become a follower of Jesus.

You listen to the message that is presented to you by a messenger of Jesus. We have in the Bible, in the Gospels, four messengers who present to us a message concerning Jesus.

We have those who announce this message, be it from pulpits or in the comfort of a sitting room or next to you on the bus or whatever it might be.

There are messengers who are announcing this truth. And you consider the message. And you consider the evidence that is presented to you.

[27 : 21] And you come to a conclusion. Now, if that were all, then it could sound all very cerebral. But there is, of course, more. Because we find in the women that these women respond also emotionally to the truth of the resurrection there in verse 8.

And of course, the claims of the Gospel do indeed address us not only at the level of our intellect, but at the level of our emotions and of the totality of our personhood.

And these women respond emotionally to the truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Now, there is a sense in which their situation is a unique one and is not entirely replicated in us as we would have

an encounter with the risen Jesus.

And yet, this element that they respond emotionally with fear and yet filled with joy is an element of their response to the truth of the resurrection.

And even for us today, to begin to believe that Jesus is alive and to begin to consider the implications of his resurrection can, perhaps should, be a frightening business.

[28 : 40] But they also respond with great joy. The one day love is alive. The one day witness breathing his last agonizing breath on the cross breathes again.

And I ask you this morning, do you know something of that fear and apprehension as you consider the implications of this truth that Jesus is alive? Have you experienced with the women of old being filled with joy as you meet the risen Jesus and you come to know him as your Lord and Savior and seek to follow him?

They believe the message. They respond emotionally to the truth. And then as we continue to read the passage, we find that they come to have a personal encounter with Jesus.

Then in verse 9, suddenly Jesus met them. They have hurried away. in obedience to the direction given by the angel that they would go and tell the disciples.

They hurry away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. And then we read, suddenly Jesus met them. Greetings, he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshipped him.

[29 : 53] And then Jesus said to them, do not be afraid. They are privileged to have this personal encounter with Jesus. Jesus. And indeed, and it is worth highlighting, that it is Jesus who meets them.

They are not looking for Jesus. They are heading back into town to tell the disciples, but Jesus comes to their encounter. Jesus it is who approaches them.

Jesus it is who stands before them, that they might see him and that they might know him. And 2,000 years on, and Jesus continues to take the initiative.

He continues to be the one who approaches us. He continues to be the one who approaches us and stands before us. And perhaps, perhaps he is doing just that in your life today and at this point in your life.

Jesus has come before you. You had never previously considered that he was there before you, but now you know, though you cannot see him with your eyes, you know that he stands before you.

[30 : 54] And you must respond to him. And what will you say to him? What will you say to the risen Jesus? What will you do as he stands before you?

They have a personal encounter with Jesus and then what else do they do? Well, they worship him.

They worship Jesus. They came to him, clasped his feet, and worshipped him.

They prostrate themselves before him and worship him. Belief and encounter brings them necessarily to their knees, to the place they were created to occupy, to the place you have been created to occupy, which is the place of worship.

You only become fully human. You only fulfill your mission in life fully when you come to the place of worship. On your knees before Jesus and worshipping him, for that you have been created.

And I direct this to every soul, every person here this morning. For that you have been created, to worship Jesus. That is your reason for being. And these women, as they meet the risen Jesus, they come to fulfill their life's mission.

[32 : 18] As they clasp his feet and worship him and continue to worship him and continue to follow him, we are sure all the days of their lives. A Christian is first and foremost a worshipper.

Yes, a Christian is one who believes certain truths, and that is necessary and important. These women believe truths concerning Jesus. But first and foremost, a Christian is a worshipper, one who worships God, one who worships the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

Are you? Are you a worshipper? Do you worship the risen Jesus? And finally, as we consider the response of these women, they obey Jesus.

Jesus said to them, there in verse 10 we read, do not be afraid, go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee. There they will see me. And in verse 11 we read, while the women were on their way, in obedience to the words of Jesus.

They are instructed to go and tell, and what do they do? They go and tell. We might say that in this way they continue worshipping Jesus. That in their obedience they are granting to Jesus the worship that he is due.

[33 : 34] So there we have it. Jesus rose from the dead. He is alive today. And we have before us in the passage we've considered, manner is in which we can respond to that.

We have met with the guards and how they responded to the truth of the resurrection. And we have met with the women, how they responded to the truth of the resurrection. And now it remains with us.

It remains with you to determine how you will respond to the fact that Jesus rose again from the dead. That he is alive today. That he stands before you this morning and waits.

Waits to see how you will respond to him. Let us pray. Let us pray.