

Matthew 28

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[0 : 0 0] Dawn is poised to break on an auspicious Sunday morning in Jerusalem. Still dark, a chill in the air, a few hardy souls making their way out of the city to their fields, others feeding the animals or lighting the fire to get breakfast on the go. Still 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. And then suddenly the earth begins to shake. The travelers stop their packing. Neighbors in their gardens exchanged worried glances as if to say without words, not again.

Just two days have passed since the earth below Jerusalem rumbled. But this was no tremor, no innocuous aftershock. It was a violent earthquake. The women heading for the tomb huddle together, in part drawn by fear and in part simply seeking to keep their balance and avoid being thrown to the ground. What is happening? The created world is giving its welcome to its creator. The very plates of the earth trembling as 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 again in celebration of his resurrection.

What is going on? Jesus of Nazareth, crucified on Friday evening, has risen from the dead on Sunday morning and the very earth trembles in acknowledgement. This resurrection clearly has transcendent cosmic implications. But why this resurrection in particular? Now, while we acknowledge that resurrection is hardly a common occurrence, others had risen from the grave before. Indeed, in the very recent past to the events that we have read of in Matthew's gospel, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the grave.

[3 : 2 0] What was different about the resurrection of Jesus? Well, it was different in a number of critical ways, and let me just suggest a few of them. First of all, the resurrection of Jesus was different in its very nature. Let me suggest three elements that distinguish the resurrection of Jesus. First of all, there is the very intriguing information we are given concerning the involvement of the dead man. Now, if there was one thing you would say about resurrection, even if you're only contemplating the possibility that such a thing could occur, maybe you're not persuaded that there is such a possibility, but even if you were contemplating it, one thing we would probably all agree on is that the dead person has little or no involvement in a resurrection. But listen to what Jesus says in John chapter 10 and in verses 17 to 18. John chapter 10 and verses 17 and 18, as he looks forward to what he knew was on the immediate horizon for him. In John chapter 10 and verses 17 and 18, we read,

Quite remarkable, the claim, the pretension that Jesus is making there. I think we all acknowledge that Jesus handed himself over to death. We all acknowledge that he was not some sorry victim. He embraced death, not because it was something he wished to embrace, not because it was an attractive prospect, but because he knew that it was necessary.

But here Jesus says it's not just death that was within his own authority, but also his resurrection. Now, when we read of the resurrection in the Bible, it's described in different ways. Sometimes it's not clearly indicated who the agent of resurrection is. It simply says that Jesus rose from the dead.

On other occasions, clearly the Father is identified as the agent, and Jesus is spoken of as being raised from the dead, and implicit is the Father's involvement. But here you have this very intriguing testimony of Jesus himself that in some way that we perhaps find difficult to altogether understand. He is or was involved in his own resurrection, not only as the one raised, but in the very act of being raised. And so it makes his resurrection different in its very nature, the involvement of the one who rises again. But I think we can also identify another distinguishing factor, and that is the inevitability of his resurrection. We turn to Acts chapter 2, and in verse 24, here we have Peter preaching on the day of Pentecost. And listen to what he says in this regard. In Acts chapter 2, and in verse 24, we read as follows, but God raised him from the dead. There we have that language of God being the agent, as it were. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death. But then particularly what Peter goes on to say, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

It was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. The resurrection of Jesus had within it an inevitability. The one who had committed no sin was one who could not be held by the wages of sin.

[7 : 25] So it's different in its very nature, the involvement of the dead man, the inevitability of his resurrection, but also the permanence of its effect. Even when we think of the likes of Lazarus and others of whom we read in the Bible, who were raised from the dead, they would die again. The grave from which Lazarus walked out would in due course welcome him again. But not so with Jesus. He rose to die no more.

We began our service this morning by reminding ourselves of the words of the risen Jesus. And let's just remind ourselves again. Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last. I am the living one. I was dead. And behold, I am alive forever and ever. And so the resurrection of Jesus is different in its very nature, but also different in its significance. On that dark, chill, and somber Easter morning, the definitive victory over sin and death was gloriously consummated and confirmed. Now listen to how Paul describes the one who rose on Easter morning. As he writes to Timothy in his first letter, he speaks of the one who rose again in these terms, our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. If we just for a moment pause and let those words percolate into our consciousness and into our lives. Jesus, the one who has destroyed death. We see death all around us. We see death. We often think of death. It's often presented as that final enemy that cannot be defeated. And yet here of Jesus it is said that He destroyed death. And of course that victory over death was won and confirmed by His resurrection. Listen to Paul again as he writes to the Corinthians.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 15, we'll read from verse 54. They're familiar words, I'm sure, for many of us. What does Paul say concerning death? Death has been swallowed up in victory. And so the believer can cry out, where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. A victory that was won at Golgotha, and then subsequently on that Easter morning when Jesus rose from the grave.

And listen also to the absolute assurance delivered by the one who rose again, now seated on the throne in heaven as He. As He anticipates the ultimate effect of His own resurrection. In Revelation chapter 1 and verse 4, very starkly, very simply, Jesus declares, there will be no more death. That is what we await.

That day is coming when there will be no more death. And why is that? It is because of the victory won by Jesus as He rose triumphant from the grave. Different in its significance as the means by which death was definitively defeated. I was in Peru a couple of weeks ago, and as I was making my way there, I was in the airport in Aberdeen, and I knew I had a long flight, and I thought, well, how can I occupy the time? And so I bought two books. You know what it's like in the airports. You get two for, what is it? Buy one and get the other for half price. So I thought, okay, I'll go for that.

[11 : 34] So the first book I bought was *The Milkman* by Anna Burns. It won the Booker Prize. It's an intriguing read. Nothing to do with what I'm going to say now, but that was one of the two books. But the second book I bought, I brought, it was this book, *Homo Deus*. It's by an Israeli historian, Yuval Noah Harari, and the subtitle of the book is *A Brief History of Tomorrow*. And it's an intriguing book. It looks ahead from the perspective of the author of what awaits us in the 21st century. And I'll just read what it says on the back where it captures some of what he anticipates will be true. Indeed, some of it is descriptive of current reality, not only looking forward to the future. So, for example, he says, war is obsolete. You're more likely to commit suicide than be killed in conflict. That is true.

More people die of suicide than in war. Famine is disappearing. You're more at risk of obesity than starvation. That is true today. More people die from overeating than undereating. But then he says this, death is just a technical problem. Death is just a technical problem. He says with the advance of technology, it's not at all inconceivable that in the foreseeable future, technology will destroy death. And that final fungi will finally be conquered. He then anticipates all the problems that will result if we do indeed reach that point. But it's interesting how now it's not just in the realm of fiction or science fiction where this is being contemplated. I don't share his confidence in terms of man's ability to achieve that. But nonetheless, the manner in which it's been presented is in scientific and realistic terms. But as we turn to the pages and to the words that we've read this morning, we say, well, you know, you don't need to look ahead to find death being defeated. You don't need to contemplate some future scenario. We look back to something that has already happened.

We don't look to technology or a machine to defeat death. We look to a man who has defeated death, Jesus of Nazareth. In him, death has been destroyed. And so this resurrection is different in its nature, but different also in its significance, different also in its implications. And so many of these things do overlap. What implications do I have particularly in mind concerning the resurrection of Jesus?

Well, the Bible on different occasions and the New Testament writers look to the resurrection as a confirmation or present the resurrection as a confirmation that all that Jesus said and claimed was true. So his identity as the eternal Son of God, his prerogative and power to forgive sin, his offer of eternal life to all who would follow him, all true. And we ask the question, but how can we be sure? And we are pointed to the resurrection. The resurrection is presented as evidence, as the grounds for us believing what Jesus claims. You remember Paul's reasoning as he presented the gospel to a skeptical audience in Athens. And he concluded all that he had said with these words, he has given proof of this to everyone.

That is, God has given proof of this to everyone by raising Jesus from the dead. And so the resurrection of Jesus is presented to us as the grounds upon which we can be confident and we can trust the claims and promises of Jesus. But the resurrection of Jesus is different also in its enduring impact. Jesus is still alive and he is active. And the impact of his resurrection continues to shake the world. Women and men, boys and girls, continue to receive and experience the eternal life secured by his resurrection.

[15 : 51] Now in the light of these truths, what must we do? What do you have to do as you are confronted anew with the reality of the risen Jesus? Believe? Believe that Jesus did indeed rise again and is alive today?

Is believing that to be true enough? In order to spend a little time reflecting on that question, let's consider the response of the first witnesses of the resurrection. And as we do, I invite you to consider who you relate to as you're confronted with the same reality of the empty tomb that they were confronted with. Well, who were the first witnesses of the resurrection? You know, we often say, and it's often claimed, well, the women. And it's highlighted how remarkable it is that the women were the first witnesses of the resurrection. But actually, the first witnesses were the guards.

And so we'll start with them and then we'll move on to the women. What did the guards see and experience? Well, the guards felt the earth shake and they saw the angel descending from heaven.

They saw him roll the stone away. They were overcome by his appearance. And we read that they shook and became like dead men. Perhaps more shaken by the angel and his appearance than by the earthquake itself.

Now, the language used doesn't seem to suggest that they fell to the ground in a state of unconsciousness, but rather that they were in a way paralyzed in the presence of an angel that exhibited a godlike majesty.

[17 : 26] Did they actually see Jesus? Well, we're not told, but they certainly were able to confirm that the tomb was empty. And in due course, Matthew informs us, they proceeded to tell the chief priests everything that had happened. And there's surely a significance in Matthew employing that very language, I'm sure, carefully that they informed the chief priests everything that had happened.

And they also evidently did not consider there to be any purpose in searching for the body. That wasn't suggested as a way forward in the face of this crisis. They knew that that was a complete waste of time because the one who had been laid in that grave had risen again and was alive.

Now, all this points to only one reasonable conclusion, that the guards believed Jesus had risen from the dead. Now, we might respond, well, hallelujah, that the guards believed. But perhaps we need to hold that celebration for a moment. How did the guards respond to the empty tomb? They believed it was empty. It was there before them. There was no way they couldn't believe that the tomb was empty. They believed that.

They believed that Jesus rose from the dead. They were powerfully impacted and shaken by the resurrection. But did they believe in Jesus? Did they become disciples of Jesus?

Perhaps there's a ray of hope in the word, some, that we find in verse 11. Notice there in verse 11, we read, 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 of course, we go on to read about the large sum of money. Well, that relates to those who went to the chief priests, presumably. But Matthew says some of the guards. Have you ever wondered about the guards who didn't go? And all we can do is wonder. We don't know. We don't know the reasons why. Maybe they had agreed that one or two would represent them. Maybe they were all in on this together. We don't know. But some didn't go. And perhaps they took a different approach. We simply don't know. But what about the guards who did go into the city? Did they believe in Jesus? Did they become disciples of Jesus? Well, the answer that we have to give, certainly on the evidence that we have before us, is that no, they did not. They took the money and ran.

[20 : 03] Why didn't they believe in Jesus? Why didn't they become disciples of Jesus? They had witnessed the empty tomb. They knew that He was alive. Why? Well, maybe there's any number of reasons. And maybe it's a combination of these reasons. And maybe some for one and others for other reasons. But I'm sure for many of them, fear of man was a decisive reason. They were more concerned with what others would say and do than with the implications of the fact that Jesus was alive. And then there is what we've very evidently seen here in the passage. There was love of money. They were offered, we're told, a large sum of money to buy their silence. And they saw it as a reasonable and attractive proposition.

They did their sums. They did their sums, and they reckoned that ignoring the resurrection, keeping silent about the resurrection, pretending perhaps that it had never happened and moving on with their lives was worth more than embracing the startling consequences of it. Were they also foolishly and short-sighted, short-sightedly blind to eternity and to eternal issues? Did they forget to reflect on their own mortality? Did they fail to consider that perhaps this Jesus who had conquered death might be able to grant them victory over death? Does the response of the guards seem strange, incongruous, hard to fathom?

But is it so different today? There are many who would acknowledge at some level, in some way, that Jesus rose again from the grave but failed to deal with the implications of this truth.

They failed 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 is that? Well, maybe the reasons aren't so different to the reasons we've suggested for the guards. Fear of man, afraid of what others will say if they decide, if you decide, to follow Jesus. Afraid of the reaction of family or friends or colleagues. Afraid of being branded some kind of fanatic. So perhaps that's what keeps many from believing in Jesus. A flawed conception of self-interest. Many who know that following Jesus involves carrying a cross, renouncing sin, submitting to and being obedient to His will. And the cost of that is deemed too high a price to pay. And so some do their sums and reckon that it will cost too much.

Of course, they're solemnly and tragically and foolishly mistaken in their calculations, but nonetheless, they do their sums not so different from the guards a couple of thousand years ago.

[23 : 14] And how many are simply blind to eternity and to eternal realities and to what awaits us all. And so for many, an unwillingness to ponder and to consider eternal realities. No time nor inclination to do so. Just get on with today. And let's not just think too much about tomorrow.

And so with the guards of old, many try and carry on living their lives as if nothing has happened. But what of the other witnesses we meet in Matthew's account? What of the women? Let's just think briefly how the women respond to the empty tomb. Well, we can notice some elements of it in our passage. First of all, we see that the women believe the messenger, the angel who was sent.

Now, this belief of the women is no blind faith. They are presented with evidence which convinces them. The language of the angel is very careful also in its content. We read there in verse 6, He is not here. He has risen. Just as He said, come and see the place where He lay. He doesn't simply declare that Jesus is alive. He doesn't simply declare that He has resurrected from the dead. He provides evidence for the women to see for themselves. Come and see the place where He lay. Now, remember, these women had been at the grave. Indeed, in the previous chapter of Matthew, we are told that.

In Matthew 27 and verse 61, we read, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb at the burial. So, they'd been there. They knew where Jesus had been laid. And now the angel says, we'll have a look. It's the same place. He's not there anymore. So, evidence is presented that convinces them, that persuades them. Now, 2,000 years have passed, but that remains the way in which we become believers. We become followers of Jesus. We hear a message that is presented to us by a messenger of Jesus, be that a gospel writer as we read, a preacher, a friend. We consider the message that is brought to us, the evidence that is presented, and we come to a conclusion. Now, that's not all that is involved, and if it were all that was involved, it might sound overly or cerebral.

There's more. They believe the messenger, but they also respond emotionally to the truth of Jesus' resurrection. We read in verse 8, so the woman hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy. Afraid yet filled with joy. It's an understandable, even an appropriate response to begin to believe that Jesus is alive and to begin to consider that the implications of His resurrection can, perhaps should, be a frightening business, certainly a sobering business.

[26 : 17] But we're told that they also respond with great joy. Their friend, their master, was alive. He who had died is now alive, and so they respond with great joy. The one they love is alive. The one they witness breathing His last agonizing breath on the cross breathes again. I wonder, do you know something of that fear and apprehension? Have you experienced being filled with joy at the reality of Jesus' resurrection? Do you today celebrate that Jesus is alive? So, they believe the messenger. They believe the message. They believe the truth that is presented to them. They respond emotionally to the truth, but they also have a personal encounter with Jesus. In verse 9, we read, suddenly Jesus met them.

Greetings, he said. Greetings, he said. And they came to him, clasped his feet, and worshipped him. Of course, it's Jesus who meets them, who approaches them, who stands before them. And again, a couple of millennia have passed, and it is still Jesus who takes the initiative to approach us, to stand before us. And perhaps He is doing that in your life. He stands before you this morning, and you must respond. What will you say to him? What will you do as he approaches you?

A personal encounter of Jesus that leads them to worship Jesus. We've read that just a moment ago. They clasped his feet and worshipped him. They prostrate themselves before him and worship him.

Belief and encounter brings them to their knees, to the place they were created to occupy, the place of worship. A Christian is, first and foremost, a worshipper, one who acknowledges that God is worthy of worship and who worships him. Are you a worshipper of God and of his Son, Jesus Christ? But then there's a further thing that the women do as they respond to the empty tomb and to their encounter with the risen Jesus. They obey Jesus. In verses 10, we read, then Jesus said to them, do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me. And then we read in verse 11, while the women were on their way.

While they were on their way, obeying the commands of Jesus. We see what the guards were doing. But the women obeyed. They were instructed to go and tell, and that is what they do. They go and tell.

[29 : 03] An appropriate response to the risen Jesus is to believe the truth that he is indeed alive, to respond to it, to enjoy and to cultivate that relationship with the risen Jesus, to worship him, and to obey him. And among the many things that we have to obey, as the Great Commission will go on to touch on, and we'll consider this evening, we have this command to go and tell. Will you go and tell that Jesus is alive? Jesus rose from the dead. He is alive today. He stands before you this morning and waits, waits to see how you will respond to him. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for the record in your word of the resurrection of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. We thank you that he is the one who has destroyed death and through the gospel brought life and immortality. And we thank you for his death. We thank you for his resurrection. We thank you for all that it has secured. We thank you for the grounds that it gives us to believe the promises of Jesus concerning who he is and the promises that he makes to us. And we ask that you would help us to respond to the empty tomb, to respond to the risen Jesus. Help us to believe, help us to rejoice, help us to encounter, help us to obey. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.