

Matthew 28:1-10

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Date: 20 April 2014

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[0 : 0 0] If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile. So wrote the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians long ago. If Christ has not been raised, your faith, our faith, is futile.

A futile faith, one that is completely ineffective, a faith that serves no useful purpose.

If Christ has not been raised, our gathering this morning here is futile. Not only futile, but really quite bizarre, and quite frankly, just a little sad. A gathering of perhaps well-meaning, but sad individuals clutching at straws, and straws that aren't even there to clutch at in the first place. If Christ has not been raised, our faith, your faith, is futile. Let's just head home, and the last one out turns off the lights. But we believe, and we have good reason to believe, that Christ is raised. For myself, I am persuaded that the resurrection accounts in the Gospels, one of which we have read this morning, are reliable and trustworthy, that they record, with all their seemingly irreconcilable differences, an event that really happened, that Jesus, who was dead, rose again alive. Such a conviction lies at the heart of the Christian faith. Without it, nothing of any value is left. In the very same chapter, well, where Paul declares this conviction, if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, he also records for us one of what is considered to be the earliest of Christian creeds. We can read what he records for us then in 1 Corinthians chapter 15, and from verse 3. In 1 Corinthians chapter 15, and from verse 3, we read,

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance. That very introduction giving the sense that this was some early creed, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, that He appeared to Peter, and then to the twelve. After that, He appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all He appeared to me also as to one abnormally born.

In this very early creed, if we can call it that, much weight is placed on the witnesses to the resurrection. Jesus died, He was buried, He rose again, and He was seen. There were witnesses, and we have a list there of those who were witnesses to the resurrection. In that list, there is one glaring omission in that no reference is made to the women. And the women are often designated, quite rightly so, as the first witnesses. And indeed, that reality that it was women who first witnessed our risen Lord is considered, again, quite reasonably to give credibility to the gospel accounts, as it's very difficult to imagine, to conceive of any fabricated account in first-century Palestine giving to women such a place of prominence in the resurrection event. But were the women the very first witnesses, as they're often designated? Well, the gospel accounts record otherwise. The first witnesses are the angels sent from heaven on that first Easter morning. The angel, we read of in Matthew's gospel, we're told, came down from heaven. And He came down from heaven as a witness to the resurrection, to witness the resurrection, and indeed to explain the resurrection to the women as they gathered at the tomb.

[5 : 01] And this morning, I want us to consider this first witness to the resurrection, the angel of the Lord. And I want us to consider Him for who He is, the first Easter witness or messenger. And as a witness to the resurrection, the angel can and does serve in some measure as an example for us who are also, as believers, witnesses of and to our risen Savior. What I want to do is explore the material that we find in Matthew's account under the following headings. First of all, the angel's master. Then, to consider briefly, the angel's mission. And then thirdly and finally, the angel's message.

Now, those second and third points, it's somewhat artificial because the message is central to the mission, but we're distinguishing them just for the purposes really of the neatness of presentation.

So, consider this first Easter witness, this first Easter messenger in this way. Who was His master? What was His mission? And what was the message that He brought? First of all, then, the angel's master.

Who is He? Well, it's not a difficult question to answer, but there is, I think, some merit in identifying three ways in which the angel's master is identified in the passage. And I would suggest that He's identified, first of all, in the name or designation given to the angel, in His home, where He comes from, but then also in His appearance. In these three ways, we are given an insight into who His master is.

First of all, then, in His name or in His designation. What do we read there in verse 2 of Matthew chapter 28? There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven. The angel is named or perhaps more accurately described as an angel of the Lord, a name or designation that very explicitly identifies His master, identifies His master, the Lord or Yahweh, the living and true God. The angel who appears there on that first Easter morning, the angel belongs to God. The angel is sent by God, and the angel answers to God. God is His master, and He serves as a witness to the resurrection, as directed by God. So, in His name very clearly, or in His designation, we come face to face with His master.

[7 : 53] He is an angel of the Lord. But also notice His home. We can usually identify who somebody is by the home they come from or belong to. And this is certainly true of the angel, the first Easter witness, who Matthew tells us came down from heaven. He came down from heaven. Heaven was and is His home, for the simple reason that the God of heaven was and is His master. So, His name or designation is home, but perhaps more intriguingly, His appearance. What are we told concerning His appearance? Well, in verse 3, we are given some insight. His appearance was like lightning, and His clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of Him that they shook and became like dead men. In these two verses, we learn concerning His appearance really in two ways. We have explicit description, but we also have a record of the impact of His appearance on others. And the impact of His appearance allows us to conclude something about that appearance. So, explicit description, but also the impact of that appearance. As regards explicit description, we have two pieces of information. We're told that His appearance was like lightning.

His appearance was like lightning. I don't know what it's like for you, but sometimes, you know, we read a passage in the Bible, and especially if it's a familiar one, and we just read it through, and we don't really think about it much. And I don't know if for the first time I sat down and thought, well, what does that mean? What does lightning look like? And I must admit, it's not something that immediately conjures up for me at any rate a visual image. Does it for you? When I say, well, the angel looked like lightning, does that conjure up a visual image in your own mind? I don't know.

In any case, that's what we're told, that His appearance was like lightning. We maybe just come back to that in a moment. But then secondly, we're also told that His clothes were white as snow. So, there we have, even if we have some difficulty in imagining it, we have explicit description.

But then also we have told concerning the impact of His appearance, the effect that it produced, very especially, on the guards. We're told the guards were so afraid of Him that they shook and became like dead men. Perhaps there that ties in somewhat with this appearance, like lightning.

Whatever that actually looks like in the case of this angel, whatever it was, it created this impact on these war-weary, hardened guards. They shook and became like dead men. Well, these are the facts as they're presented to us, but in what way do they help us identify His Master? Remember that this is what we're trying to do at the moment. We're thinking about the angel's master. We've seen how His name or designation identifies His Master? His home also does likewise, but how does His appearance point to who His Master is? Well, I would suggest that the appearance of the angel presents the angel as one who, in some measure, reflects His Master, one who, perhaps very particularly, reflects His Master's glory.

[11 : 37] It's helpful to notice the occasions, or at least some of the occasions, where similar language is used in the Bible to describe a person or being. If we turn first to Daniel chapter 10, in Daniel chapter 10, we'll find very similar language used in describing a particular being there. In Daniel chapter 10, we'll read from verses 5 to 9. Before we do that, just to introduce these verses, what we have here is a description of a man, or subsequently, as we read, it becomes clear, an angel in human form, not unlike the angel there on Easter morning. But let's just read the verses and see how this particular being is described. In Daniel chapter 10, reading from verse 5, I looked up, and there before me was a man dressed in linen, with a belt of the finest gold round his waist.

His body was like chrysolite, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude. But then notice also the impact that this has on Daniel. Verse 7, I, Daniel, was the only one who saw the vision. The men with me did not see it, but such terror overwhelmed them that they fled and hid themselves. So I was left alone, gazing at this great vision. I had no strength left. My face turned deathly pale, and I was helpless. Then I heard him speaking, and as I listened to him, I fell into a deep sleep. And the account continues. Similar language being used there to describe this being. But to take things a little further and to give weight and substance to the assertion that the angel at the tomb and the angel here in Daniel's vision reflect, because this is what we're claiming, reflect their master's likeness and glory, we need to further note that the language used by Matthew to describe the angel is language used to describe God himself. Indeed, in the very same book of Daniel, in chapter 7, where we have a description of the one called the Ancient of Days, and the manner in which he described, making it very clear that this is a description of a God. And in that description, how is the Ancient of Days described? Well, he's described as having clothing as white as snow, the same language that we have here describing the angel on Easter morning. We move forward to Revelation and to John's vision of the risen Savior, and there too he is described for us, his head and hair white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. So similar in many ways to the angel at the tomb. And the question is why? Why the similarity? Well, the similarity surely is because the angel, the first Easter witness or message of the resurrection, in his very appearance reflects and so identifies his master.

So the angel's master is the Lord, evidenced by the name he bears, the home that he comes from, and his very appearance. But in what way does this serve as an example and challenge to us? As I began, I suggested that this was so. As we considered and explored this angel, it wouldn't just be out of curiosity, but that it could serve as an example and challenge for us. How so? Well, we too, as believers, as Christians, are witnesses to the resurrection. And with the angel, we share the same master, a reality that is or ought to be echoed in our name and home and appearance. We bear the Lord's name, as Christians, as Christians, as the Christ ones, as the Lord's people. Our home ultimately and fundamentally is in heaven. We are citizens of heaven. But what about our appearance? Does the parallel break down at this point? I don't see many of you out there in front of me this morning with an appearance like lightning. I've already said that I find it a little bit difficult to know what that would actually look like. But whatever it would look like, I don't think we have many with that appearance here this morning. As for clothes as white as snow, well, such clothes tend to be favored by a particularly unpleasant brand of TV evangelists. I don't particularly encourage people to wear clothes as white as snow, though there's no real reason why you shouldn't if you wish to.

But though that is true, and in that sense, we bear very little resemblance in our own appearance to the angel who we are saying is reflecting his master's appearance, it is so, and it is true, and it must be true, that we as Christians, as the Christ ones, that we are to reflect as witnesses of the one we are to. There is this constant theme in the Bible, and very especially in the New Testament, of how as believers we are called to look ever more like the one whose name we bear. Indeed, this is God's great work in us, that He is transforming us into the image of His own Son. The angel identified who His master was in some measure by His very appearance, and so it ought to be with us.

The angel's master, but secondly, let's think a little bit about the angel's mission. Now, as I said at the beginning when I was identifying the three main headings for the purposes of securing a neat structure, I'm distinguishing between the angel's mission and his message. Of course, his message is the central component of his mission, and I recognize that. But bear with me as I, perhaps somewhat artificially, consider one element of the angel's mission that precedes the delivery of his message, namely the moving of the stone. I want us to just think for a brief moment about this matter of the stone being moved. Now, I want us to think about what the purpose of that was. Why was the stone moved, and how was the stone moved? How was that achieved? First of all, then, let's just think a little bit about the purpose of moving the stone. I think we can reasonably say that the stone was not moved, as you might imagine if you were just in a, perhaps a fleeting way reading the account. The stone was not moved in order to allow Jesus to exit the tomb. Now, that might seem a reasonable reason for the stone being moved. Jesus is in the tomb. He has to get out of the tomb, and so you have to open the door.

[19:19] So, the stone is moved, and that allows Jesus to exit from the tomb. But that is not, it seems to me, the reason why the stone was moved. Indeed, what the angel says in verse 6 of our passage implies, while not establishing definitively, does imply that Jesus exited the tomb before the stone was moved. Notice what the angel says there to the women. He is not here. He has risen, just as He said.

Come and see the place where He lay. Now, we don't know exactly the time that elapses between the different elements of the account. But certainly, as we would read through Matthew's account, the implication would seem to be that Jesus has already risen and exited the tomb before the events described. Now, if that is the case, as it would appear to be the case, it does rather beg the question, well, why move the stone at all? What purpose does that serve? If Jesus has already risen, if He has already exited from the tomb, why the need to move the stone at all? Well, the answer to that question is given very clearly by the angels as they address the women. Then in verse 6, we read there, come and see the place where He lay. Now, had the stone not been moved, the women could not have done that. But as the stone had been moved, it was possible for the women to look in and to see that, effectively, the tomb was empty. And so, the angel very clearly gives us the reason why the stone was moved, that the women, and then subsequently, Peter and John and perhaps others in due course, could look in and see that the tomb was empty. The angel rolled away the stone, not that Jesus might get out, but that the women might get in. Now, why was this important or necessary? Well, by moving the stone, the angel was making known to the women that Jesus was alive, that Jesus had risen from the dead. The tomb was empty. He was fulfilling His task as a witness to the resurrection. Come and see for yourselves.

Look inside. Look inside. He's not there. The tomb is empty. He's risen. He's alive. That then concerning the why the stone was moved. But what about the how, the manner in which the stone was moved? How did the angel move the stone? In Mark's account, and we are limiting ourselves today very much just to Matthew's account, but on this occasion, just to draw in the fact that in Mark's account, the stone is described as very large. And it's likely that the stone would have been rolled downward into its place at the entrance of the tomb. So, when Jesus was placed in the tomb, the manner in which this opening would have been covered would have been by this large stone being rolled down into place. Now, gravity alone makes it clear that to move the stone into place need not necessarily have required great strength. But to move the stone out from where it was laid would have been another matter altogether, in all probability requiring several strong men. Now, we can't say for sure, but Matthew does seem to deliberately connect, as we think about the manner in which the stone was moved, he does seem to deliberately connect the earthquake with the appearance of the angel and the rolling away of the stone. Notice what we find there in verse 2. There was a violent earthquake, and then we read, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven. So, there's a connection there. It's not simply that these two things happened in parallel, but that they're connected. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven, and going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it.

And the question that arises, and that many have posed, and to be honest, I don't think we can give a definitive answer, is might the earthquake have been involved in some way in moving the stone? Well, it may be so, but equally that may not be the manner. But what is true, and this really is what I want us to stress and to focus our attention on, what is true is that the angel, in performing this task, in performing this mission that the angel had been given to move the stone, enjoyed divine empowerment and help to move the stone, and then, in this very delicious detail, rather nonchalantly to sit on it.

You have this great obstacle, and yet as it's removed, it then becomes a stool upon which the angel can sit. But as we think about that, the angel's mission, or this aspect of the mission, again, the question that I want us to consider is, how does this aspect of the angel's mission serve as an example and as a challenge to us today as witnesses of the risen Lord? Well, with the angel, we too are to bear witness to the risen Lord to demonstrate to others that Jesus is alive. Now, we don't do that by rolling away boulders, but our task is equally beyond our own power to perform. With the angel, we stand in need of divine help and power. Just think about unbelievers known to you in your circle of friends and acquaintances, even of loved ones. Does the task of demonstrating to them who do not believe that Jesus is alive and that the gospel is true, does that task seem beyond you? Well, the reality, of course, is that it is beyond you. That is not something that you and your own powers are capable of doing. The barriers to belief, the extent of man's spiritual blindness is like huge boulders or large stones that stand in the way of faith, and you can push and push to your heart's content and with all your strength, but they just won't budge. But as God empowers and as God owns and accompanies your witness and testimony, the stone can roll away like a paper mache, a replica. The angel's master, the angel's mission, but then finally, the angel's message. And as we think about the angel's message, let's begin by identifying the central truth of the angel's message. And it's found in three words in the message that they bring.

[26 : 21] He is risen. He is risen. They address the woman, do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here. He has risen. This, without doubt, the central truth of the angel's message and everything else that happens and everything else that is said revolves around this central truth. He is risen. But what I want you to consider is how that central truth is delivered, the manner in which it's delivered and proclaimed by the witness, the angel from heaven. And there are three aspects to note and learn from. First of all, notice that this message, this central truth, is delivered by the angel with love and sensitivity. The angel's very first words, they almost seem like a calling card of angels in the Bible, don't be afraid. How often we find angels pronouncing those words, don't be afraid. But what do they do? They reveal a loving concern for the women on the part of the angel. Don't be afraid. The encouragement to not be afraid is not central to the message that the angel brings. What would be lost if those words had not been spoken? Don't be afraid.

But these words that speak of care and concern, they are necessary or helpful to prepare the women for what follows. Truth lovingly delivered is truth that is more readily received and believed.

Love opens the door for the message in a very real way. This central truth delivered with love, but we said love and sensitivity. The two go hand in hand. And the angel demonstrates a sensitivity or a discernment with regard to where the women are and what they are looking for. What does the angel say to the women? For I know that you are looking for Jesus. Don't be afraid. I know why you're here. I know who you're looking for. You don't know who I am, but I know who you are, and I know why you're here and what you are looking for. Just imagine the women when they heard that in the midst of their troubled hearts because of the circumstances and because of this amazing appearance before them of the angel. And just imagine the women as they hear these words. I know that you're looking for Jesus.

Don't you think that having heard those words, they would have listened even more intently to what follows? The central truth. He's not here. He has risen. So, a central truth, but delivered with love and sensitivity, but also delivered with authority, that is a call delivered by the angel to the women to both come and to go. Not just to listen. The women aren't simply to listen to what the angel has to say. No, within the words of the angel, there is a call to action, to come and go. They are to come and see.

Verse 6, come and see the place where He lay, to discover for themselves and see with their own eyes that the tomb is empty and that Jesus is alive. But not only to come and see, but also to go and tell.

[29 : 56] Having discovered, they must not remain passive or silent. The women must go and tell others. A message that demands action is a message that must be delivered with authority.

You see, if we're only giving a lecture with information to be heard and processed, then that doesn't require perhaps great authority. But if what is being done is a call to action, to come and see, to discover, to go and tell and to tell others, that message is one that must be delivered with authority. And the angel, rather, delivers this message with God-given authority.

He calls the women to come and see and to go and tell, but delivered also with promise. What does the angel say to the women? It's within the context of the message that they have to take to the disciples. In verse 7, go quickly and tell His disciples, He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see Him. There you will see Him. There's a promise there. It's a promise for the disciples. The women, in a sense, are bearers of the promise, but of course, the promise is also for them. They too were part of the group of disciples. There you will see Him.

Now, in the case of the women, the promise was fulfilled much sooner than the words of the angel might have suggested. They didn't need to go to Galilee to see Jesus. Indeed, just moments later, they are given that privilege. But the key element for our purposes is this, that the message of the angel is a message with promise. If you do this, you will see Jesus. But in what way does the manner in which the angel delivers and proclaims His message serve as an example and encouragement to us?

Well, we too have a message to tell, that same central message, He is risen. And we can and must learn from the angel concerning the manner in which we are to deliver our message, that Jesus is a lion. We are to do so also with love and sensitivity, but married with God-given authority, as we don't only provide information to ponder on and listen to and consider, but as we call men and women to repent of their sins, to come and put their trust in Jesus. And we deliver that message with that promise, that as they do come, and as they do trust, as they do believe, so they will see Jesus. They will be born again. They will be brought into the family of God. They will have an encounter with the risen Savior, the angel's master, the angel's mission, and the angel's message. But as we draw things to a close, perhaps quite appropriately, let's do so by considering the angel's final and seemingly inconsequential words. They're in verse 7 at the end, the final words of the angel to the women. Now I have told you. Now I have told you. As I say at face value, seemingly inconsequential words.

[33 : 26] It's like the angel is saying, okay, that's me done. That's me done. I was given a message. I've given you the message. That's me done for today. Now I have told you. What possible significance can we draw from these final words of the angel? Well, it seems to me that these words point to two crucial characteristics of any and every messenger of God and witness to the resurrection, that we are as believers. First of all, we obey. We do what we're told. We deliver the message that we have been given, certainly in the manner learning from the angel as to the manner in which we do so. But we obey.

We do what we're told. That's what the angel is doing. Now I have told you. I was sent from heaven for this purpose. I have completed what I have been given to do. Now I have told you. And so we also, we obey. But implicit in what the angel says is also this, that we trust. We trust that God will take our words and with them open minds and hearts and bring them to an encounter with his risen Son.

The angel had done what the angel could do. The angel had given the message. And he says, now I've done what I can do. And now I hand over to God. God will do the rest. I've done my part. I've obeyed. Now I leave it in the hands of the one who sent me. And that true is what we must do as witnesses to the resurrection, as messengers of this central truth, that Jesus is alive. We obey. We tell the message. We share the good news. And then we leave it in God's hands. We trust that he will bring men and women to that encounter with his Son, that he will use and own the words that we speak to bring men and women to faith in Jesus. We are to obey and trust, or to trust and obey, for there's no other way to be a faithful and effective witness of the resurrection. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you again.

We pray that we would never think it unwarranted to repeatedly thank you for your Son, Jesus, and thank you that he is indeed alive, that the tomb on that first Easter Sunday was empty, and it was empty because he had risen from the dead. We thank you that this is indeed the central truth that we declare and proclaim with the angel. And we pray that you would enable us to do so, to do so with zeal, with passion, with authority, with faith, with conviction, and that as we do so, so you would own our words, perhaps often faltering words, perhaps often inadequate words, but that, Lord, you would own them and use them and accompany them to bring many to an encounter with your Son, our risen Savior. And these things we pray in his name. Amen.

Amen. We're going to conclude our service this morning by singing from Psalm 16. Psalm 16 is a psalm that speaks prophetically of the resurrection. And so, as we sing, we sing celebrating in the words of the psalmist that the Messiah did indeed not remain to experience the tomb's decay. As we read there in verse 10 of Psalm 16, for you will not allow my soul in death to stay, nor will you leave your Holy One to see the tombs decay. Psalm 16, we'll sing from verse 7 to verse 11. We'll sing to the tune Busser, and we'll sing.

[37 : 22] And we'll sing. The praise the Lord, my God, whose counsel guides my choice.

And even in that land my heart with all instructions wise.

Before me constantly I send the Lord alone. Because He is at my high time, will not be overthrown.

Therefore my heart is glad, my tongue with joy will sing. My God, ye too, will rest secure and hope on with rain.

For you will not allow my soul in death to stay. Now will you be here, Holy God, to see the tomb's decay.

[38 : 55] You have made room to me, the path of life divine. Which shall I know, and your right hand, right from your face will shine.

Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and always. Amen.