

Matthew 27:62-28:15 “The Resurrection: Do Not Be Afraid”
Exodus 14
Psalm 2

November 8, 2015 (Peter)

Last time we saw how the last two plagues of Egypt – darkness and the death of the firstborn – are replayed at the cross,
as Jesus took upon himself the curses that were upon Israel –
and the whole the human race.

After all, God had said in Deuteronomy that if Israel rebelled and forgot the LORD,
then all the plagues of Egypt would come upon Israel.

In one sense, you can see how the story of salvation has a narrowing focus throughout the OT:
God chose Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob –

promising to Abraham three things:
the land, the seed, and the blessing to the nations.

But first Israel must pass through the death of slavery in Egypt.
And so then God delivered Israel out of Egypt through Moses –
saving them from slavery, and bringing them into the land,
calling them to succeed where humanity had failed in Adam.

But Israel failed too!

And so God chose the house of David –
adopting the son of David as the son of God –
calling the son of David to succeed where Israel had failed.

But this story of salvation and blessing is also a story of cursing and death.

After all, there is a problem at the heart of the human race.
Our problem is that we *do not* love God with all our heart.

And because of our sin and rebellion, we deserve death.
And so the story of salvation also takes the form of a narrowing of the curse:
the curse of humanity placed upon Israel,
the curse of Israel placed upon the son of David,
our Lord Jesus Christ,
so that the *blessing* of Abraham might come to the nations.

So it seemed fitting to read Exodus 14 this week –
since the crossing of the Red Sea was, in a sense, the resurrection of Israel.

Our Psalm of response focuses on the Davidic part of this story of redemption.

Psalm 2 speaks of the son of David as the son of God.
We saw last week how Jew and Gentile joined together in the mockery of the cross.
Psalm 2 reminds us that all the mockery of the nations fails
when God raises his Son to his right hand!

Sing Psalm 2

Read Matthew 27:62-28:20

So what happened?

How *was* Jesus raised from the dead?

There is an earthquake –

there is an angel of the Lord descending from heaven –

but then, when the grave is opened –

it's empty!

The grave is not opened in order to *let Jesus out* –

the grave is opened to reveal that Jesus is *not there!*

Matthew spends a fair amount of time talking about the guards

and how the story of the resurrection was distorted among the Jews.

He also spends a fair amount of time talking about the angel of the Lord –

indeed, there are seven verses

about the appearance of the angel of the Lord to the women (v2-8)

and only two verses about the appearance of Jesus to the women (v9-10).

And all of this is sandwiched by ten verses on the guards and the priests (27:62-66, 28:11-15).

In other words, Matthew's account of the resurrection

spends lots of time on seemingly trivial things –

while spending almost no time on the meaning of the resurrection itself!

Why?

The answer is found in the command of the angel -- repeated by our Lord himself:

"Do not be afraid."

This command (which is the most common command in all of scripture)

is at the heart of the Christian life.

"Do not be afraid."

There are so many things that make us afraid.

Sometimes they are little things.

Seemingly trivial things.

Irrational things.

Do not be afraid.

But there is a good reason to be afraid!

We are so weak – so frail – so helpless against the powers of darkness!

A week ago yesterday I received a call from a close friend.

He started by saying, "I hope you're sitting down."

Talk about words that make you afraid!

He told me that his father, a seminary professor, has been a serial adulterer for most of his married life. He had resigned from the seminary, and his Presbytery was soon to meet to take appropriate disciplinary action.

For forty years he has been an influential minister – in the Christian Reformed Church, then in the United Reformed Churches, and most recently in the PCA.

He was first a pastor, and then (ironically) a professor of Christian ethics – and over the last twenty years he has become a leading Reformed theologian.

But during that whole time, he was cheating on his wife – with multiple women.

What do you do when the man who preached the gospel to you turns out to be a serial adulterer? What if it was your father?

You look around – you look at me – and you ask, “Who’s next?”

So yes, I understand why you are afraid.

We need to hear the voice of the angel reminding us: "Do not be afraid....He is risen."

1. The Posting of the Guard (26:62-66)

⁶² *The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate* ⁶³ *and said, “Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, ‘After three days I will rise.’* ⁶⁴ *Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, ‘He has risen from the dead,’ and the last fraud will be worse than the first.”*

Of all the gospel writers,

Matthew was the one who had the closest ties to the Jerusalem establishment.

He had been a tax collector –

he doubtless knew the movers and shakers in the Jewish world.

And so of all the gospel writers, Matthew is the one who tells this story.

They knew that Jesus had said that he would rise after three days.

So the chief priests and the Pharisees (two groups who normally did not like each other!) went together to Pilate and asked him to set a guard.

When you read this in Greek, it is a little more striking:

“Lord, we remember...”

“Lord” is the proper way to address your superior in Greek –

but for the Christian, when you hear the Jews calling Pilate, “Lord,”

you can only weep.

They have crucified the Lord of Glory –

and they are calling the Roman governor “Lord.”

And notice what they call Jesus:
“that impostor” (or “that deceiver”).

It’s the same root used in verse 64 – when they fear that the “last fraud” (or “deception”) will be worse than the first.

And so Pilate said to them:

⁶⁵ *Pilate said to them, “You have a guard^{li} of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can.”* ⁶⁶ *So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.*

Pilate never cared much for the Jews.

He refuses their request, by saying, You have a guard – take care of it yourselves!
(And you can see this also in how the guards *report* back to the priests.
If they were Roman guards, they would have reported to Pilate.)

The priests and the Pharisees are afraid.

They do not fear Jesus – after all, he’s dead!
But so long as everyone knows that he has *stayed* dead,
they do not fear what Jesus *said*.
After all, they think that he is a fraud – an impostor.
They only fear Jesus’ disciples.

And because they will not call Jesus, “Lord,”
they fear Pilate instead, calling him “Lord.”

What fear masters you?
Who is your Lord?
What fear can get you to snap?

And so we move to scene two –
our second group of fearful people...

2. The Resurrection (27:1-10)

a. “The Dawn of the First Day of the Week” – the Dawning of the New Creation (v1)

Matthew again highlights the time.

Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week...

The darkness of the seventh day is coming to an end.

The final Sabbath of the old covenant has been spent with Jesus in the darkness of the grave.

The last two plagues of Egypt – darkness and the death of the firstborn –
have fallen upon Jesus.

And in those last moments of the seventh day,

as the dawn of the new creation draws near,
two women make their way through the darkness...

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.

You might think that the two Mary's have a good reason to be afraid!
They are so weak – so frail – so helpless against the powers of darkness!

And as these women gather at the tomb,
you might say that everything they had hoped for was gone.

They had thought that this was the Christ – the Messiah –
who would triumph over their enemies and restore the kingdom of God.
They had thought that he was the one who would redeem Israel.

And now he is dead.
All their hopes buried in the tomb –
with the mockery of the nations ringing in their ears:
“He saved others – let him save himself!”
“He trusts in God – let God deliver him now, if he desires him!”

And yet they also remember that Jesus had told them that he would be crucified –
and that he would rise again on the third day.
Did they come to the tomb *hopeful*?
Or *fearful*?

Or both?!

What will we find when we come to the tomb?
In the face of evil – in the face of betrayal – in the face of the unknown –
do you dare to hope?
Brothers and sisters,
since the resurrection of Jesus,
no darkness has ever been so dark as the darkness on that road!
We may face doubt and uncertainty.
But we face that doubt as those who have been united to the resurrected Lord!

How do you believe – how do you hope – how do you go forward –
when the Lord of Glory lies dead in the grave?!

Or does he?

b. “Do Not Be Afraid...He Is Risen” – The Angel of the Lord Descended (v2-7)

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.

The guards cannot bear the sight of the angel of the LORD!

They had been sent to guard a corpse –
but now, they fall to the ground like corpses,
while the one whom they guard has risen from the dead!

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^[a] lay.

Notice that Matthew does not give us an account of the *resurrection*.

Matthew does not give us a detailed account of what happened to Jesus.

Rather, he speaks of the guards and the women –
the angel speaks to them *about* Jesus.

Matthew’s silence about the resurrection

parallels his silence about the incarnation at the beginning of his gospel.

The angel announced what *had* happened to Mary.

But we are only told that she was with child by the Holy Spirit.

In the same way, now the angel announces that “he *has* risen, as he said.”

The incarnation and the resurrection book-end the gospel of Matthew
with the mysterious work of God,
announced by angels – but wrought by the power of God alone.

And so the angel says,

“Do not be afraid.”

This is the standard greeting by an angel in the OT.

The appearance of an angel tended to be pretty intimidating –
so it makes sense –
but it is also important to see that it is not just a formal greeting.

After all, the angel did *not* say that to the soldiers!

The soldiers were not seeking Jesus!

And so they *should* be afraid!

The appearance of the angel who had come to proclaim the news
that Jesus has risen from the dead,
is enough to make the soldiers like dead men.

And I say that to you as well!

If you are not seeking Jesus,
then you *should be afraid!*

Let me say this more pointedly:

If you are only *pretending* to seek Jesus –

but you are stubbornly and persistently pursuing your sin –
then you *should be afraid!*

Your only hope is to repent.
If you've been sleeping around –
if you've been hiding your sin
and thinking that you could get away with it –
the angel of the Lord has nothing to say to you.

You should be afraid!

If you've been thinking, “Oh, it's just porn – it's no big deal” –
you need to remember that if you are not killing sin,
then sin will be killing you!
We need for our small groups – our men's groups – our women's groups –
to be places where people can be killing sin together!
We need to have people in our lives who *know us* well enough
to call us out when our behavior does not line up with the gospel!

Why do we fear?

Invariably we are afraid because we are seeking the wrong things.
As Jesus said earlier in Matthew's gospel:
“seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,
and all these things will be added to you.” (6:33)

And the angel says to these two women:
*Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified.
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.”*

Each of the gospels recounts different appearances of Jesus.
Luke tells us of several appearances of Jesus in and around Jerusalem.
Matthew and John focus on Galilee.

Matthew focuses on Galilee because there is really only *one thing*
that Matthew wants us to think about as we think about the resurrected Jesus –
and that is the Great Commission (which we'll look at next time).

Here, we simply see the women:

c. “Do Not Be Afraid...Go and Tell My Brothers” – Jesus Met the Women (v8-10)

⁸ *So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.*

They had been told “Do not be afraid.”

And yet now there is fear mingled with their joy.

“The fear they have as they leave the tomb is the fear that protects them
from the fears that would have us deny the resurrection.” (Hauerwas, 245)

⁹ *And behold, Jesus met them and said, [Hello] “Greetings!”*

Jesus greets them in the ordinary way.

In the middle of miracle there is the ordinary – the same Jesus they had always known.

And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him.

The same – and yet new.

Or more precisely, now they *see* what they had not seen before!

This Jesus – the man whom they had known and loved – is also their God.

Remember that these are pious Jewish women.

They know better than to worship anyone other than the Lord their God!

The women did *not* worship the angel earlier.

The angel was a remarkable appearance –
but they knew their scriptures too well!

You do not worship an angel!

But they worship Jesus –

because they recognize that Jesus is not only their Messiah,
the Son of David,
he is also the Son of God.

He is the God of Israel.

The worship of Jesus is what defines the church.

Where the gospel of Jesus is proclaimed,
and where the sacraments are enacted,
there is the church.

As Jesus will say a few verses later:

“make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”

But here on the road between the tomb and the house,

we have the first worship that ever was given to the resurrected Christ!

And every time we gather,

whether publicly here on Sunday,

or in your homes throughout the week,
we continue what they began!

Indeed, the worship of the risen Lord Jesus is the necessary precondition
for hearing what Jesus says.
If you will not worship him – if your heart and mind and soul and strength
is too preoccupied to be devoted to worshipping Jesus,
then you will not hear him when he says:

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.”*

Jesus echoes the words of the angel.
“Do not be afraid!”

But go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee and there they will see me.
The betrayer – Judas – is no longer counted among them.
Only time will tell whether Nelson Kloosterman will be counted among our brethren.
Pray that he will repent – and bear fruit in keeping with repentance –
otherwise he will end up like Judas.
And let him who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall!

But listen to Jesus!
If you would “see Jesus” – then respond to his words by faith – and with obedience!
Do not be afraid;
Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.

The good news will come to the disciples –
and they will have a choice.
Will they believe the message and *do* what Jesus says?

If you believe the message and do what Jesus says – then you will see Jesus.

But there is another option.
And this is what we see in verses 11-15:

3. The Report of the Guard (27:11-15)

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.*

In the light of the resurrection, it is still possible to live like dead men.
The guards show us how.

They saw the empty tomb.
They saw the angel of God descend from heaven.
They are witnesses of the greatest event in all of human history.
And yet they took the money from the priests and told lies about Jesus.

Stanley Hauerwas says it well:

“The truth that is Jesus is a truth that requires discipleship,
for it is only by being transformed by what he has taught and by what he has done
that we can come to know the way the world is.

The world is not what it appears to be, because sin has scarred the world’s appearance.

The world has been redeemed – but to see the world’s redemption, to see Jesus,
requires that we be caught up in the joy that comes from serving him.” (247)

Do not be afraid.

Jesus has established a new way of life – a new family –
based on his own death and resurrection.

Those who trust in Jesus have nothing to fear!

I served for a summer as a missionary intern in Africa.

This African country is about 40% orthodox (Coptic) – 40% Muslim –
and about 15% Catholic and Lutheran – with another 5% “other.”

The first four are recognized by the government – the “others” are not.

The government told all the “other” churches to register,
and that if they registered, they would be allowed to worship in peace.

Most of the “other” churches refused –
fearing that their registrations would be used against them.

My friend tells the story of the meeting of his Presbyterian church:

Many of the younger folk were afraid –
they knew that the government would likely use the information against them.

But then the older greybeards spoke:

“What are we afraid of?

What is the worst that they can do to us?

They can send us to the One we love!

If we die bearing witness to Jesus, that is no great loss!

Jesus says that we should bear witness to him before men.

The government is asking us to bear witness to Jesus.

How can we refuse?”

What are we afraid of?

Jesus says to you: “*deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me.*”

So long as you refuse to do this,
you will be paralyzed by fear.