

*In the End: Life!*  
Matthew 27:62-28:1-10  
4/5/2015  
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It is a pleasure to be with you this morning, to be able to share with you from God's Word such wonderful, beautiful, electrifying, and fearful truths. There is a difference between being afraid and being fearful. Jesus tells us this morning to not be afraid. But it's proper to fear, because if what we celebrate this morning, being the resurrection of Jesus Christ, is fact, then it does change everything, and it will, over time, turn us upside down and inside out. For the truth of the resurrection is that God was dead but is now alive. And that brings resurrection life to everything, because in the end is not death. In the end is life.

But we need to remember, of course, as the passage from which I will read -- people go to all sorts of lengths to avoid miracles. Let's look at Matthew chapter twenty-seven. We'll be looking first at verse sixty-two through sixty-six. And then it's already been read for you this morning, the second portion of the passage continues in Matthew twenty-eight, verses one through ten. But I'll be reading the first portion first and the second as I go along. Hear now the Word of God.

The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, "Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.' 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." Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can." So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

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. 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. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the 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. 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." So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me this morning?

Heavenly Father, we ask that now by your Holy Spirit in the power and truth of your Word, we ask that you would open our minds, our hearts, and our souls to the deep truth of the resurrection. For whether we know it yet this morning or not, we desperately need life. Help us, we pray, and help the teacher. In Jesus' name. Amen.

I'm very grateful for many writers. Certainly among those have been many British Christian writers. Among the top, in my own estimation, is one Dorothy Sayers. And she writes these words as she reflects on Easter, the story of Easter. She says, considering the story of Easter, she says:

This is the outline of the official story: the tale of the time when God was the under-dog and got beaten, when He submitted to the conditions He had laid down and became a man like the men He had made, and the men He had made broke Him and killed Him. This is the dogma we find so dull—this terrifying drama of which God is the victim and hero. If this is dull, then what, in Heaven's name, is worthy to be called exciting? The people who hanged Christ never, to do them justice, accused Him of being a bore—on the contrary; they thought Him too dynamic to be safe. It has been left for later generations to muffle up that shattering personality and surround Him with an atmosphere of tedium. We have very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certified Him "meek and mild," and recommended Him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies.

She's challenging us to consider: is Easter just another dull drama in the official party line of the church? The challenge that this passage presents to us is to consider: if it is in fact true, then how can any of us consider it dull or to take it lightly, and to not pray the resurrection into everything? Because if Christ died and was raised to life on the third day, then the end to everything is not death, but life. So let's consider the passage, and then we'll look at the Matthew twenty-eight passage right afterward. We're going to look at three things. First, indeed, are you standing guard? Secondly, Jesus's first message. And finally, the double cure, in which I want to look at and have us expand on Augustus Toplady's great hymn, the Rock of Ages, as the double cure. Are you standing guard, Jesus's first message, and the double cure. So together, let's go.

Are you standing guard? What do I mean? Well, the passage tells us something, does it not? Consider for just a moment who it was who came to Pilate. This is a group of men who were the religious leaders of their day. I said to the earlier service as I say to you: it would be tempting for each and every one of us, were we to meet a group of Pharisees in the foyer of this church, we would consider them worthy of our respect. We would consider them to be holy men. They were certainly by no means spring chickens. These were older men. They were worried.

And so they come to the power of the day, the state, Rome. They'd been to Pilate before. He's helped them out before. They want his help again. And so they come on this day, which would have been Holy Saturday, as we refer to it in the Christian church, the day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday morning, and they are concerned, they are worried, and they are afraid. And what they are afraid of is first and foremost: what if this ends up being a hoax pulled over us and we are found to be the laughing stock? What if his disciples come in, take his body, and claim that he is alive? As they note, if that happens, that would be the worst fraud.

Now, what's interesting is they're willing to go to any length to try to avoid a hoax, yes -- but there is perhaps another unspoken fear. And I'm very grateful to the wonderful, hilarious writer, Frederick Buechner. If you've never read Frederick Buechner, read him, if you're a Christian. He will give you a profound sense of humor. And he says this. He says, "I believe there's another unspoken fear here in the hearts and minds of these Pharisees." Because remember, the Pharisees were the group of religious leader who actually believed in resurrection. Not all the Jewish religious leaders believed in resurrection. Another important group, the Sadducees, did not. The Pharisees did. And he says, "Could it be that the one thing they were not willing to admit to each other or even to admit to themselves" -- perhaps on that Saturday morning they got up, and they thought to themselves, what will the day bring? Surely they were concerned about a hoax. But it could it have been, Buechner asks, and I think it worthy of consideration -- could they have said to themselves: what if he was the Messiah?

And the problem, it seems to us and seems to me, is that the state and religion seem bent on trying to make sure that we keep the Lion of Judah in the grave, that we do whatever we can to make sure we can avoid miracle. Now, Buechner goes on to suggest -- and I think he's right -- they were quite crude in what they were willing to do: pull the stone over in front, make sure we get a couple of guards. We'll do whatever we can to make sure this doesn't happen. And he says, while that's a crude example of how

people try to keep Jesus in the grave, he says that -- and I think he's right again -- that in fact, we do so many ways, but much more subtly.

How are some of the subtle ways that even perhaps you as a Christian try to keep Jesus in the grave? Keep miracles sort of conveniently out of the way? One way is by how we consider Jesus. And on a day like today, we're supposed to consider Jesus. He says, one of the ways we do this is perhaps treating the teachings of Jesus as immortal, immortal like the plays of Shakespeare or the music of Beethoven, so that their wisdom and truth will live on forever. That's what the resurrection is about; it's about the teachings of Jesus. And it kind of sings through the air and whispers in our hearts, love your neighbor as yourself.

He says, another way that we try to keep miracles conveniently out of the way is to treat, if you will, the resurrection of Jesus as sort of the spirit of Jesus. The spirit of Jesus, it's undying. And he lives on among us the way the teachings of Socrates does. It just kind of floats somewhere in the background of our lives, and we pull it off the dusty bookshelf when we need a little bit of comfort, need a little bit of wisdom. We pull out old Jesus.

Perhaps we consider Jesus to be a good example to follow. Maybe he's a good moral example when we get busted lying or cheating or stealing or whatever the case may be. How do we get back on the straight and narrow path? Well, good old Jesus, he'll tell us.

What we need more than inspiration or a moral example or some wise sayings that float in and out of our lives like good old music or a really good saying to bring out in quotes, is we need God to show up. And what this tells us is this: that if they were willing to go to such ends to make sure no such miracle would happen, don't think we are above trying to keep the same thing from happening, because what the resurrection demonstrates to us is, God is about doing miracles, but not according to our definition of miracles. We want miracles, God, but we want them how it sort of nicely intersects with what we need or what we want, or avoiding what we don't. But God demonstrates that in raising his Son from death to life in the middle of history, that nobody -- including those he told it was going to happen -- actually expected it to happen. And so when it did, it tells us that even when God says he's going to do something amazing, we're still not ready for it.

Could it be that if Jesus Christ was raised in the middle of history as the great miracle of the divine power of God, that means that God is not done doing miracles? Jesus heals, wonderful. Jesus who feeds, great. He shows up with bread and ka-boom, we got more food than we know what to do with. People followed him for that. But raise him from the dead, and we are full of fear. Roll the stone, folks. Call the cops. Why? Because the resurrection tells us that God is not finished, and we, nor these religious leaders, nor the powers that be of Rome, are in charge. He is. And his power is so subversive, so loving, so seeking, that he means to turn you and me inside out. And so he would say to us on Easter Sunday morning, wake up, O sleeper. I am alive, and I invite you. I invite you to my life. This is what Jesus is doing, and why they went to such lengths. And yet, he appeared. He appeared first to these women, then to his disciples, then to many Jewish leaders, and they were converted. There is no way we would still be talking about Jesus two-thousand-some odd years later if, in fact, it was a hoax. Because too many of his enemies were converted when they saw him. This is what God is doing. He is showing us he is about life.

And so Jesus comes, and with his first message -- of all things to say, what would be the words from Jesus's mouth when he is raised from the dead? He doesn't go back to the Sermon on the Mount. He doesn't go back to, love the Lord your God with all your soul, mind, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself. He doesn't go there. Where does he go? He goes straight to the heart of the matter: do not be afraid. The angel tries it first. The guards were stunned silent, the text tells us. They were frozen, it says, like dead men. The women, they too, likewise, were full of fear. And the angel says to them, "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. 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."

So the angels says it, but the women are still afraid. It says, "So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid and filled with great joy." So there was both: afraid and great joy. The joy, I get. Why the fear? The fear is, this is such good news that they recognize, as his disciples will recognize, this changes everything. It changes my work. It changes my relationships. It changes my love. It changes my heart. It changes my mind. It changes the world. That's the implication. Why the fear? It's because, what is going to happen now? Look, God just did what he said he was going to do. Now what? And with great joy they run.

And Jesus turns to his disciples, and the first thing he says, "Greetings." He doesn't give a dialogue. He doesn't give this long sermon like I'm doing. What does he do? He says, "Greetings. Do not be afraid." Jesus knows what they know. Jesus knows he's just taken Satan and all that he has done, taken all the circumstances that man meant for evil, placing him on the cross, dying and being considered a sinner, taken on the sin of the world -- he knows that he's just done all of that, but now it's all been defeated. And he knows that his hearers know it. And if this is what he's done, what will he do next?

You see, again, Dorothy Sayers reflects on this news that Jesus brings. She says the following. She goes:

We may call this story exhilarating, or we may call it devastating; we may call it revelation, or we may call it rubbish; but if we call it dull, the words have no meaning at all. That God should play the tyranny over man is a dismal story of unrelieved oppression; that man should play the tyrant over man is the usual dreary record of human futility; but that man should play the tyrant over God and find Him a better Man than himself is an astonishing drama indeed. Any journalist, hearing of it for the first time, would recognize it as news; those who did hear it for the first time actually called it news, and good news at that; though we are likely to forget that the word Gospel ever meant anything so sensational.

Walk with me. We call this the good news. I don't like the word "good" very much, because of what it's come to mean in our normal use of the word. Think about it. Somebody comes to you. How was your day? Good. How was your week? Good. How are you feeling? I'm all good. We use the word "good" all the time. The problem is, it's become so commonplace, and in a world full of brokenness and suffering and a lot of bad news, "good" barely pierces the darkness of our doubt, of our worry, anxiety, and fear.

What we need is sensational news. But what we think by sensational is, so long as the resurrection comes in and changes my circumstances, that's what makes it sensational. But here's the dirty little secret about the resurrection: it doesn't always change our circumstances. Our brokenness is often very stubborn. The brokenness and sin in the world is often so dark and so difficult, it's hard to get it off of us. It's hard to get it out from our ears and our eyes, and we become so full of anxiety and worry. What we mean by sensational is change all this stuff. But what the resurrection tells us is that God is doing something completely different. He means to change us from the inside out. So therefore, oftentimes what will change first is not our circumstances, but how we're greeting them. Remember, it's a miracle by his definition, not by ours.

This came home to me very really yesterday. As I was sitting around yesterday morning, waiting for my daughter to go out and do some things for the day, I got a text, and it was from Patty Floyd. The Floyd family -- our brother here, one of our elders here, Pete Floyd, has been in the hospital for going on twelve days. He received some back surgery. He was supposed to be out in four. Very common, very normal surgery. Nothing unusual. Taking care of some vertebrae. But the problem is, he's had this headache that can be caused by this kind of surgery, and it's kept him in the hospital. But yesterday was going to be the day. He had passed some therapy tests. Yesterday morning he was going to get up, he was going to walk up some stairs. They get him up. He's passing the tests so far. Comes back into the room.

They wanted him to sit in a chair. He was going to go home after that. And he's like, you know, I think I need to lay down. So he lay down. And after about a few minutes, they said, you know, Mr. Floyd, we really need you to sit up in the chair. So he sat up, because he wants to go home. He sat up, and his headache returned within thirty seconds, just as bad if not worse than it had been the previous days. So Patty sent a text. She said, got some difficult news this morning. Pete's going to need to stay in the hospital for at least another forty-eight hours. He needs to heal a little bit, and he needs to lay on his back. This is very hard. Please pray.

I was thinking about him all day yesterday. I know that he would want to be here this morning. I know he wants to be home with his family. And then last night, he Facetime'd me on my phone. He's laying flat. I'm looking at him, you know, Kate and I are looking at him on the phone. And we said, Pete, we know, we're so sorry, we know you wanted to come home today. And you know what it was, the first thing he said? He said to me and Kate, he said, I have so much to be thankful for. I have been so blessed. Not because his circumstances had changed, but because God in his resurrection power came into that hospital room through the love of his family, and he could say, he is risen indeed. Because in that hospital room last night, fifteen members of his family showed up, celebrating the birthday of one of his daughters. Got to see his grandchildren. And he said, Randy, you know barely five people can fit in here? There was like fifteen people in here. And the nurses loved it. And he said, I am so blessed.

And then this morning, at seven-thirty in the morning, I get another text. And he said in capital letters: HE IS RISEN. What that demonstrates to me is that Jesus's message of the resurrection was whispered to my brother's heart: do not be afraid. The end is not diagnosis. The end is life. And that is the case for everyone here this morning who wants to receive it. He needs to remind you this morning that he is good, and his love endures forever, and into whatever you bring in here this morning.

But finally, this passage when Jesus says, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me," he's announcing that God is victorious, that the true double cure has now been demonstrated. That old hymn by Augustus Toplady, "Rock of Ages," the first stanza goes like this:

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,  
Let me hide myself in Thee;  
Let the water and the blood,  
From Thy riven side which flowed,  
Be of sin the double cure,  
Cleanse me from its guilt and power.

He is so right. The Jesus that we celebrated and worshipped on Friday night, we worship that Jesus Christ was both victor and victim. He willingly came as a servant to the point of death, knowing every one of our weaknesses, every one of our temptations, to walk in our shoes, to breathe our air, to know our suffering, not as one who is far off, but one who is acquainted with our grief, yet he was without sin. And he goes to the cross, and his blood is spilt for the forgiveness of sins as a sacrifice in our place -- pure, pure grace. And he died as a sacrifice for our sins, paying all the justice that was due to us. He took God's wrath that was directed to us, and he drank it deeply, and all of it, where he could say: it is finished.

But I would suggest that our definition of "double cure" needs to go well beyond Good Friday. Because if it doesn't include Sunday morning, Easter Sunday morning, then merely it was another martyr in a long line dying for someone else. Because as the hymn says, "be of sin the double cure / Cleans me from its guilt." Good Friday, that's what it did. It frees us from the guilt of our sin.

Ah, but what of its power? The power of sin is death, and on Easter Sunday morning, we now see the final nail in victory, and that is the victory over sin and death. That is the double cure. And if that is the double cure, then that means this: that Christ's resurrection is now. It's not a moment in the past, merely. It's not something to be waited for merely in the future when Jesus said he will return again and he will raise the dead who believe in him and they will be with him forever, but he will also raise all the

dead, and those who do not believe will be eternally separated from him in judgment. But the resurrection isn't just in the future, and it's not just in the past, because if it's in the past, we're merely historians. If it's merely in the historians, then we're just like a bunch of people at a bus depot waiting for the next bus, and we don't know when it's coming.

The fact that God raised Jesus from the dead in the middle of history means that the power of the resurrection, the miracle of the resurrection, the grace of the resurrection, and it's victory, is now. Which means tomorrow morning when we get up to do our work, regardless of what the work is, that means everything we do has eternal perspective. The work that we do, the people we work with, the people we work for, the things and talents that God has given us, are not meant for just here and now. The resurrection brings and changes all of it to give me an eternal perspective, that all that I do is glory and honor. The relationships that we are in, now, though they might be broken and hurting, the resurrection brings new life -- the new life of victory over sin and death, which means reconciliation is possible.

I say these things to you not with easy optimism. And here I want to speak to those of you who are very much like me. There's many of you here this morning who want to be here. There are a number of you here this morning who, if given the choice, you would not be here. That was me. We only went to church on Easter and maybe Christmas, and we went because that was the thing you did. But I say all this to you not with an easy optimism, as one who has it together, because I do not. I say it to you as one who remembers what it was to be separated from the living God -- to despise him, to think him dull, to keep him in the cage, to avoid miracles, and to avoid his grace at whatever way I could. Because, quite frankly, I didn't need it -- or so I thought. But then, by God's grace, the Lion of Judah came after me -- and the one who was really in the cage was me -- and released me to see that what I need most was new life.

If we strip all the religious stuff away, and we don't have the buildings, we don't have the pulpits, we don't have the lights, we don't have the suits, and all the stuff that goes with the celebration of Easter -- we strip it all away, and it's just us before God -- what we need more than a moral code, a good inspiration, or words to live by, is a Savior who is very much alive, who loves us in the most intimate and painful way that we could ever imagine. And his word to you and to me this morning is: life. And he means for you to be invited, regardless of where you are, regardless of what you bring into this room. While your circumstances may not change -- in fact, they may get worse -- his message to you is this: this life is about him, the One who has created you, the One who died for you, the One who has now been raised to victory over death for you. And he invites you in. His hands are open, and his wand is a gift of life for you to receive. May today be that day.

If you're already a Christian, today is a day when you and I need to be challenged to pray the resurrection into every situation, relationships, difficulty, and circumstance, and let God bring new life according to his purposes, because he is good, and his love endures forever. Let's pray.

Come, Lord Jesus, this morning, by your Spirit and your Word. Make us uncomfortable with the power of your grace and resurrection, to make us a people dependent and trusting in your hope, not only for forgiveness, but for life -- all of life. Lord, do this, we pray, by your power of the risen King, in whose name we pray. Amen.