

THE EMPTY TOMB

Matthew 28:1-10

THE PROCLAMATION

Matthew 28:1-7

1 Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave.

2 And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it.

3 And his appearance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow.

4 And the guards quaked from fear of him and became like dead men.

5 And the angel answered and said to the women, “Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified.

6 He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying.

7 And go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going ahead of you into Galilee, there you will see Him; behold, I have told you.”

(Matthew 28:1–7, 2022 LSB)

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary – the mother of James and Joseph (Matthew 27:56) made their way to the tomb in the early morning, just as it was beginning to be light enough to see. Matthew writes that they **came to look at the grave**. Mark and Luke write that they brought spices to anoint Jesus’ body. John mentions only Mary Magdalene. Are these contradictions? Not at all, just different tellings of the story.

There was a second **great earthquake** in three days. The previous earthquake, you’ll remember, was at the moment the veil in the Temple was torn (Matthew 27:51). This second earthquake was at the moment the tomb was opened. Earthquakes were not unknown in Palestine, but these took place at the hand of God. Matthew explains the second: an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, rolled away the stone, and sat on it.

The **appearance of the angel was like lightning and his clothes were as white as snow**. Lightning marked the presence of Yahweh on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:16, 20:18). Lightning also accompanied the angelic beings in Ezekiel 1:13-14). The prophet Daniel spent three weeks in prayer, after which he was visited by an angel whose face was like lightning (Daniel 10:6). The angel at the empty tomb had the appearance of lightning: brilliantly white, blinding, and breathtaking in his holiness.

At the sight of him, the Roman soldiers **quaked from fear** of the angel **and became like dead men**.

There are times in Scripture when God's people saw holy angels, and they were usually terrified. The angels often reassured them, as they did the shepherds in Luke 2:10. But there is no assurance for the wicked. Matthew writes that the soldiers **quaked** from fear. It's the same root word as **earthquake** in Matthew 28:2; the only difference is that verse 2 uses a noun – *earthquake* – and verse 4 uses a verb – *quaked*.

But the angel reassures the women: **do not be afraid**. Their purpose was different; they were different. They were not present for some wicked purpose. They were **looking for Jesus who has been crucified**. The language is very specific.

7 Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump,
just as you are in fact unleavened.

For Christ, our Passover lamb, also was sacrificed.

(1 Corinthians 5:7, 2022 LSB)

It is not simply that Jesus *was* crucified for a moment or two. He *has been* crucified. Even now, resurrected to glory, ascended to heaven, and reigning over all creation, Jesus Christ has been crucified. Paul writes,

22 For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom,

23 but we preach Christ crucified **[the same verb form]**,

to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness,

24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks,

Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

(1 Corinthians 1:22–24, 2022 LSB)

Shortly after, Paul writes,

1 And when I came to you, brothers,

I did not come with superiority of word or of wisdom,

proclaiming to you the witness of God.

2 For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ,

and Him crucified **[the same verb form]**.

(1 Corinthians 2:1–2, 2022 LSB)

Why is it that Christians can have perfect peace in the death of Jesus for our sins? Because He has been crucified once and for all time (Romans 6:10) and is never to suffer again because His one crucifixion accomplished every purpose of God.

The women at the tomb were the first to hear that truth. They were also the first to hear the blessed news: **He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said**. He is not here – but why? Because they went to the wrong tomb? No. Because someone else moved His body? No. Because He only fainted on the cross, and

after being wrapped in 75 pounds of sticky ointment and wrapped in a heavy linen shroud, He recovered, freed Himself, muscled the stone clear of the doorway, and crept away without the guards noticing? No. He is not here because **He has risen**. He has been crucified. He died. He was buried. He was sealed in the tomb. But He rose from the dead.

In Matthew 16, which took place perhaps six or eight months before these things, Jesus began to tell His disciples that He would suffer, die, and be raised on the third day (Matthew 16:21). It was a frequent point of teaching from that time on. Matthew records three of them (Matthew 16:21, 17:23, 20:19), but there were unquestionably many more reminders. So the angel tells the women that what Jesus had so frequently talked about had come to pass, just as He said.

We see the angel didn't say to the women, "You can take my word for it – He is risen!" Instead, He said, **Come and see the place where He was lying**. That is, where He was lying dead, prepared for burial, and left to decay as all the dead decay. He had been lying there but was no longer lying there. Why? Because He has risen! Matthew doesn't say, but I think it's safe to say that the women did look into the tomb. Most tombs had a small entrance, about two feet square, just big enough to crawl through. That seems ridiculously small, but it kept the closing stone small enough for one or two men to handle. It's most likely that the women had to get down on their hands and knees and peer inside.

And go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead, and behold, He is going ahead of you into Galilee; there you shall see Him; behold, I have told you. I want to point out a couple of things.

First, this was not a private event for the ladies. It was not the start of a gnostic cult where two or three people claim to have the inside scoop, and the rest have to take their word for it. No human being got to witness the resurrection, but all of Jesus' disciples, and all of Jerusalem for that matter, could come to His tomb and see for themselves that it was empty.

Second, the women were not faced with the empty tomb and were then left on their own to figure out what had happened. An angel of the Lord told them exactly what had happened: Jesus, who had been crucified, had risen from the dead just as He said He would. I can imagine a modern skeptic saying to the women, "OK, sure, the tomb was empty, but the resurrection is just YOUR opinion." Those ladies would say, "Wrong! Yes, the tomb was empty, but we didn't DECIDE that Jesus had risen from the dead; we were TOLD by an angel from God that Jesus had risen from the dead."

THE PROOF

Matthew 28:8-10

8 And they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples.

9 And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!"

And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him.

10 Then Jesus said to them,

“Do not be afraid;

go and report to My brothers to leave for Galilee,

and there they will see Me.”

(Matthew 28:8–10, 2022 LSB)

The women **left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples**. Fear and great joy make perfect sense. **Great joy** because Jesus, who has been crucified, has risen from the dead! **Fear** because they had no idea what would come next. I think it means that they were overwhelmed with joy at the knowledge that Jesus had been raised and also recognized that it meant something both incredible and mysterious. As Matthew’s Gospel has unfolded so far, we were prepared for Jesus’ death and resurrection. But Jesus never went past His resurrection. He left that future undefined. The women knew that everything had just changed, but they had no idea what it had changed into.

Before they had gone very far, Jesus met them. *Jesus!* Jesus, who has been crucified, as they themselves saw. Jesus, who had been buried, as they themselves saw. Jesus, who was no longer lifeless in His tomb but standing before them, alive, strong, vital, *speaking* to them! No wonder they ran to Him, fell at His feet, and worshiped!

I want you to notice that He did not rebuke them for worshiping Him. Only God may be worshiped. The apostle John was so overcome by the revelation he received that he fell and worshiped at the feet of the angel (Revelation 22:8). But the angel rebuked him: **Do not do that! I am a fellow slave with you, and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God!**

There is only one God.

6 “Thus says Yahweh, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, Yahweh of hosts:

‘I am the first, and I am the last, And there is no God besides Me.

7 Who is like Me? Let him call out and declare it;

And let him tell it to Me in order, From the time that I established the ancient people.

And let them declare to them the things that are to come And the events that are going to take place.

8 Do not be in dread and do not be afraid;

Have I not long since caused it to be heard to you and declared it?

And you are My witnesses.

Is there any God besides Me, Or is there any other Rock? I know of none.”

(Isaiah 44:6–8, 2022 LSB)

The first commandment is to worship Yahweh alone. The worst possible sin is to refuse Him His rightful worship.

Then why did Jesus receive their worship and the worship of Thomas in John 20? Because Yahweh is Triune: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ is Yahweh the Son, and He received the rightful worship due Him. Yahweh is, without doubt, One God, but He is Three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Does anyone know how He is One God and Three Persons? No. But the Scripture makes it abundantly clear that He is One God and Three Persons.

Listen to what Jesus says to the women: **Do not be afraid! Go and report to My brothers to leave for Galilee, and there they will see Me.** Jesus repeats what the angel had said just moments before. The women were to carry out Jesus' purpose regardless of their personal experience. We can't imagine what it must have been like for them, but they had no right to personalize what had happened. They had a job to do at that moment. First, tell the disciples that Jesus was raised, just as He had said. Second, tell them that Jesus wanted them to leave immediately for Galilee, and He would find them there.

I love this! The disciples who ran in terror when He was arrested, including Peter, who denied Him three times, were still His brothers. He loved them as He loved all His disciples. He died for them, after all. He carried their sins in His body on His cross. He satisfied the wrath of God against them. He was not disgusted with them for their sins. He didn't resent them. He lovingly and generously gave Himself in their place. And He did so in order to gather them to Himself for all time. After His death and resurrection, they remained His brothers. **For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of One, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brothers** (Hebrews 2:11).

BRINGING IT HOME

Over the next few weeks we are going to continue our study of Jesus' resurrection. Next week in Matthew, we'll look at the attempt of the Jews to keep the resurrection secret and examine other objections as well. Then, in Luke 24, we'll join Jesus and two of His disciples on the road to Emmaus. Then, in John, we'll see how Thomas reacted to news of the resurrection and see how Jesus restored Peter after his denials. And then we'll return to Matthew and give our attention to the commission given to the church, a commission which is still in place.

You see, the resurrection is THE dead center – no pun intended – of the Good News, the Gospel. The apostle Paul boldly and unapologetically said,

22 For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom,
23 but we preach Christ **crucified**,
 to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness,
(1 Corinthians 1:22–23, 2022 LSB)

The only reason we can so boldly preach Jesus Christ crucified is that He was raised from the dead. We do preach Christ crucified, and yet Christianity is not a religion that honors the memory of a fallen hero. I'll

put it this way.

There is a kind of Christianity that is nothing more than a memorial to a dead leader. In fact, it's the most common sort of Christianity out there. The followers of that religion live in memory of a bygone hero. Jesus *was*, they say. Jesus *did*. That Jesus, just like most people, is now "in heaven," wherever that is. That sort of Christianity is a cemetery filled with monuments, statues, green lawns, and periodic displays.

Biblical Christianity is a movement, not a memorial. Jesus Christ is not our dead historic leader, but our Living Lord. Jesus *was* and *is*, and *is to come*. Jesus *did* back then, and *does* today. Jesus *spoke* in history and *speaks* today in the Scriptures. Don't go to Israel expecting to find some profound revelation: He is not there! He was raised on a day in history, but more importantly, He IS risen today!

We all know this on an intellectual level, but letting the truth saturate our minds and hearts takes longer.