

Easter promises that Christ has the power and the will to help us in every circumstance of life.

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SCRIPTURE READING: Matthew 28:1-10

Historical Truth:

VERSES 1-10: THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

Each of the four Gospels includes an account of the resurrection, and there are differences among the accounts. These differences do not discredit the scriptures, but simply suggest that the four accounts were written independently rather than collaboratively.

Matthew's account is based on Mark 16:1-8. In his day, the rumor-mill suggested that the disciples had stolen Jesus' body and the resurrection was not true. Matthew "wishes to certify the historical authenticity of the church's preaching" by emphasizing tight security at the tomb, divine intervention, the women actually touching Jesus, the perfidy of the chief priests and elders, and bribed soldiers who lie (28:11-15) (Snow and Furnish, 3).

The resurrection is the central event of the Bible. The idea of resurrection has its roots in the OT (Job 19:25-26; Psalm 49:15; Isaiah 26:19; Daniel 12:2; Ezekiel 37), and the resurrection is emphasized in most NT books.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the foundation of our faith. "Without this reversal of the ignominy of the cross, Jesus' death would have atoned for nothing. The resurrection demonstrates Christ's vindication by God, who reestablishes him in heaven as Lord of the cosmos" (Blomberg).

If the resurrection is false, "we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Cor. 15:9) because we have staked our faith on a lie. If the resurrection is true, it validates Jesus' teachings and ministry as well as our faith. While there are a number of reasons to believe in the resurrection, we cannot prove it but can see it only through the eyes of faith. "It is a faith story, intended not for unbelievers, but for believers" (Hare, 328).

VERSE 1: AS THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK WAS DAWNING

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.

The resurrection takes place, not on the Sabbath, but on a weekday. At creation, God sanctified the Sabbath. At the resurrection, Jesus sanctifies the following day.

The Sabbath ended at sundown, but the women went at first light to the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, witnessed the crucifixion (27:56). Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" (presumably the mother of James and Joseph) witnessed the burial (27:61), and now they become witnesses to the resurrection. "We celebrate Petrine boldness, Pauline grace, and Johannine sublimity; we should also celebrate

Magdalenic fidelity. In the records of all four Gospels this one woman stands immovably by Jesus, even in and past his death" (Bruner, 1073).

Deut. 19:15 requires at least two witnesses in a legal proceeding, and Jewish practice admits only men as witnesses. During his ministry, Jesus broke with a number of traditions, and he breaks with another here. The Eleven, all men, are nowhere to be found, while two women serve as witnesses to the resurrection. The 1 Cor. 15:3-8 listing of witnesses, written earlier than this Gospel, does not include Mary Magdalene, but does mention "brothers and sisters."

Mark 16:1 says that the women came to anoint Jesus but, in Matthew's Gospel, a woman with an alabaster jar of ointment anointed Jesus. Jesus said, "By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial" (26:12). In this Gospel, the women come "to see the tomb" (v. 1) rather than to anoint Jesus. Anyone who has visited the graveside of a loved one can understand why they come.

VERSES 2-4: AN ANGEL OF THE LORD ROLLED BACK THE STONE

²And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.

"And suddenly there was a great earthquake" (v. 2). The earthquake, the angel with dazzling clothing, and the rolling away of the stone are important historical facts, telling us that God is ushering in a new age. They remind us of Israel's encounter with God at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:18). An earthquake also announced Jesus' death (27:51).

"an angel of the Lord" (v. 2). Earlier in this Gospel, an angel appeared to Joseph to tell him to take Mary as his wife (1:20), to tell him to flee to Egypt (2:13), and to return to Israel (2:19-20).

The angel "rolled back the stone and sat on it" (v. 2) as if to say, *Fait accompli!* The angel's appearance makes it clear that the angel is no ordinary being and this is no ordinary moment in history. Jesus has risen to inaugurate a new era in salvation history.

The angel's appearance both reflects God's glory and authenticates the angel's heavenly origins.

"For fear of him the guards shook (*eseisthesan*) and became like dead men" (v. 4). The guards are scared to death! The earth quakes (*seismos*), and the guards quake too (*eseisthesan* -- from the same root as *seismos*). Jesus, who is supposed to be dead, is alive. The guards, who are supposed to be alive and guarding Jesus' body, become like dead men. They were prepared for Jesus' disciples, but not for the angel.

VERSES 5-6: HE IS NOT HERE; FOR HE HAS BEEN RAISED, AS HE SAID

⁵But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay."

"Do not be afraid" (v. 5). The women must have feared harassment by the Roman guards, but went to the tomb anyway. Then the earthquake and the angel's dazzling appearance must have frightened them. They must have feared that someone had played mischief with Jesus' body. However, it is difficult for faith to dwell with fear, and the angel comes to restore faith. "Do not be afraid." These are the words that the angel spoke to Joseph concerning his pregnant fiancée (1:20). Jesus taught, "So do not be afraid, you are of more value than many sparrows" (10:31). When he came across the stormy sea to the disciples, he said, "Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid" (14:27). At the transfiguration, he reassured the disciples, "Get up and do not be afraid" (17:7). Now the angel says to the women, "Do not be afraid." It is a gracious moment in which God's messenger acknowledges the women's natural fear and helps them past it.

The angel rolls the stone back (v. 2), not to let Jesus out, but to let the women in. The resurrection is history -- has already taken place. There were no human witnesses to the actual resurrection. These women witnessed Jesus' death and his burial. Now they witness the fact that, in spite of Rome's best efforts, Jesus is gone. The angels assure the women that Jesus has been raised (passive voice -- the raising is God's action) just as Jesus had predicted.

"he has been raised." The Good News is not just that Jesus' spirit lives, but that he has been raised bodily to new life. For a full teaching of the resurrection, we must turn to Paul, who tells us that Jesus is the "first fruits of those who have died" (1 Cor. 15:20) -- that the Good News of Jesus' resurrection leads to the Good News of our own resurrection -- that the resurrected body is somehow transformed into a spiritual body (1 Cor. 15:44) -- but that it is a true body nevertheless. The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus' resurrected body allows him to enter a locked room without a key (John 20:19, 26), but he nevertheless presents his wounded hands and body to Thomas for inspection (John 20:27) (see Bruner, 1077).

VERSE 7: GO QUICKLY AND TELL HIS DISCIPLES

"Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you."

The angel commissions the women to tell the disciples, making them the first to proclaim the Good News of the resurrection. If Matthew were trying to concoct a believable story, Jesus would appear first to Peter or one of the other men. But just as Jesus breaks the mold by choosing women to be the first witnesses, he again breaks the mold by choosing them to be the first preachers. Their first sermon is to the disciples -- to those who should need no convincing but sometimes do. In this case, the congregation has lost faith and desperately needs the word that these women bring.

"indeed, he is going ahead of you to Galilee." Prior to the crucifixion, Jesus told the disciples that he will "go ahead of you to Galilee" (26:32).

VERSE 8-10: SUDDENLY JESUS MET THEM

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

⁹Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "**Greetings!**" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, "**Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.**"

"So they left the tomb quickly" (v. 8). The women run to tell the disciples. Not only are they obeying a direct order from the angel, but also they are obeying their human impulse to share good news. In spite of the angel's reassurance, they are afraid, the natural response to wildly unusual events. But they are also joyful, because the angel promised that Jesus is alive.

"**Greetings!**" (v. 9). Jesus meets them and says, *Chairete*, a common Greek greeting that the NRSV translates "**Greetings!**" *Chairete* may be to Greeks what *shalom* is to Jews -- or *Hello* is to the rest of us -- a standard greeting that defies precise translation. "**Greetings!**" is as good a translation as any.

"And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him" (v. 9). The women immediately recognize Jesus, unlike the accounts in Luke 24:16 and John 20:14, and come (*proselitousai*) to him. "The verb *proselthōn* is used throughout the Gospel to describe the approach of the sick or other petitioners to Jesus (see, e.g., 8:2, 5, 19, 25; 9:14, 20, 28; 13:10, 36; 15:30; 17:14; 18:21; 19:16; 20:20; 21:14; 26:7)" (Senior, 342). The women take hold of Jesus' feet, their act bearing witness to Jesus' bodily resurrection. They worship him. This is one of only three occasions in the Gospels where people worship Jesus (see 2:11; John 9:38) (Craddock, 239).

"**Do not be afraid**" (v. 10). Jesus repeats the angel's reassurance. He also repeats the angel's command to go and tell the disciples, but with a significant difference. He says, "**tell my brothers to go to Galilee.**" Brother-brother is a more intimate relationship than disciple-master. Another gracious moment! Jesus promised to confess before the Father anyone who confesses Jesus before people, but warned that he will deny anyone who denies him (10:32-33). The disciples have deserted Jesus (26:56), and Peter has denied him (26:69-75). Justice demands that Jesus reciprocate, but love demands that he forgive.

The eleven disciples go to Galilee (28:16) -- "Galilee of the Gentiles" (4:15) -- where they hear Jesus tell them to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (28:19). This is not the first time that Jesus includes Gentiles in his ministry. The Magi (2:1-12) introduced Gentiles at the story's beginning. Jesus healed a Centurion's servant (8:5-13) and a Canaanite woman's daughter (15:21-28). Now the Great Commission formalizes ministry to those outside the Jewish nation.

VERSES 11-15: THE GUARD WENT INTO THE CITY

Even though the guards are frightened at the earthquake and dazzled by the angel, they do not become disciples. They are hirelings (see John 10:13) whose remain loyal to their paymasters. Having been bought, they stay bought!

Matthew is writing this account, in part, to counter the rumor that the disciples stole Jesus' body from the tomb. These verses tell how that rumor got started. The soldiers report the early morning events to the chief priests, who bribe them to say that the disciples have stolen Jesus' body from the tomb. Matthew notes that "this story is still told among the Jews to this day" (28:15).

APPLICATION:

Christmas and Easter! Those are the big ones, aren't they -- the days when everyone comes to church. I suppose that Christmas is the favorite. It is hard to compete with angels -- and a baby -- and shepherds -- and Wise Men. It is also hard to compete with presents under the tree -- and pumpkin pie.

It wasn't always so, you know. For most of history, Easter was the favorite. Christmas had to compete with Pentecost for second place.

But why should we care about Jesus' resurrection? Why should we care about something that happened so long ago? How does that affect our lives? Don't we have more pressing issues to deal with -- wars and rumours of war -- budget deficits -- job problems -- marriage problems -- children problems -- roofs that leak -- cars that need fixing.

As they say, "When the crocodiles are biting your ankles, it isn't easy to remember that you came to drain the swamp."

And when you are out of work -- or having marital problems -- or caught up in any of the difficulties that threaten to undo us -- it isn't easy to remember that the resurrection of Jesus matters.

Or, perhaps, it matters too much. It might seem that the resurrection is one of those great issues so far above us that it doesn't affect our lives where the rubber hits the road.

I am reminded of the couple who had been married fifty years. Someone asked the man their secret of success, and he spoke about an agreement that they made early in their marriage. They agreed that he would make the major decisions and she would make the minor decisions. When asked for an example of a minor decision, he said, "Well, she got to choose where we would live and how many children we would have." When asked for an example of a major decision, he said, "I got to decide whether we should admit Red China to the U.N." **Some of the great issues are so big that they seem irrelevant.**

But the resurrection of Jesus is not like that! The resurrection of Jesus is important, because it shows us that God cares.

The resurrection is important, because it shows that God is willing to get involved in our lives -- is willing to help us -- is willing to get his hands dirty to solve our problems.

We usually talk about the resurrection as important because it breaks the bonds of death-- defeats the defater -- makes it possible for us to live eternally. That is true! But sometimes, when we are struggling with day to day problems, it is difficult to care about

eternal life. Our immediate concern is finding a job -- or getting out of debt -- or getting our marriage back on an even keel -- or helping our child through the teenage years.

But, if it is true that Jesus' resurrection prepares the way for eternal life -- and I believe that it is -- it is also true that Jesus' resurrection promises God's in our everyday struggles -- it promises that God cares about every detail of our lives.

-- After all, the Jesus who rose from the dead was the same Jesus who healed a leper -- who gave a blind man his sight -- who healed a centurion's servant.

-- The Jesus who rose in splendour on Easter Sunday was the same Jesus who was born in a stable -- the same Jesus who had no place to lay his head -- the same Jesus who got along famously with sinners but not so well with religious people.

-- The Jesus who now lives in glory is the same Jesus who worked as a carpenter's helper in Nazareth -- who trudged the dusty roads of Galilee -- who endured nails in his hands and a sword in his side.

In other words, Jesus came down from his home in heaven to live on this earth -- not in the best of human circumstances, but in the most ordinary circumstances.

And, if the way that Jesus lived seems difficult, consider the way that he died. It is difficult to imagine a death more terrible than crucifixion. Jesus' death demonstrated his determination to experience not just the ordinariness of our lives, but life at its worst -- death at its worst.

-- His death on a cross is testimony that he is with us in every experience -- every difficulty.

-- His resurrection is testimony that he can help us through every experience -- every difficulty. It tells us that he has extraordinary power to help us -- and that he will use it to help us.

Strangely enough, we are often open to Jesus' help only in the worst of circumstances -- when we are really desperate -- but Jesus wants to help us in every circumstance. You fathers and mothers know what I mean. You don't want your son or daughter to wait until they are in jail to give you a call. You want them to call whenever they have a problem -- whenever they need help or counsel -- before things get out of hand. In fact, you want them to call just to say hello.

And so it is with Jesus. Jesus wants to help us in every circumstance. Jesus wants to be there for us in good times and bad -- in big things and little -- in worship on Sunday and at work on Monday. Jesus wants to help us to make good decisions. He wants to help shape our lives. He wants to help us decide whom to marry. He wants to help us raise our children. Jesus' resurrection promises God's help in every situation of life.

And Jesus' resurrection promises God's help in death. The resurrection is God's promise of eternal life, which means more than living forever -- eternal life means living now AND forever in the presence of God.

In my years of ministry, I have seen people cope with the problems of life and the problem of death. I can tell you that resurrection faith makes a difference.

-- I have seen people of resurrection faith faced with difficulty. I am not going to tell you that lives are always simple -- but I will tell you this. They have a faith foundation that steadies them when trouble hits. They know that God loves them. At their best, they remember to ask, "What would Jesus do?" And when they act in faith, their faith helps them through the crisis. It keeps them going. It keeps them from making it worse. It gives them hope. It assures them that God is with them -- and that God will lead them through the valley into the sunshine beyond.

-- And I have seen people without faith faced with difficulty. Too often that is like watching a boat drifting on the water -- subject to every wave and current -- rudderless --helpless. You don't want to live like that. You want to live a life of Easter faith.

Easter -- is the first day of the rest of your life:

-- My prayer for you is that the Holy Spirit will touch your life here and now -- and give you an Easter faith.

-- My prayer is not that God will make your life easy, but that he will guide you with a steady hand through every difficulty.

-- My prayer is that, in life and in death, God will comfort you with his love and strengthen you with his presence.

-- My prayer is that your Easter faith will shine like a beacon on a mountaintop, reminding you from whence your help comes -- because your help comes from the Lord. That is the Easter promise -- your help comes from the Lord.

Amen.