

# Easter Sunday

*But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. <sup>6</sup> He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. (Matthew 28:5-6a ESV)*

*And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20 ESV)*

## **The Empty Tomb**

**April 21<sup>st</sup> 2019**

**Matthew 28:1-20**

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### **Introduction:**

Good morning! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! I want to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew 28.

Before we begin, I recognize that we have a number of visitors with us today. Welcome! Today is an important day for us. You may or may not know this, but the Christian faith is a faith rooted in historical events; history matters for us. The Apostle Paul, for instance, said:

if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. <sup>18</sup> Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. <sup>19</sup> If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. (1 Corinthians 15:17-19 ESV)

We are not celebrating the IDEA of a risen Saviour this morning. The Christian faith has no legs to stand on if Christ was not truly dead and then truly raised to newness of life. If Christ is not risen, then his mission was not accomplished. If his lifeless body remained in that tomb, then we are dead in our sins today!

But if he is alive then that changes EVERYTHING! This is a big deal – this is an important text so turn with me to Matthew 28:1-20. Hear now God’s holy, inspired, living and active word to us today:

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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. <sup>4</sup> And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. <sup>5</sup> But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. <sup>6</sup> He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. <sup>7</sup> 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.” <sup>8</sup> So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. <sup>9</sup> And behold, Jesus met them

and said, “Greetings!” And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him.<sup>10</sup> Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.”

<sup>11</sup> While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. <sup>12</sup> And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers<sup>13</sup> and said, “Tell people, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’” <sup>14</sup> And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” <sup>15</sup> So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

<sup>16</sup> Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. <sup>17</sup> And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted.<sup>18</sup> And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:1-20 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

There are a number of things that we could pull from this text, but with the limited time that we have this morning I want to press in on one detail in particular. The empty tomb.

### **The Empty Tomb**

As I mentioned just a moment ago, Christianity is a faith that makes historical claims. The story that we just read is not meant to be read symbolically. Therefore, what we have in front of us claims to be an accurate description of a true event that took place nearly 2000 years ago – an event that has since changed the world! And by the way, whether you believe this story to be true or not, we can all agree that this was a world-changing event, can we not? Pastor David Platt writes:

There’s no question, even among the most secular of scholars, that around 2,000 years ago an entirely new religious community was formed – almost overnight. And immediately, hundreds of people started claiming that Jesus rose from the grave, even when it meant they could die for such a claim. A fast-growing movement of people, which now makes up one-third of the world’s population by some estimates, survives as a result.<sup>1</sup>

Wow! So something happened – something significant enough to make people risk their lives. Something significant enough for a movement to start that is now the largest movement in the history of the world!

Pascal once said: “I [believe] those witnesses that get their throat cut.”<sup>2</sup> Those are the kinds of witnesses who are worth listening to. Those are the witnesses who wrote our New Testament.

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<sup>1</sup> David Platt, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Matthew*. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), 358.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*. (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), 218.

And one of the things that those witnesses claimed to see is described in our text this morning: the empty tomb. Let's consider their testimony:

## 1. The fact of the empty tomb

Look with me at the final verses of Matthew 27:

<sup>62</sup> The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate <sup>63</sup> and said, "Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.' <sup>64</sup> 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." <sup>65</sup> Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can." <sup>66</sup> **So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.** (Matthew 27:62-66 ESV)

Would you just think about this seriously for a moment? The chief priests wanted to shut down the Jesus movement so that they could re-solidify their power. Step one was to have Jesus murdered publicly. Mission accomplished. Step two – the only other step that was needed – was to keep that tomb sealed for three measly days.

You see, Jesus prophesied that he would be raised on the THIRD day. So, all that the Pharisees had to do was to keep that tomb on lockdown until the time that was prophesied had passed. Day four didn't matter! Just keep that stone in place for THREE DAYS! Pilate, understanding the significance of their request, gave them full permission to station as many guards as they pleased at that tomb.

And yet, three days later the guards came running back telling stories about earthquakes and angels... and an empty tomb!

Can you imagine how frustrated the Pharisees would have been at this point? They were literally one day away from being done with this whole ordeal, but now they have to formulate an explanation for the empty tomb. We find that in verses 12-13 of today's text:

And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers<sup>13</sup> and said, "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.'" (Matthew 28:12-13 ESV)

Seems plausible, right? Except that the disciples would have had to silently roll away a stone that would have likely weighed two to three thousand pounds. It also seems odd that EVERY guard managed to sleep through this event – even as Jesus' three-day-decaying body was carried past them. It also seems odd that on the third day – the ONE day that these guards were specifically hired for – there was a block of time when all of them fell fast asleep. Day three was game day! That was the gig! Call me skeptical, but I find that to be improbable. One commentator goes on to say:

It is equally improbable that the timid disciples could have mustered up the courage to open Jesus' tomb and run the risk of capital indictment, or that the Jewish authorities

would have failed to prosecute the disciples if they had possessed a scrap of evidence pointing to the disciples' guilt.<sup>3</sup>

Think about that. We know how the disciples died – all of them but one was sentenced to death because they continued preaching the resurrection of Christ. But not ONE of them was sentenced to death for stealing Jesus' body.

I find the historical evidence to point overwhelmingly in one direction: That tomb was empty!

And the man who had been buried dead within that tomb revealed himself to numerous witnesses. In 1 Corinthians 15 we read:

Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. (1 Corinthians 15:6 ESV)

Timothy Keller says here:

Paul refers to a body of 500 eye-witnesses who saw the risen Christ at once. You can't write that in a document designed for public reading unless there really were surviving witnesses whose testimony agreed and who could confirm what the author said... For a highly altered, fictionalized account of an event to take hold in the public imagination it is necessary that the eyewitnesses (and their children and grandchildren) all be long dead.<sup>4</sup>

Countless skeptics have tried and failed to refute the testimony of the empty tomb. If even one of them had succeeded, then we would not be gathered here this morning. There is no Christianity without an empty tomb! But from the very first days after the resurrection until now, the testimony of the empty tomb has stood up even under severe scrutiny.

So, this story confronts us with an empty tomb, but what does the empty tomb mean for our lives today?

## 2. The meaning of the empty tomb

When Jesus showed himself to his disciples – when he walked in his resurrected body out of that tomb – he proved definitively that he is who he said he was. He is God! And because he is God, he possesses ALL AUTHORITY! Jesus said as much in verse 16:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.<sup>17</sup> And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted.<sup>18</sup> And Jesus came and said to them, "**All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.** (Matthew 28:16-18 ESV)

The empty tomb has proven this!

The grave could not keep him, therefore, **He has authority over death!** The Apostle Paul wrote:

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<sup>3</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Matthew - Luke)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelin, vol. 8, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 591.

<sup>4</sup> Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*. (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), 105.

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”

<sup>55</sup> “O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your sting?”

<sup>56</sup> The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. <sup>57</sup> But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:55-57 ESV)

What is death, after all? It is the penalty – the consequence – for sin. But, if Jesus Christ has taken upon himself that penalty – if he has paid that debt once and for all for anyone who would believe in him – then death no longer has authority over us! Because we’re in CHRIST.

Have you ever been to a Christian funeral? When we say that our loved one will rise again, we mean it! And we say it with confidence BECAUSE OF THE EMPTY TOMB! If Jesus had stayed in the grave, then we would have no reason to expect anything different for ourselves. But, as the Apostle Paul says:

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. <sup>21</sup> For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. <sup>22</sup> For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. (1 Corinthians 15:20-22 ESV)

That’s what baptism is all about! Today, nine people are going to go under that water. This is a symbol and it represents the death of Jesus Christ. When they go under that water, they are saying that when Jesus Christ died on the cross, he bore THEIR sins with him on that tree. Therefore, the old, sinful Chris, Richard, Chelsea, Cole, Jenny, Luke, Dianne and Ethan has died with Jesus.

But we don’t leave them under the water, do we? No! They come up out of the water and we proclaim: “Raised with him to newness of life!” because the tomb is now empty! Death no longer has a claim on Jesus and it no longer has a claim on those who are in Christ!

### **He also has authority over the devil!**

In Colossians 2 we read:

by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. <sup>15</sup> He **disarmed the rulers** and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. (Colossians 2:14-15 ESV)

Do you see that? The devil and his forces have been disarmed.

If you’ve been here for any length of time, then you’ve heard me say this: The devil is a toothless lion. Jesus’ life, death and resurrection has knocked the teeth right out of the devil’s mouth. Here’s why:

The devil has never had any authority in and of himself. The devil can’t drag me to hell. He’s a dog on a chain and he has to operate under God’s authority in the same way that you and I do. And yet, he remains remarkably dangerous. Why is that?

It's because the devil is our accuser. That's actually what his name, Satan, means. Satan points at our sin – and there is plenty of it to point at – and then he points at God's perfect law and he says: "This one is a filthy sinner, and you have said God that the wages of sin is death. Therefore, you HAVE to send him to hell!"

He's not wrong. The wages of sin IS death, and you and I and everyone else on the planet HAVE sinned. He's right.

But.

Jesus has silenced our accuser by paying our debt in full. He has died in our place. Every time the devil points at a believer and lists off the numerous sins that ought to condemn us to death God turns to him and says: "Hmm. It says here that this debt has been paid in full at the cross. Court dismissed."

Isn't that good news? That is the message of the empty tomb! But Jesus' authority doesn't stop there. If it did, many more would follow Christ. But his authority stretches over death, and over the devil, and it reaches into our hearts. You see:

### **Jesus has authority over you.**

If Jesus had stayed in that tomb, then we could rightly dismiss him as one more dead teacher. Do you know what you can do with dead teachers? You can pick and choose what doctrines you'd like to obey. Which, by the way, is exactly what most people do with Jesus, isn't it? "I'll take the golden rule, the parable of the good Samaritan and, wasn't there something in here about 'judge not lest ye be judged?' Perfect! Toss that in the cart too!"

But when Jesus rose from the grave, he took that option from us. Good teachers don't rise up from the grave. Good teachers don't ascend to heaven. The empty tomb tells us that Jesus is more than a good teacher – He is God.

Suddenly, we're forced to wrestle seriously with ALL of what he said. Thing like:

I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.  
(John 14:6 ESV)

And things like:

whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.  
(Matthew 10:33 ESV)

Jesus possesses all authority. This is his world. He created it. On the cross, he redeemed it. You can be free from sin and death today! But many choose to remain in sin and death because they believe that there, they are free.

But the Bible tells us that no one is ultimately free. We're all slaves to that which masters us. Romans 6:16 says:

Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? (Romans 6:16 ESV)

Are you a slave to sin this morning? I wonder if there isn't someone here who feels trapped in addiction. Addiction to pornography. Addiction to alcohol. Addiction to money and success. It's all consuming, isn't it? It promises you satisfaction but the more you chase after it, and the more you grab hold of it, the more you come to realize that it leaves you EMPTY inside.

When we deny the authority of Christ over our lives, we separate ourselves from the only one who has the authority to set us free! He has paid the price for that sin that has mastered you. He has broken the chains that bind you. And he's inviting you to come to him today. He says:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30 ESV)

Jesus has authority over you, but that is a GOOD thing! There is no one else who I would rather surrender my life to! He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He is the Lion of Judah who has conquered our enemy. He is the prince of peace who has come to set the prisoners free. And he would be your Saviour today. Let go of your sin. Take hold of Christ.

if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9 ESV)

As we conclude, I want to make sure that we see:

### **3. The implication of the empty tomb**

The empty tomb tells us that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. He is God. He has all authority over heaven and earth and he has purchased our lives at a great cost to himself. He offers this resurrection life to the whole world. Therefore, if you're here this morning and you believe all of that, then you need to listen very closely to what Jesus says in verses 18-20. Look there with me:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Go **therefore** and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20 ESV)

Do you see that "therefore" in verse 19?

He is saying: "I am who I said I was, and I have accomplished what I said I would accomplish. Death has no power over me. I have received all authority on heaven and on earth! Therefore, GO! Tell the world!"

If you are a Christian, then you are called to be a disciple maker. This deserves an entire sermon and it will get an entire sermon on another day, but for now this one paragraph will have to suffice.

Christian, look at your life. Are you making disciples? When is the last time you looked someone in the eyes and told them the good news of the gospel? When is the last time you took a new believer under your wing and helped them to understand the Bible? If what I am describing is not a regular part of your Christian life then you are MISSING OUT on the life that God made you to live! This is IT! You can't take your money with you to Heaven. You can't take your toys with you. But by the grace of God, you can bring your family, and your friends, and your neighbors, and the tens of thousands of people in our city who haven't yet put their trust in Christ. MAKE DISCIPLES!

As a church, we are about to watch as nine brothers and sisters pass through the waters of baptism! Praise God! This is what we were made to do! My prayer this morning is this: "Give us more, God! More professions of faith! More baptisms! More teaching! More discipleship!" I'm asking that in faith, because I know that it aligns with His will. And I know that He has given us all that we need for the task. And He will be with us till the end of the age.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.