

Matthew 28:1-10

The Resurrection of Jesus

28 After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ² And 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. ³ His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵ But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he^[a] lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead,^[b] and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." ⁸ So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers and sisters to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Go Quickly!

I cannot imagine a week more packed with emotion and turmoil than holy week. Last Sunday we celebrated Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, riding a donkey as a sign of peace. He was greeted with loud praises and a crowd begging him to save the people. Yet by Friday, that same Jesus was arrested, given a corrupt and shameful trial that broke many Jewish rules of justice, and sentenced to death on the cross while the crowd turned on him, hurled insults and demands his blood. Little did they know his blood was exactly what they needed. As Terry Pratchett writes: "Always remember that the crowd that applauds your coronation is the same crowd that will applaud your beheading. People like a show." And a horrible show is exactly what the people got.

Jesus is tortured, first by the agonizing thought of what is to come, and then as he is flogged at Pilate's direction. Jesus was flogged with a device made of strips of leather tipped with lead and bone designed to cut flesh to the bone. Many would faint or even die from these injuries alone, and so terrible was flogging that Roman citizens were exempt.

Then Jesus was made to carry the cross on a back stripped of its flesh. It is no wonder that he stumbled and fell along the way, as he carried the cross to the place of his execution. The crowd followed along, some still calling for death, and some, the women who followed Jesus, weeping.

When Jesus finally reached the end of his journey, he was nailed through the ankles and wrists to a cross. These were not small nails at all. These nails were long and thick, and would crush bone. Crucifixion has become a bit like wallpaper for most of us. We see crosses everywhere. We might well be the only religion that wears a symbol of execution around our necks. For the people of Jesus' time, the cross was no harmless symbol, but one that filled them with terror.

Victims would linger for hours or days. The Romans had designed this form of execution to be as horrific as possible. The tremendous stress on the body eventually would take its toll and kill the victim. After Jesus submitted himself to death, the soldiers went so far as to pierce his side with a spear to ensure he was dead, the rush of water and blood confirming his heart and ripped itself to pieces.

Jesus was dead, his body utterly destroyed far beyond any hope of life. This was punishment our sin had brought to bear on us, this was the consequences of sin, but Jesus stepped in and took this horrible punishment, this horrible death for us. Jesus laid down his life for us. If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves. Jesus took the penalty for every lie we've ever told, every time we've cheated, every time we've flung curses at another person, every time we made our false idols and worshiped them over God, every idol word. Jesus took the penalty for all of it, so we wouldn't have to, so that we could be reconciled with a God that loves us. This terrible execution was the price of sin, paid in full by innocent blood.

From triumph to devastation, from joy and praise to the silent dread and fear of Holy Saturday, the lord dead in a tomb, the disciples cowering and frightened. And they had good reason to be frightened. The crowd had turned on Jesus, and would turn on them just as soon. It would not be enough to kill the leader of the movement, the romans would want to see the whole movement destroyed. It was very likely the disciples could face a similar faith to Jesus, to the terrible death they had just witnessed.

Women go to the tomb to carry out the heart wrenching work of embalming Jesus' broken body. The trauma of his execution still fresh in their minds, probably bracing for the sight of his body which would bring it all back. They will have to face the roman guards placed at the tomb, the guards they fear might well come after them, and somehow find a way to have the stone rolled back.

But then, everything changed. An earthquake shakes the ground, an angel rolls the stone away, the guards are stuck with fear and become docile. The Good News, the Gospel, is given by this angel to these women. He is not here. He has risen. See the empty tomb, see the cast-off grave clothes. And then go, and tell the others.

It seems incredible to believe. Death seems so final from where we stand, but the women did go quickly and told the disciples what had happened. From there, the Good News would be carried to the ends of the earth.

And it all started with a couple frightened women on a mission of compassion. These women had precious little credibility in their culture. They weren't considered reliable witnesses in Jewish culture. They weren't allowed to be rabbis. They hadn't been to seminary or bible college. They might well have been illiterate. They had no special training. Yet God chose these women to be the first witnesses to the resurrection. God could have chosen anyone, some renown rabbi or eloquent preacher, but God chose these women. And because of these women, we have heard the good news.

Don't ever think God can't use you because you lack some talent or training. You only need to be open to God, and God will supply the rest, as God did with these first apostles, the first witnesses to the risen Christ.

Today, we are far away from an open tomb, both in time and space, yet we still hear the voices of these women calling out the good news; Jesus is risen, he is not in the tomb, he has risen. All your sins are forgiven, you are adopted by God in great love, and you will live forever with God in God's kingdom. You, as a child of God, will never spend one moment alone for God will be with you every step of the way, you need only to receive the great news before you.

Do you hear the women? Do you believe their message? Chuck Colson, a Watergate participant turned Christian author once said "I know the resurrection is a fact, and Watergate proved it to me. How? Because 12 men testified they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years, never once denying it. Every one was beaten, tortured, stoned and put in prison. They would not have endured that if it weren't true. Watergate embroiled 12 of the most powerful men in the world-and they couldn't keep a lie for three weeks. You're telling me 12 apostles could keep a lie for 40 years? Absolutely impossible."

Do you hear? Do you believe? Will you receive the gift that is Easter morning? And if so, will you join these women in sharing the good news? Go quickly, and tell others what you have found, an empty tomb, a risen Lord, and a new life of love and grace, not punishment and fear.

That's not to say it will always be easy. The women went away afraid at the wonders they had seen and the implications of those wonders, a fear that many trials would lay ahead, yet also filled with joy. You don't have to be fearless to share the Good News. In the words of John Wayne, courage is being scared to death, but saddling up anyway.

These women were not experts, they had no special training or education, they were just normal people, scared to death and doing the best they could with what they had. And yet they changed the very world. Imagine if they had been silent that Easter morning. All they had

was a love for God and a willingness to serve God, and that's all it took. God supplied the rest, the words when needed, the means, and likely even some courage.

You and I have more resources and education than those women could have imagined. We have the completed bible to study for ourselves. We live in a country where we need not fear crucifixion for practicing our faith. What might we accomplish if we, like the first witnesses, simply loved God and had a willingness to serve God wherever and however God desires? Who might hear the good news for the first time? Who might finally receive the gift that is Easter morning? Who might breathe more deeply without the weight of their shame, knowing their sins are forgiven? Who might find an enduring and faithful love for the first time in their lives in Jesus Christ? What new brothers and sisters might we welcome into our family? What new friends might we make?

Friends, hear the good news. Mary and Mary Magdalene have seen the empty tomb. Christ is risen. He has appeared to many people, some of whom even touched the scars on his wrists. Our sins are forgiven. We have been adopted in the family of God, God who loves us enough to die for us and who promises to never leave us. All we need to do is receive the gift that has been given to us, and having received it, let us not hesitate to go quickly, and share this wonderful news with others.

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