

Discipleship in the Lectionary - 04/09/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Easter Day/Resurrection of the Lord

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, April 9th

Matthew 28:1-10

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Do not be afraid

We come now to Easter Sunday and the most important event in the Christian calendar. This lectionary year features Matthew's Gospel and thus it is his account of the Resurrection on this most important day. During Lent this year we have all faced a reminder of just how broken our world is – take your pick of the various political, economic, and socio-cultural crises. Yet it is the account of this first Easter Sunday that gives us the reason why we should not fear.

Matthew 28:1-10 Commentary

¹ 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.

The Sabbath ended on Saturday evening at sundown. The two Marys go to the tomb as soon as it is light. We read how Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph witnessed the crucifixion (27:56) and Mary Magdalene and the "other Mary" witnessed the burial (27:61). Presumably the other Mary here is the mother of James and Joseph. Deuteronomy 19:15 requires at least two witnesses to establish a charge. Jewish tradition would only accept male witnesses. A compelling fictional account that would have been more believable by the Jews would have had two men visiting the tomb. But this is not a fictional account. It is written by a human author under the superintendence of the Holy Spirit. While the women demonstrate courage in their faith, where are the men? Indeed, this is a question that many churches are asking today.

² 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. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men.

There is much eschatological symbolism in this scene communicating that God is ushering in a new age. The angel's appearance has allusions to the Ancient of Days (Daniel 7:9; 10:6). The angel also appeared at other pivotal moments in Matthew's Gospel: to Joseph telling him to take Mary as his wife (1:20) and telling him to flee to Egypt (2:13) and return to Israel (2:19). The word rendered as earthquake and thus the shaking of the earth in v.2 (*seismos*) is the same word used to describe the shaking of the guards in v.4 (*eseisthēsan*). The world shook, people shook. Jesus was dead and is now alive. The guards were supposed to be alive but appear dead. The image here of the angel sat on top of the rock suggests the job is finished. If angels smoked cigars, one would have been

fired up here. Victory. While the serpent may have bruised Christ's heal on Friday, early Sunday morning the events have been set in motion that will ultimately crush the serpent's head (see Genesis 3:15).

⁵ *But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified.*

⁶ *He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.*

The women had much to fear. Their world had been turned upside down over the previous few days. On top of this, they would have expected to experience at least some kind of harassment from the guards. Now there is the angel of the Lord and the events described above.

⁷ *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."* ⁸ *So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.*

The two women with fear and great joy hurry off to tell the 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 tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."*

It is turning out to be a good day indeed. As the women hurry off, they now encounter the resurrected Jesus. They take hold of His feet and worship Him. This indicates two important things. First, Jesus was not a spirit but a physical being since the women took hold (physically) of His feet. The fact the two Jewish women worshipped Jesus leaves us with absolute clarity of their understanding of His deity. If the message of the angel of the Lord was not enough, the resurrected Christ tells them (and us) to have no fear. The two women are commissioned as the first two evangelists - to hurry and deliver the good news to the disciples.

Reflections

The last time this text appeared in the lectionary for Easter was three years ago. Then we were in the midst of the early Pandemic when many were concerned this would be the Black Death of our age. Three years later, the Pandemic has faded into a distant memory for most only to be replaced by the shadow of the collapse of our long-time political system, world war and economic collapse. Three years from now, who knows what the next fear-du-jour will be. One thing is consistent from year to year and from generation to generation: Christ was raised from the dead and His tomb is still empty. The world was seismically changed – more so than if the Yellowstone Caldera erupts again. The spiritual reality of Christ's resurrection has continued to impact our physical world.

On the first Christian Sunday, the world of both Marys and all of Jesus' disciples was totally shaken. In the Gospel text, the phrase "*Do not be afraid*" appears twice. Usually when language is repeated in Scripture it is a clue that we should pay attention. In the first instance it is spoken by the angel of the Lord and the second instance by the risen Lord Himself. It is difficult to dispute the credibility of the messengers, no matter how difficult the message may be to hear. The very reason why we should not fear is also presented in the text: "*he has risen*" (v.6).

What does the bodily resurrection of Christ mean for us today? Quite simply - everything. The resurrection is the cornerstone of Christianity. Our broken world of death and despair came through Adam. Through Christ's resurrection we know everything ruined by Adam will finally be restored. Our redemption in Christ not only involves our souls but also our physical bodies. All of creation will be redeemed. Like Christ, we will have our own resurrection bodies living forever in the perfect world God intended. When we die, our spirits temporarily dwell with Christ. The real hope of Easter Sunday is the sure knowledge that on the last day our spirits will be reunited with our glorified physical bodies, and we will dwell in a new heaven and earth (Daniel 12:1-2; Revelation 21:1-4).

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.

[1 Corinthians 15:20-23]

As we ponder the events of this first Easter Sunday, it soon becomes clear that there are two camps we can stand in. We can be Good Friday people where we still have Jesus on trial. We may not be fully willing to embrace the truths about Christ that seem to conflict with what the world believes. After all, resurrection is a bit weird. Mohammed is still dead, Confucius is still dead, Buddha is still dead. As Good Friday people we are always going to live in fear. Alternatively, we can be Easter Sunday people and embrace the truth of the resurrection and its universe-shaking consequences. Grounded in this truth we cannot help but live our lives differently – regardless of whatever may be troubling us.

The complex theological consequences of the resurrection can be broken down into a simple statement offered up a few Easters ago by my pastor's great-grandson: "The tomb was empty. That's all you need to know!"

He is risen! Do not be afraid!

Application

- What does the resurrection mean to you in your life?
- How can the resurrection give you hope?
- How can the resurrection change the way you live?
- How would your life be different if there was no resurrection?
- Are you living like the resurrection never happened?

