

The Resurrection of Jesus

Matthew 28:1-10

Most Christians today think the resurrection is about our existence after death, about going to be with God when you die. Scripture does teach that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8), but the resurrection is about the defeat of death because Jesus resurrected here. Matthew shows how the resurrection of Christ empowers His followers to rejoice and follow in His steps on mission.

Summary of the Text

On the day after the Sabbath, the dawning of a new week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary come to the tomb (v. 1). Where they expect to find a dead body, an earthquake occurred and an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, rolled the stone away from the door, and sits on it (v. 2). The guards witnessed this, trembled with fear, and became like dead men, but Jesus is alive (v. 4). The angel tells the women not to be afraid; he knows they seek Jesus who was crucified, and just as He said, He is risen and they can see where He used to lay (vv. 5-6). He instructs them to quickly go and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead and to meet Him in Galilee (v. 7). They obey and with fear and joy run to tell the disciples, but on the way Jesus meets, greets, and receives their worship (vv. 8-9). He commands them not to be afraid but to go to Galilee and see Him there (v. 10).

New Creation

Matthew begins the resurrection account by literally saying “After the Sabbath, as it was dawning on the first of the Sabbaths” (v. 1). This is a new day of a new week and the sun is rising as Jesus conquers death and usher in a new creation. The Jews celebrated the seventh day Sabbath from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday, resting from vocational work, worshiping God, and enjoying this delightful gift from God (Is. 58:13). In Matthew’s Gospel, the Pharisees complain about how Jesus plucks grain and heals on the Sabbath, but He is Lord of the Sabbath and keeps it perfectly (Matt. 12:1-14). His enemies are all about what can’t be done on the Sabbath but He is about giving rest and life to His people. In the old covenant God’s people followed His pattern of working for six days and resting on the seventh, but after Jesus rose from the dead, the church calls the first day of the week, the day that Jesus rose from the dead, the Lord’s Day and sets it apart for rest and worship. We celebrate Easter once a year in a huge way, but really every Sunday is a day of worship, rest, and celebration because Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week and declared His Lordship over *this* world. The old Sabbath was a creation ordinance, and in order for it to change, Christ had to re-create. If He was going to defeat death, He had to rise bodily. This is not a secondary issue: “And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty... For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!” (1 Cor. 15:14, 16-17). This why the angel directs the women to see where the body used to be, and when they met Jesus Matthew tells us they worship and hold on to His feet (vv. 6, 9). Spirits don’t have ankles and toes. It’s hard for us to grasp the power of the resurrection because we don’t feel like death has been defeated. We still die. Christ has already risen and defeated death, but our experiencing the fullness of that victory and rising with Him is yet to come. The New Testament teaches us to live in this tension of the already and not yet: “For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death. For He has put all things under His feet” (1 Cor. 15:25-27); “For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. But now we do not yet

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see all things put under him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone” (Heb. 2:8-9). We are new creations in Christ, but we still fight the old flesh. We enjoy the beginning of the new heavens and the new earth where Isaiah tells us people still die (Is. 65:20).

New Witnesses

We’ve seen the women at the crucifixion, burial, and now at the resurrection of Jesus. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, who is probably Jesus’ mother, faithfully attend to Him even as they don’t understand His promise to rise on the third day. It’s remarkable that the first witnesses to the resurrection (not counting the soldiers) are women. If someone wanted to start a false religion in first century, the last people he would make the first eyewitnesses to a miracle would be a couple of women, particularly a former demoniac and the hero’s mom. Women were not allowed to be witnesses in court cases, and predictably some people attacked Christianity as a faith for women. People think religion is something that makes good people a little bit better. But you don’t have to be good enough in order to be a Christian; you have to be bad enough in order to be a Christian. You must believe that God’s own Son had to die on the cross for you, and that it was God’s sheer mercy alone that brought you and keeps you in relationship with Him. The angel has to send Mary and Mary to go get the disciples because they have scattered. And yet how does Jesus treat them? “Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me” (v. 10). These are His brothers. In one sense it’s like nothing has changed, like they didn’t flee and leave Him to die on the cross; He still loves them. But in another sense everything has changed—because Jesus died for their sins, they can come to Him and through Him to the Father for complete forgiveness and reconciliation. The woman who had been infested with demons, the girl who had been pregnant outside of wedlock, the proud and weak disciples all come to meet the risen Jesus. They don’t have all the answers or arguments, but they witness to the one who overcame death. He has the power of transform hearts and lives, and that happens when the gospel is unashamedly declared (cf. Rom. 1:16). When you believe, you must bear witness to it.

New Mission

The last time an angel appeared was at the beginning of Matthew to direct Joseph to marry Mary (1:20), flee to Egypt (2:13), and return to the land after Herod’s death (2:19). The last time we saw someone clothed in light was at the transfiguration when Jesus’ face and garments radiated in glory after talking with Moses and Elijah about what He would accomplish in Jerusalem (17:1-9). He came down from that mountain and began His journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. Both the angel and Jesus direct the women (and through them, the apostles) to go to Galilee where it all started. When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan, the Holy Spirit descended upon Him and the Father declared Him to be His beloved Son in whom He is well pleased. The mission is starting all over again, but this time it’s not Jesus who will carry it out but His emissaries. It was one thing to go with Jesus, but now this group of believers will follow in the steps of the risen Christ from Galilee to Jerusalem and from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. The news of what just happened is public news for the whole world that needs to hear it (cf. Acts 26:26).