

# The Rest of the Story

Matthew 28:1-10 Preached April 12, 2009 by Dr. Dwight Kilbourne

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

**The Setting.** Imagine what the early disciples felt following the death of Jesus. Their hero was dead. In him, they had placed their hope and trust. They had heard his words of love and compassion spoken to those in desperate situations. He was willing to associate with the outcasts – the poor, Samaritans, lepers, foreigners and sinners. They had witnessed amazing miracles – healing those who were blind, lame people walked and even a couple of dead people resuscitated.

Their hero had talked of a God's kingdom and its nearness. When they were with him they sensed they were part of that kingdom. Fresh air seemed to fill their lungs when he spoke. Hope flooded their hearts when he was present. Light filled their eyes, dispelling the darkness.

But now, their hero was dead - not a drop dead with a heart attack dead, but a death that came following his arrest, trial and execution. He was put to death as a

common criminal on a cross. How could this have happened?

When he was arrested, he did not fight back even though there was grave injustice. When on trial, he did not defend himself and prove just how wrong his accusers were. He did not rally his followers to take up swords and fight back. Would it not have been better to fight for the faith than to die as a criminal? He never called on the armies of heaven to deliver him from death. He suffered enormous pain, spent only a few hours on the cross and died. Did he just give in and give up?

Because we are an "Easter people," it is difficult for us to get our minds and heart around where those who loved him were early that first Easter morning. They were in a state of despair.

**The Untidiness of the resurrection stories.** I believe that the gospel writers understood and still knew those feelings of despair as they attempted to tell the story of the resurrection. In many ways, reading each of the stories along side one another is like talking at a funeral home with family members about the last days of they loved. Each tells the story from their perspective, with details varying, emotions at the surface and hearts still wounded. For one who listens, it is somewhat difficult to make sense of all that is said.

When we look at the resurrection story in the four gospels, we find what I consider to be a kind of untidiness. It is as if what we read is a raw and unedited version of the story. There seem to be parts of the story that are incomplete or disjunctive – (did the women and soldiers experience the earthquake – Jesus' appearance to them seem more like an interruption than expected in the story line).

When we place the four gospel stories beside one another, we find the details included are different from the number of women and angels to how it all unfolded. The modern mind longs to explain these differences and harmonize them or to declare, "Well this is evidence

against physical resurrection of Jesus." So the heated debate between progressives and fundamentalists rage.

The modern mind longs for a clear theological explanation of the resurrection but none is offered in the gospels. We tend to want a systematic theology about resurrection and atonement. We want 4 spiritual laws we can use to tell the story. But in the text, we do not find this. There is not reflective editing by the church at a later date of the text. We have the "raw and unedited" versions of resurrection.

These factors give enormous power to the story. When we read the words, we are there. The resurrection is not something we can easily explain. It is mysterious. It is complex.

**Two women headed to the tomb.** Matthew tells his readers about two women who were headed to the tomb. We know very little about these two women. Mary Magdalene had followed Jesus for some time and had been delivered from oppression by him. She had contributed to the support of his ministry team from her resources. There is no hint that she was a secret lover who had married him even though it is popular among some to think that was the case. That story is creative fiction. The other Mary was a mother of two characters, James and Joseph, whom no one today is quite sure who they were.

Apparently these two women started their journey to the tomb when there was just enough light for them to see their way.

Personally, I am prejudiced toward that part of the day. If you look for me just as light in piercing the darkness of morning, you will find me most days walking through my neighborhood and down to the lake and back. For me, it is a time of encountering creation and the Creator. The shadows of night create some uncertainties but the rays of light give hope of a new day.

I suspect for these two women, there were no rays of hope. The darkness of night still held their souls. They

were going to the tomb to do what mourners do. They were not looking for a resurrected Savior but a dead friend.

In his retelling of the story, Matthew shares an interesting and surprising contrast. On the day preceding the resurrection, he tells his readers that a few of the Jewish council members went to Pilate and explained that Jesus had said when he was alive that he would rise from the dead. They wanted guards to be posted lest the disciples come and steal the corpse and claim he had been raised. Pilate granted permission for the Jews to post their own police at the tomb.

This is interesting. The Jewish people who led the way in having Jesus executed had more faith in Jesus' words than his followers did. All except a few women were in hiding. They seemed to have forgotten Jesus' words about rising from the dead even though he had shared it with them at least three different times. These women were not looking for a resuscitated friend when they made their way to the tomb.

At the tomb, they got the surprise of their lifetime. Surprise! Surprise! Surprise! They were greeted by an angel whose appearance was gleaming and clothes were snow white and who was ready to deliver his lines given by God.

Speaking of delivering one's lines, a young boy was next to say his lines in a church presentation. When his mother noticed a blank look on his face, she whispered, "I am the light of the world." Armed with renewed confidence the child proclaimed, "My mom is the light of the world."

Fortunately, the angel knew his lines: "You are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here for he has been raised." Can you imagine what they must have thought? Is this April 1? Are there hidden cameras? But the angel did not stop there, "Come and see the place where he lay." They saw the evidence of the empty tomb.

If that evidence was not enough, Matthew tells us that as they were leaving, Jesus met and greeted them. Upon seeing him they knelt to the ground and grasped his feet. Their love and awe flowed forth in abundant fashion.

**The otherness.** There is something about this story that demonstrates an "otherness." This is beyond the normal. Earthquakes, conversations with an angel, talk of the dead being raised, an empty tomb and grasping the feet of a risen dead man is not everyday stuff. It is something from beyond our experience intersecting with our world. The divine invades our cosmic existence. The great reversal takes place – we know life to death, but here we find death to life.

For these women, their lives would never more be the same. They had been the first to see the risen crucified Savior. They would be changed forever.

Matthew tells us as they were leaving the tomb they did so with "fear and great joy." These are not complementary emotions. In my thinking, they hardly seem to fit together. When I am afraid, I am seldom joyful. When I am joyful, seldom does fear fill my heart.

Once again we are taken back to the messiness of the story – joy and fear together in those who hear about the resurrection of Jesus.

Without a doubt, this day of the Christian year is the greatest because we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. With great anticipation, most believers look forward to it and to seeing churches filled with worshipers.

Yet I find preaching about the resurrection is not the easiest sermon to preach. There is a high level of mystery and otherness about the resurrection. I believe it with all my heart, yet I cannot adequately explain it. I can share with you theories of atonement that arise out of the resurrection and then let you know that each do not do adequate justice to the event.

Even in experiencing the risen crucified Lord on a personal basis, there is messiness about it. We want a set pattern of that encounter – step 1, 2, and 3 but there is not one. When and how we encounter Jesus is different for each of us. We hope for a guaranteed result – new life, deliverance from oppressive forces, discovering the secret to life's meaning, reversal of bad times, etc. While for some these may occur, others do not see or feel the immediate impact. Even for those who may experience immediate improvement, difficulties may later arise that challenge faith. (Some of you here today,

know that experience. At one point Christ was so real to you but stuff happened that shook your faith and your faithfulness.)

I think of a dear friend of mine who came to know Jesus Christ and an immediate change was evident in his life. He became extremely active in church, giving more than a tithe from his business, serving and doing as much as he could for the church and being part of some deep fellowship groups. After a couple of years, his business faced some reversals and he felt as though he was abandoned by God. He went into shutdown mode spiritually and dropped out of church. To my knowledge, he has yet to return even though that has been nearly a decade ago. I think of it as messy. How I long for him once again to open his eyes and heart toward Jesus.

The message and encounter of the resurrection of Jesus Christ involves mystery, complexity and a level of messiness. Yet it is at the heart and center of our faith. It is about a personal encounter with the risen Jesus through which we are transformed to transform the world.

There are people at many different places in relationship to Jesus. Some have experienced and received him personally, have lived through the challenges to faith, and yet are extremely close to him. Others had encounters and began life in relationship to him, but the challenges of life have battered your faith and commitment. Others have never allowed yourself to get close to Jesus, even though you may have sensed his presence.

My personal longing this morning is that each of us will this day encounter the risen Jesus. My hope is that each of us will receive him into our lives and live with and for him. I want each of us to experience his transformative power and then be in ministry to transform this world for his sake.

#### **Invitation.**

Will you open your heart to Jesus now? Will you yield control of your life to him? If so, I invite you to join me in prayer.