



Matthew 28:1-10 - After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. <sup>2</sup>There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. <sup>3</sup>His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. <sup>4</sup>The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. <sup>5</sup>The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. <sup>6</sup>He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. <sup>7</sup>Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you." <sup>8</sup>So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. <sup>9</sup>Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped 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; there they will see me."

## *Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life*



*Shouts of joy and victory resound in the tents of the righteous: "The LORD's right hand has done mighty things! The LORD's right hand is lifted high; the LORD's right hand has done mighty things!" I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the LORD has done. (Psalm 118:15-17)*

So there I was, standing in a golf course sand trap on a very warm day, doing some very unpleasant work with one of my coworkers. And as it often happens during the dog days of summer, we arrived at the unspoken agreement that it was time for a little break. There we stood, leaning on our respective rakes, trying to catch our breath. And then he asked me, "You're studying to be a pastor, right?" "Yeah," "So you mean to tell me that all the bad things I've ever done, all the sins I've committed, I'm supposed to believe that God forgives those and they're gone, poof, just like that?" I said, "Yeah, because of Jesus, and through faith in him, that's right." "I don't know about that. It sounds too easy. It doesn't make any sense. And plus, how could you ever really know for sure?" While the exact wording of our conversation that day may have slipped my mind a little bit, and some of the dialogue may have been ever so slightly embellished for the purpose of illustration, the struggle my coworker was wrestling with was a very common one. Doubt. How could he ever really know for sure that God would forgive his sins? How can you know that God would ever forgive yours? Maybe you've struggled with similar thoughts of doubt in your life. So sometimes you want proof. You'd like a little certainty. You wish you had the assurance of God himself putting his hand on your shoulder and telling you – "Don't be afraid, I've taken care of it all." The burden of doubt is, truly, a heavy one to bear.

On the first Easter morning, the women and the disciples were carrying some burdens of their own. First of all, sadness – their good friend and beloved teacher had been wrongfully accused, unjustly convicted, and brutally killed. The women and the disciples had some doubts of their own that Easter morning - certainly at least once, they had heard Jesus say something about rising from the dead but in just about every other instance of death they had seen, it was pretty much a one way street. Nobody came back. And I think the women and the disciples were wrestling with the burden of guilt –after all, most of them had abandoned their friend in his hour of deepest need; some even going so far as to deny ever knowing him. They were carrying some burdens on that first Easter morning.

When the Marys arrived at the tomb, things were nothing like they expected. Instead of seeing a stone sealed sepulcher, they came to an open and empty grave. Instead of the body of their dear friend and teacher, the Marys saw Roman soldiers passed out from fear and a dazzling angel messenger who had rolled away the stone to reveal God's promise fulfilled. The rocky slab where Jesus' lifeless body had lain became the first Easter pulpit. Instead of the silence of a tomb and the stillness of death, they listened to a sermon—short, sweet, and to the point. This sermon has literally changed the history of the world: **"He is not here; he has risen, just as he said!"** The crucified One lives again! Now, wait a minute, pastor. Did you just say that a dead man literally rose from the dead? Actually, I didn't say it. Angels said it. No, even more than that, Jesus the Son of God said it! The angels quoted Christ himself, **"He has risen, just as he said."** Whether the world believes in the bodily resurrection of Christ from the dead doesn't change the fact in the least: Easter truly, literally happened. And it makes all the difference.

In order to appreciate the gravity of that simple sentence, we would be well served to take a look at the ugly flipside of that Easter coin. What would our reality be if Jesus hadn't risen from the dead? What if the Roman soldiers at the tomb were just lazy and the Marys were delusional and the angels were just a myth? What if the gospel writers were just plain making stuff up and spinning a story? Well, the apostle Paul tells us, **If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, you are still in your sins.** So, if Jesus isn't alive we've got a problem...a big problem that's three letters long: S-I-N. And deep down inside, each one of us knows that **the wages of sin is death.**



What would our reality be if Jesus hadn't risen from the dead? Once again, Paul tells us, **If the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.** So, if Jesus isn't alive we've got a problem...a big problem. That means that all of our loved ones who have died with faith resting solely on Christ and his promises – are lost. If Jesus isn't alive, then there's no hope for my sister, my nephew, my grandparents, no hope for me, no hope for you. If Jesus isn't alive, then the thought of eternity can only make us shudder. What would our reality be if Jesus hadn't risen from the dead? **If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.** If Jesus isn't alive, you and I and every person on this planet have no real hope in this life. If Jesus is still in his grave, then our entire existence is just a hopeless, hapless, aimless wandering until we simply cease to exist. What an ugly picture!

But Jesus *has* been raised from the dead – really, physically, truly raised from the dead! Trusting in the truth of Easter isn't simply a matter of *"I didn't like all that depressing sounding stuff we just talked about, so I'm going to delude myself with some more pleasant thoughts."* Trusting in the truth of Easter is taking God, who cannot lie, at his word. The crucified one lives again – and the eternal God stakes his entire reputation on these historical, unshakeable Easter facts! The gospel writers weren't liars. The angels weren't a myth. The Marys weren't delusional – instead they came to the tomb of Jesus burdened by their own struggles with sadness, doubt, and guilt – and there by the word of the risen Christ himself, they found a place for unloading every one of their burdens. They saw the solution to every one of their problems; the fulfillment of every one of God's promises; joy for their sorrow, certainty for their doubt, and forgiveness for their guilt standing in flesh and blood right before their eyes. Christ is risen! Easter truly, literally happened. And it makes all the difference.

As you come and view the empty tomb this morning, maybe for the first time, maybe for the fiftieth, what burdens are you carrying with you? You can be honest with yourself. After all, even the Marys and the disciples didn't *immediately* understand what the empty tomb meant. Instead, even after seeing the empty tomb, there were some fears, there were some tears. Sometimes, in our lives, we forget all that the empty tomb of Easter means. When temptation comes nagging and we think we're powerless against it, and we think there's no other recourse but to give in...we forget what the empty tomb means. When we do fall into sin and our guilt overwhelms us to the point that we can't even look past our own feelings of worthlessness to the living, breathing proof of God's grace standing right in front of us...we forget what the empty tomb means. When we look at our life on earth and the people around us and think there's no purpose for my existence and no hope for my future...we forget what the empty tomb means. And with those problems and with those struggles in our lives inevitably comes our own attempts at solving those problems – if I just take the right steps, if I do more of the good things and not so many of the bad, if I just put a smile on and try harder, then things will get better. But every one of our human solutions to our struggles and fears is kind of like trying to put a Band-Aid onto cancer. It's never going to work.

Those attempted solutions certainly weren't working for the Marys or the disciples on that first Easter morning. They came to the tomb weighed down by the myrrh and spices they were carrying, but shouldered an even heavier burden in their hearts – doubt, guilt, and fear. But then...Jesus showed up. Faithful to his word, **a bruised reed he will not break and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out**, Jesus gave those women every ounce of assurance and comfort that they could ever want. He simply said, **"Do not be afraid."** That simple command from Jesus carried with it the power to do just what it said. **Do not be afraid.** It's real. I'm here. The reality of the resurrection changed everything. Then they knew for a fact that everything Jesus said was the truth and every promise he had made was going to be fulfilled. No need for burdens, no need for fear, **Do not be afraid.**



In his grace, Jesus says the same thing to you today. **Do not be afraid.** Why not? Because Jesus lives. By his resurrection, Jesus delivers straight to you everything ounce of comfort and assurance you need. If you've come to the tomb this morning carrying a burden, then join the club. And find the only place in history to lay down those burdens. If you've come to the tomb this morning looking for proof, look where Jesus promises it to be – as you hear his voice in his word; as he reached his hand into the dark abyss that was your life and pulled you out through the waters of baptism; as he takes your trembling hand into his own nail scarred hand and tells you, "Don't be afraid, I've taken care of it all," feeding you with his own body and blood for your forgiveness.

So what are you expecting to receive from your Easter celebration? I suppose that depends on what you personally believe about the reality of Jesus' resurrection. If the forgiveness of sins and victory over death aren't really that big of a deal to you, then there is no pressing reason to come and worship Jesus again anytime soon. And the best you can expect from today is a bunny, bonnets, a ham, and a nap. But if Christ walked out of his tomb—truly, bodily, powerfully—then you have every reason to worship him as often as you can! And the certainty you have for today is full forgiveness for all of your sins, complete removal of all your guilt, God's truth to drive out your doubts, joy as you live for Jesus now, hope of eternal life in heaven, and the assurance of your own bodily resurrection when the last trumpet sounds.

Easter changes everything – remembering what the empty tomb means changes everything. Does the devil want to make you feel powerless against his temptations and to think that you have no other recourse but to give in? Take him to the empty tomb and show him that if Jesus has the power to rise from the dead, he has the power to help me fight temptation. Does the prince of lies want to throw your sins back in your face and make you doubt and wonder whether God could really love me after what I've done? Take that liar to the empty cross and the empty tomb and show him that here the sacrifice was made and accepted. Do you want to know that you eternal life rests securely in God's hands and your earthly life actually has a purpose? Go to the empty tomb and see that because he lives, you too will live. Christ's resurrection has the power to transform despair into joy, guilt into freedom, and yes the power to transform death into life. Christ is risen, he is risen indeed! And that makes all the difference.

Amen

*To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power, and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen (Jude 24-25)*