

The King's Victory

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's reading is from the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 28, verses 1 through 20.

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. 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.

His appearance was like lightning and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

The angel said to the women, do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here. He has risen, just as he said.

[1 : 26] Come and see the place where he lay. 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. So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid, yet filled with joy, and ran to tell the disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them.

Greetings, he said. They came to him, clasped his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers and go to Galilee where they will see me.

While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, you are to say, his disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.

If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep out of trouble. So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed.

[2 : 38] And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day. Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go.

When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. This is the gospel of the Lord. Thank you, Lord Christ. Good morning, Christ Church, and happy Easter.

I'm going to do the hardest thing that I have to do all day today, which is to take a picture of you right now, so that I can remember you. Now, some of you have your Presbyterian face, but I want you to act like you're happy that it's Easter Sunday.

[3 : 43] So, all right, that's great. That'll be something I can draw on through the rest of this year. So, we've already heard this ancient Easter greeting in Greek.

It's Christos Sonesti, Alithos Sonesti, which means Christ has risen. He's risen indeed. But what we haven't done yet is what many churches call the great noise. And that is when churches get together, people would bring pots and pans and horns and tambourines.

And we don't have those today, but you can maybe pull out your keys. You can use your hands to clap, or you can bang on your pews. And in a moment, I'm going to say Christ has risen. You'll say he's risen indeed.

And we're going to practice this ancient Christian practice called the great noise. You ready? Christ has risen. He has risen indeed. He is risen indeed. All right, now don't get too excited.

Some of you are here, and you're like, okay, Christians are weird. And you're right. But why are we so excited? We have people here every Sunday who are exploring Christianity.

[5 : 06] For some of us, Easter's a day where we come to church with our family because it's the thing to do, trying to make our mom happy or whatnot. Some of us, we used to be a part of church, or maybe we identified as a Christian at some point in the past.

And for some of us today, this may be your first time in a church. Wherever you're coming from, we're so glad that you're here. And maybe you're asking the question, what actually happened on that first Easter Sunday morning?

And I want to acknowledge up front that this is just an odd and outlandish thing, unimagined and unheard of, really. And it's so unlikely, so improbable that it's astonishing this story was ever even told in the first place, that one person in the middle of history, in the middle of the night, walked out of his grave alive with an indestructible body that would never die again.

And that's crazy. That's crazy. But what I want to help you to do today is to examine the historical record, to take a deeper look at this event that energizes the irrepressible enthusiasm of the church and the unshakable joy of Christians.

And we're looking at that today in the Gospel of Matthew. We've been here since Christmas Eve, and we've now reached the climax. And Matthew recounts for us what happened after Jesus died on the cross on Good Friday.

[6 : 31] And what he tells us is this. He says, Jesus' resurrection leads to joy, worship, mission, and grace. That Jesus' resurrection leads to joy, worship, mission, and grace.

I want to talk first about Jesus' resurrection, and then try to apply the meaning of that resurrection, the significance for our lives. But Jesus' resurrection, first of all, verse 1, says that after the Sabbath at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. And these women were not outside the tomb, counting down 10, 9, 8, 7, cue the sunrise, 6, 5, 4, cue the hallelujah chorus, 3.

No, they weren't doing that at all. They were not saying, I'm so excited to see a resurrection today. And isn't Easter brunch going to be so delicious later on? No.

What were they expecting? They were expecting Jesus to do what deceased people do, and that is to be dead. The gospel of Mark, the gospel of Luke, tells us that these women brought spices to embalm the corpse of Jesus because they knew what we know, that dead people stay dead.

[7 : 47] Well, what happens while they're on the way to this tomb? We're told in verse 2 that 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.

What in the world? Well, in the Old Testament, when God was on the move to save people, the earth would tremble. You see this in the Exodus and at Mount Sinai, where God's giving the moral law.

He's giving the first parts of his Bible, the mountain shakes, and something like that's going on here. Reality is shifting, and so people feel some shaking. And what's up with this angel?

Well, I understand that people are skeptical of these spiritual, non-human beings, and we don't really have time today to talk about the metaphysics of these heavenly warrior messengers.

But I will just say this. If angels do exist, and if God in this moment is putting the universe back on its axis and saving the human race from certain ruin, wouldn't we expect God to get at least a few of these angels involved in the process, involved in these great nerve centers and turning points of history, like God becoming a human being, and this human being being raised from the dead by God.

[9 : 03] I think that's what's happening here. And Matthew 27 tells us that there's this great stone over the tomb, and the seal of the Roman Empire has been put on that stone, and a Roman guard, a large Roman guard, has been put there to ensure that no one comes to steal the body.

And these women come to the tomb. They don't have any idea, really, how they're going to get into the tomb to embalm this corpse. They just come out of love and loyalty to Jesus to try.

And the text tells us that the Lord God rolled the stone away. Why? Why did he do that? Well, it wasn't to let Jesus out. Right?

It's not like Jesus was inside the tomb banging and saying, hey, somebody come let me out, because the Gospels tell us in other places that Jesus' glorified body was so amazing, it could walk through locked doors, that he has this new spiritualized physicality.

Jesus can just appear wherever he wants to appear. So the stone is not removed to let Jesus out. The stone is removed to let the eyewitnesses in so that they can see that God has emptied this tomb.

[10:14] And this angel, in a dramatic fashion, sits on the stone to let us know that the grave has been conquered by Jesus and that our enemy, Death, has been defeated by Jesus.

And look at what it says in verse 3. His appearance, the appearance of this angel was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

And this is incredible because these are Roman soldiers who've seen it all. They're hardened men. They are fearless people, and yet they encounter the power of the Lord God Almighty, and it completely wrecks them and undoes them.

And, you know, you sort of have to ask, like, why doesn't that happen to the women? Well, these are fierce women. They've been with Jesus for three years. They've been exposed.

They've developed some capacity. They're incredibly courageous and brave women. And what does God say to them? What's his word of divine revelation to these disciples and then to us?

[11:19] It says in verse 5 that the angel said to the women, Do not be afraid, for I know that you're looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here. He has risen, just as he said.

Come and see the place where he lay. 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 to kind of pause here because our culture says that miracles and things like resurrection are not scientifically possible. But we also say that these biblical documents are not historically reliable.

And the common line of thinking is this, that, you know, many people believe that Jesus was a good man, he was a teacher of love, and that he died. And later on, people began to develop higher and higher views of Jesus, that Jesus was maybe divine, that he was perhaps the son of God.

And they invented this story of the resurrection. And centuries went by. They wrote these stories down. And the results are these gospels, these pious legends that we should not trust.

[12:27] But I want to point you to a few clues that this gospel, these gospels are reliable history and not merely legend. One of the major clues is that all four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the first eyewitnesses of Jesus' resurrection were women.

And you may know that in the first century, women had low status. They were not full citizens. Their testimony was not admissible in a court of law. So if you're making up this kind of story, you're doing a really bad job.

Like, why would you put them in the story? You'd have a very high incentive not to even mention women and just jump straight to the men, Peter, Andrew, James, John. Make them your witnesses. But Matthew names these women, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary who we learned in the previous chapters, Mary, the mother of James and Joseph. And why does he name these women? Well, Matthew is writing 30 years after the resurrection within the lifetime of these eyewitnesses.

And he's basically saying, look, these are well-known, respected members of the church, and you can go talk to them, and you can go cross-examine them, and ask them what they saw at that tomb.

[13:43] The Apostle Paul is doing something very similar. He's writing 20 years after the resurrection. And he gives us a whole list of witnesses, people who saw the risen Jesus in 1 Corinthians 15.

And he says, at one point there were 500 people all at the same time who saw Jesus. Most of them are still alive. And again, you have access to them. You can go, and you can talk to them and figure it out for yourself.

So what if this is not a legend? What if this is established fact and reliable history? Well, then that means that God's word to these female disciples and to us is simply this.

In verse 7, he has been raised from the dead. That Jesus' corpse is not here because he's no longer a corpse. He's gone into death, and he's come out the other side somehow alive.

You know, that God, in some mysterious way, has raised Jesus from death into a new life that's incorruptible and indestructible. And I want to mention here that this does not erase what happened

on Good Friday.

[14:51] Far from it. This does not render the death of Jesus meaningless, but rather it shows us how meaningful his death actually was. In verse 5, they hear these words, I know you're looking for Jesus who was crucified.

And Jesus will be eternally known as Christ crucified. The other gospels tell us that Jesus' glorified body still bears the marks of his crucifixion.

And this means for us that the resurrection means that Jesus... This is not a reversal of Jesus' defeat. The resurrection is the proclamation of his victory on Good Friday.

The resurrection tells us that Jesus' death on the cross was not a defeat, but that it was, in fact, God's victory over sin and the wages of sin, which is death.

This news that's being announced here at this empty tomb, that quote-unquote, Jesus who was crucified has been raised from the dead, means that his Good Friday sacrifice for us was sufficient.

[16:01] And that his substitution of himself in our place to atone for our sins was effective. And the resurrection confirms to them, these women, and it confirms to us that the finished work of salvation, wrought by Jesus Christ on his cross, has been accepted and approved by God.

Now, if you're here exploring Christianity, I want to ask you, have you considered that this same Jesus who was crucified, this same Jesus who prayed from his cross, Father, forgive them?

The same Jesus who cried out at the very end, it is finished, the work of salvation is finished. This Jesus who went through such bitter agony, did it all out of love for you.

And have you considered that God raised him from the dead for your sake, so that your sins might be wiped away, and that you too might share in his victory in his life?

Friends, this crucified yet resurrected Jesus is alive. He's here with us even now, through his scriptures, through his sacraments, through his spirit, and he's inviting you today.

[17:21] He wants to welcome you today into his kingdom, if you would just simply not lean on your own understanding, but acknowledge him as the one who has been raised from the dead.

And perhaps you're here, and you're just beginning this process of exploring Christianity today, and I want to extend to you the same invitation that these women received in verse 6, where it says, come and see, come and observe, come and open-mindedly research, and investigate, and examine all the evidence.

And I invite you to take two practical steps today. The first is that we have a lovely new website, and if you go on our website, you'll scroll down, and you'll see questions welcomed.

And if you click on questions, you'll see a whole list of some resources that address some very common doubts, and very common concerns for people who are exploring Christianity. I invite you to look at those, and maybe explore one of those.

The second thing I want to invite you to do is come to our Ask Me Anything lunch next Sunday with myself and Pastor Andrew. It's a free lunch for people who just have questions about Jesus, and about the Gospels.

[18:34] But I hope that today, I've at least demonstrated to you that it's not possible for these eyewitness accounts to be legends. And as Sherlock Holmes once said, when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.

C.S. Lewis, who was an Oxford professor and described himself as one of the most reluctant converts in all of England, he said, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that he, Jesus, was and is God.

And that's what the resurrection's all about. Jesus' resurrection from the dead leads to joy, leads to worship, leads to mission, and it leads to grace.

I want to press out some of the implications of the resurrection for a minute and apply it to our lives. Jesus' resurrection leads to joy, worship, mission, and grace. Look at verse 8.

It says, The word in that text in Greek is they had a mega joy, mega gladness.

[19:52] Being reunited with those we love is one of the happiest experiences on the earth. When we see that familiar face and we hear that reassuring voice and we feel that comforting embrace, imagine what it would be like to be reunited with someone you never thought you'd see again.

Somebody you thought you'd lost forever. They didn't just change jobs. They didn't just move away. But somebody you thought you would never, ever see again. Some of us today, we think about family we've lost.

We think about friends that we've lost. And it's devastating to think that they're gone. However hard we try, no medical, no industrial advance can stop death from winning.

It's going to happen to you. It's going to happen to me. Our bodies are going to fall apart. It's the destiny of every person we love. And yet this tells us that there's one man in history who demonstrated absolute power and authority over death.

And that, if it's true, leads to mega joy. These women had not yet met the resurrected Jesus. That's going to happen in a minute. But the very news of a possible reunion with Jesus fills them with a mixture of fear and joy.

[21 : 10] Fear because they're real people like us and it'd be strange if they weren't trembling with some awe in this moment. But joy because if their lives are somehow reunited to the life of this conquering Christ, then how can they not gratefully and joyfully participate in his victory over death?

And so their hearts are filled with gladness and the delight of the living God himself. And friends, do you know what this means for us? If Jesus is alive, if death has been defeated, if the uncreated energies of God have been unleashed in the resurrected Jesus, then our circumstances, no matter how difficult, can be transcended by this unshakable and unflappable joy of the Lord.

And that does not deny our tragedies. That does not erase our pain or our sadness. It just says that we can have joy even within these experiences.

Some of us in this church have been studying Philippians, which is an epistle in the New Testament written from a prison cell. The Apostle Paul is chained to a Roman guard.

He's being treated as a criminal. And you can imagine the conditions of an ancient prison cell. But this is called his letter of joy. It's the happiest epistle he wrote.

[22 : 37] And he says there, he says, rejoice in the Lord. And I'll say it again, rejoice always. What's happening with this man? The joy of the resurrected Jesus is filling his prison cell.

The joy of the resurrected Lord is filling all of his pain. And friends, the joy of the Lord can fill your sorrow too. The joy of the Lord can be your strength.

The joy of the Lord can point you to that future joy. When all of us are going to be raised up and we're going to be reunited with this one we thought we'd never see again, it's just a matter of time, my friends.

Jesus' resurrection leads to joy. But Jesus' resurrection also leads to worship. It leads to worship. Look at verse 9. It says that suddenly Jesus met them.

And you've got to watch out now because Jesus is out there. He's loose. Suddenly he'll come and meet you. Suddenly he came and met them and greetings he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshipped him.

[23 : 45] Can you imagine Jesus coming up to you and saying, Shalom. Morning. And what do they do? They fall down before him. They grab his nail-scarred feet and they worship him.

And you say, well of course they did. They're gullible. They're primitive, pre-scientific, supernaturalistic people who are prone to be duped by a quote-unquote miracle. But I have to remind you today that these are Jews.

These are Jews and Jews in the first century believed in a general resurrection to come at the end of time. But absolutely no Jew but Jesus in the first century believed that one individual in the middle of history would rise up from the dead.

Jews also were the last people on the planet to believe that a human being could be divine. And a human being is somebody who should be worshipped. This was just impossible.

It was blasphemy in their worldview. But look at verse 16. Then the eleven disciples came to Galilee to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go.

[24 : 51] And when they saw him they worshipped him but some doubted. Again, if you're making up this story why would you write that in? This is just bad storytelling.

To say that the founders of the church were full of skepticism. Well how strong would the evidence have had to have been to blow away all their doubts and their skepticism.

It must have been incredibly strong for them to develop a whole new worldview overnight. And this tells us that these women and these men when they encountered Jesus it says they proskuneoed.

And I had to look up that word this week and here's what it means. It says proskuneo means to fall on your knees put your forehead on the ground and express reverence before a person of superior rank.

Now how does that definition of worship compare with our definition of worship? If you're a Christian have you bowed yourself down in reverence and adoration at the feet of the resurrected Jesus today?

[25 : 57] It's what these women and these men do instinctively in the presence of this living Lord. He doesn't command them to do it they just know it's the natural and right and good thing to do.

When you're in the presence of this death-defeating life-giving Jesus you just fall down. And if you're a disciple of Jesus I want to encourage you to make this a daily habit in your life.

When you wake up in the morning when you go to bed at night when you gather to pray with your family or friends fall on your knees put your forehead on the ground and express reverence before this person of superior rank because he's alive and he's worthy of our worship.

Amen? The resurrection Jesus' resurrection leads to joy it leads to worship it also leads to mission. Two times in verses 7 and 10 these women hear this message go and tell go and tell and next week Andrew's going to unpack the great commission at the end of this text in verses 18 to 20 but they're given a mission aren't they?

Your eyes have seen the empty tomb your ears have heard the word of God the word of this gospel your hands have touched the resurrected body of Jesus you've done your investigation you've done careful observation you've applied rigorous criticism you've gathered up this empirical data and now what do you do when you have the data scientists you publish the data you go and report the data that you've discovered and who are they sent to reach well they're not sent to reach the ends of the earth not yet Jesus says I'm sending you out to my disciples because if the church doesn't believe in the resurrection how will the rest of the world believe in the resurrection and so they're to go and tell that he Jesus has been raised from the dead and these wonderful beautiful women they go and evangelize the apostles and why does Jesus tell these apostles to come meet him in Galilee because Galilee is Gentile territory

[28 : 08] Galilee is the place that it all began but it's the place where they're going to take this news of the resurrected Jesus west to Italy and east to India and south to Ethiopia and north to the peoples of Eurasia you can read the acts of the apostles the letters in the new testament early Christian history and you can read about these men and women who endured great persecution they endured beatings they endured executions to go out and share this incredible news would they have done that if this tomb were empty would they have risked their lives if Jesus were not alive why in the world would you go out and live these kind of lives of courage and compassion and sacrifice and to die for a fantasy for a fraud no threat no torture could cause these women and these men to deny what they had seen with their eyes and for them because they had seen it death no longer had any power over them whatsoever

I love this text from Michael Green he wrote a book called evangelism through the local church he says the church armed with such an improbable claim and beginning from a handful of uneducated fishermen and tax gatherers swept across the whole known world in the first the next 300 years it's a perfectly amazing story of peaceful revolution that no parallel that has no parallel in the history of the world it came about because Christians were able to say to inquire Jesus did not only die for you he is alive you can meet him and discover for yourself the reality that we're talking about they did and joined the church and the church born from that Easter grave spread everywhere and I pray it will keep spreading in Berkeley and Oakland and throughout the San Francisco Bay Area through us the resurrection of Jesus leads to joy it leads to worship it leads to mission and the last thing I want to say is that it leads to grace it leads to grace

Jesus says in verse 10 do not be afraid go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee there they will see me the one that they thought was lost to them the one they thought they'd never see again is waiting for them in Galilee the place where they first met him the place where everything started he says go to Galilee and there you will see me but friends it's not only the disciples who will see the risen Jesus you will see him too you're going to see him too the apostle Paul says in Acts chapter 17 he's preaching to Athens the intellectual center of the Roman Empire and he says in Acts 17 31 for God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed he has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead in other words there will be a day of judgment for all of us the resurrected

Jesus guarantees that one day we too will be raised physically and when we're raised up from the dead Jesus is going to be our judge on that day and the only question is are we ready to meet him are you ready to meet him and you know who was not ready to meet the resurrected Jesus these

disciples these disciples who disowned him these disciples who abandoned Jesus in his hour of greatest need these were big time screw ups you think you're a screw up these guys were big time screw ups spectacular failures but what does Jesus say he says go tell my brothers and isn't that a beautiful detail that having died to pay for sin and having risen from death to prove that sin was truly paid for Jesus wants these disciples to know that by the grace of God they can be his brothers if only they would trust in Jesus then all of their sin all their denials all their abandonment all of their betrayals every failure to love

God as they should would be fully and finally forgiven and friends that could be the case for you and me that by grace we can be reunited with Jesus as his brothers and as his sisters don't you want to know this Jesus that's gone ahead and is waiting for you don't you want to know that familiar face that reassuring voice that comforting embrace Christ church Jesus is risen from the dead he's launched a new creation where all is forgiven all is remade all is reborn and so I invite you let's join in his project let's be a resurrection people let's be a joyful people of life in a world that's still in death let's be a worshiping people that celebrate God's victory over death let's be a missionary people to this world that Jesus loves so much he gave his life and let's commit ourselves today to follow this

[33 : 49] Jesus who gives grace to the undeserving undeserving people like you and undeserving people like me who he wants to know as brothers and as sisters in the name of the Father Son and Holy Spirit Amen Amen