

The Day Heaven Came to Earth

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[0 : 00] In Matthew chapter 28 and verses 1 through 4. So if you've got your Bible with you, you've got your Bible handy or on your phone, then Matthew 28 verse 1 through 4.

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. 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.

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

So imagine the scene. You're quietly minding your business in your Glasgow back garden when a strange shadow comes over the sun.

You look up and behold, an alien mothership is settling over Hillhead. Okay, yes, we're in Hollywood territory.

[1 : 03] We're waiting for Will Smith to turn up in his F-15 and give the little green men a jolly good thrashing. How strange and how fantastic. Good job it doesn't belong in reality, eh?

Only on the screen. What we're reading today doesn't belong on the screen. It belongs in reality. It's the day heaven came to earth.

The key word is at the beginning of verse 2. And behold. Stop. Take a look at that.

Reflect. Reflect on what you are being told. That in a first century garden just outside the city of Jerusalem, heaven came to earth.

Something of universal importance is happening and the world will never be the same again.

Behold. Stop. Reflect on what you are seeing today and being told.

[2 : 06] Our minds are busy with a thousand distractions. Stop now. On this 3rd of January a.m. at 1138. And push the distractions away. Focus your entire attention upon the scene set before us here in Matthew 28 verses 1 through 4.

The day heaven came to earth and the glory of God triumphed over the gloom of the grave. A momentous event has taken place and an angel from heaven has been sent to announce the good news of Jesus' resurrection.

Next Sunday morning, God willing, from verses 5 to 7, we'll explore the meaning of that announcement. Today I want us, though, to pause.

Stop what we are mentally doing and to behold the scene. The day heaven came to earth first was a day like no other.

[3 : 15] It was an event like no other and it prompted a reaction like no other. Now, why I am drawing your attention to this day, this day heaven came to earth, a day which will be marked in history as that on which Jesus rose from the dead, and in this sermon, actually focusing not on the actual resurrection of Jesus, but on the scene, I'm doing it because as 21st century metro Christians in the midst of a worldwide pandemic and deeply affected by a secularistic, materialistic worldview, we need to regain our sense of the supernatural.

Our minds have become dominated by COVID-19. We've become all too familiar with what it looks like to look at paint drying on the four walls of our rooms all day, every day.

It's time to regain a heavenly perspective. That which is described in these verses is a day like no other.

When the curtain of spiritual reality is punctured and we get an unprecedented glimpse into the glory of Christian salvation.

First of all, from verse one, it was a day like no other. It was a day like no other. Well, talk about a roller coaster of emotions.

[4 : 59] These women who visited the tomb of Jesus on that first day of the week had been through it all. Three days previously, they had stood at a distance, watching their Lord and Master Jesus dying in excruciating pain in the cross.

They had heard his voice, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And they had watched as he bowed his head and breathed his last. Even as he was broken on their cross, so their hearts were broken as they watched from afar.

After the death of Jesus, they had joined with Joseph of Arimathea to dress and anoint the body of Jesus. They'd been there when the stone had been rolled across the entrance to the tomb and they had sat there until the darkness fell.

How their tears must have been wrung dry and their hearts twisted within them. Now, we saw from previous sermons that Matthew wants to emphasize their being at the cross, their being at the burial, and their being at the resurrection because he wants them to act as witnesses to the truth of all these events.

These loyal female disciples, they provide continuity and historical truthfulness such that if any of the early Christians to whom Matthew was writing had doubts about whether Jesus had really died and risen again, they could consult these women.

[6 : 35] They could get the first-hand testimony of these women. In other words, you today can have confidence in the truth of the death, the burial, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the truth of the events surrounding Christian salvation because these women stand as pillars of testimony.

All that we have already seen from Matthew 27. However, let's put ourselves into their shoes. It's dawn on the first day of the week, Sunday as we would know it.

The Jewish Sabbath was on the Saturday when no work was to be done, but at the first opportunity when the sun poked above the horizon, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. Now, Matthew does not tell us why they went to the tomb, simply that they went to see the tomb.

Their primary motive, according to Matthew, was to see the tomb with their own eyes.

Perhaps over the course of the previous 36 hours, as often happens when grief strikes, they had begun to question whether Jesus really had died or that it was some kind of bad dream they were having, and so they went to check it out for themselves.

[7 : 56] And in doing so, they did what millions of people do every day. They're visiting the grave of someone they loved dearly, but had lost. It doesn't matter what cemetery it is.

You're going to find someone standing beside one particular grave or another with a flower in their hands. Perhaps it's an old lady speaking to her dead husband.

Perhaps it's a middle-aged man standing beside the grave of his parents. Whatever and whoever, this is a scene pathetically repeated every minute of every day in our world.

These women came to see a tomb. Perhaps you've been, I'm sure you have, where these women stood that very day, standing beside the grave of someone you loved dearly, and you don't want to let them go.

You just want to stand there and talk to them as though they were still beside you. These women went to see the tomb because it was the closest they could get to the Jesus they had loved and lost.

[9 : 05] How tragic. In so many ways, this was a day like any other. A day like yesterday. A day like today. A day like forever.

And yet, and yet, is there not more here? Is there not more here? Because they went to see a tomb just like millions of others did, didn't do. But the story of the passage isn't about a tomb, but about an angel.

They went to see a tomb, but instead they saw a heavenly being whose appearance was like lightning and whose clothes were as white as the snow. They came to weep and to grieve.

It had never entered their minds that the first thing they would see when they got to the tomb was a mighty angel of God sitting on the stone. They never thought that heaven would come to earth.

What had begun as a day as mundane and ordinary as today became a day unlike any other. put yourself in their shoes with the roller coaster of their emotions.

[10 : 19] The point is this. A Christianity with no resurrection leaves us waking up in the morning with a heavy heart and no possibility of the gloom lifting.

This is where Christianity minus the supernatural leaves us going to stand at the graveside of a loved one altogether empty of anything resembling hope or joy.

But when heaven comes to earth when the gospel strikes home into our hearts and we see the supernatural breaking into the mundane the spirit of God sits on our stony hearts proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus the triumph of life over death we can be filled with hope and joy even in death. Every day with the gospel there's a day like no other because it changes everything about us. Going to see a grave changes from being a journey of morbidity into a pilgrimage to joy. the Christian went to see a tomb and she left with the burning hope of resurrection in her heart. Talk about a rollercoaster of emotions.

[11 : 46] These women went through it all but the resurrection of Jesus changes everything. It can for you too. It can for you. You will grieve but not as those with no hope for the hope of the gospel will change you.

A day like any other will become a day like no other and all because Jesus rose. Second in verses two and three we have an event like no other.

An event like no other. This is the day heaven came to earth. The day a mighty angel of God came down and shook the earth. He rolled away the stone and he sat upon it.

He treats with contemptuous mockery the might of Rome with all its stones and its soldiers and its seals. Here then is the mighty power of Rome that in order to prevent the body of Jesus being stolen by his disciples they made the tomb as secure as they knew how to.

they placed the first century equivalent of an advanced security alarm system on the door of the tomb to make it more secure than Fort Knox and over it they placed a Roman seal carrying the symbol of the imperial eagle of the mighty legions.

[13 : 11] all that stands then between heaven and the tomb is the simple matter of the most powerful empire the world had ever seen.

An empire far more powerful in its day than the United States is in ours. And there is an imperial eagle can you see it impressed upon the stone across the entrance of the tomb and there is a small detachment of Roman guards.

But it was in this seemingly impossible situation that an event like no other took place. An angel of God having come down from heaven rolls away the stone from the entrance of the tomb.

The precise timeline of verse two can be summarized in this way. An angel of God comes down from heaven and rolled the stone away from the entrance to the tomb causing or being caused by a great earthquake.

The angel then sat upon the stone. The primary cause of all these events is that an angel from heaven came down.

[14 : 31] it's an event like no other. He came down and he rolled the stone away and he sat upon it. The grammatical construction of this sentence in the original language is actually pretty complex.

It places the emphasis not on the great earthquake not even upon the angel coming down from heaven both are Greek participles but on the active verbs that the angel rolled the stone away and sat down upon it.

The event which changed the world and made it a day like no other the event like no other was the rolling of the stone away from the entrance to the tomb.

That was it. The rolling away of the stone from entrance to the tomb. What all the might of Rome tried to secure the angel burst open with the shaking of the earth.

The wings of the imperial eagle on the seal were smashed by the mighty wings of heaven's angel. Now today's archaeologists do this all the time.

[15 : 52] They open the entrance to long sealed tombs loose. But this was an event like no other. For it could only have been done by an angel sent from heaven.

That's the point. In fact that's the point of the whole sermon today. that the coming down from heaven of the angel that the rolling away of the stone that his sitting on it is the necessary prelude to the greatest declaration that has ever been made namely that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead.

Great announcements are made by great people. Churchill announcing the end of the second world war. Nye Bevan announcing the creation of the NHS.

In many ways the greatness of the announcer is a symbol of the greatness of the announcement. For example think of how our national lockdown back in March in the UK was announced by the prime minister live on TV speaking to the whole nation.

It was a life-changing announcement for us all. And so the most important person in the United Kingdom, well that's up for debate of course, made the announcement. The announcement was so important that every channel halted its programming to tune in.

[17 : 24] And so this greatest announcement in the history of the universe is going to be made not by a mortal dressed up in fine robes, not by a frail man or by a frail woman, it's going to be made by a mighty angel from heaven.

He has come to roll away the stone and sit on it. He has come to make an announcement that will change the universe forever, that this tomb is empty and that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. That's how important this announcement is. And that's the message of verses 1 and 4, 1 through 4, that God sends a mighty angel to announce the resurrection of his son.

Consider with me the glory of this announcer. In verse 3 we read that his appearance was like lightning. The word Matthew uses is that from which we get the word astral, astrophysics, astronomy.

It means lightning, it means the rays of the sun, perhaps even blazing starlight. Starlight. His clothes were as white as the snow.

[18 : 37] Get the picture? This is hardly a mundane or ordinary person and therefore we should not expect him to be making an ordinary or mundane announcement. Rather, given that he is a heavenly being, exalted and glorious, we should expect him to make a heavenly announcement, exalted and glorious.

The emperor of Rome, if he sent envoys around his empire to announce new victories in battle, he didn't and couldn't match up to this one envoy God sent from heaven to announce the resurrection of his son from the dead.

Heaven has come to earth, dressed not in the robes of humility and weakness, but as it really is, majestically glorious.

Matthew wants his readers to wait with bated breath for what this heavenly announcer is going to say. Angels appeared throughout the Old Testament to announce great events and this angel is now appearing to announce the greatest of them all.

Holding that truth in one hand, we want to go back to what the angel did here in verse 2 and 3. He rolled the stone away from the entrance of the tomb and when the woman arrived, they found him sitting on it.

[20 : 13] It wasn't as if the angel rolled away the stone to allow the risen Jesus out of the tomb. No, by this stage, Jesus had already risen.

The angel rolled away the stone for two reasons. First, to demonstrate God's power over the power of Rome and the power of death.

But secondly, to allow witnesses to enter into the tomb to check out for themselves the truthfulness of Jesus' resurrection. He rolled the stone away, allowing the disciples to check it out that Jesus really had risen from the dead.

He rolled the stone away and he sat on it, demonstrating God's power over Rome and over death. This is an event like no other.

It is nothing quite as tame as an alien mothership hovering over Hillhead. It's heaven come to earth and the glory of a mighty angel whose appearance is starlight.

[21 : 25] It's heaven come to earth and the world will never be the same again. Take a look at the angel. Behold, stop, reflect what he's done by rolling the stone away, sitting upon it.

Think. Contemplate the meaning of it all. Behold and believe. a day like no other, an event like no other, and lastly, a reaction like no other, a reaction like no other.

Verse 4. Have you ever heard the expression seismic shift? It means a great change.

Something happens and the attitude of society undergoes a seismic shift. Think of how quickly Jimmy Savile went from being hero to zero once criminal accusations against him had been made public.

Actually, the word seismic comes from the Greek word for earthquake and it's used twice in our passage. The first is in verse 2 in the context of the great earthquake caused by the angel descending from heaven.

[22 : 42] You'll all have heard of seismic activity being code for earthquake. But the second is in verse 4 in the reaction of the guards to the appearance of the angel.

It's translated by the English word trembled but actually it's the same word. They underwent a seismic shift. They quaked in their shoes and they became like dead men. never mind the earthquake outside. These guards have an earthquake going on inside. There's a seismic shift taking place in the heart of these guards. Or if you told them when they'd gone on duty that night that these things would happen they'd probably have tried to pull a sickie. To use modern language these guards weren't snowflakes. No one in the society in which Jesus lived was a snowflake but especially not these men.

[23 : 47] They were used to displays of awesome military power. They had been in the presence of greatness and their lips had kissed the Roman imperial eagle. Nevertheless these men had never experienced power like this.

An angel from heaven his appearance starlight and his clothes whiter than the snow. All in all I think their response is both deeply natural and highly appropriate because what other response could they possibly adopt?

A mighty heavenly being a glorious heavenly angel a majestic heavenly creature appears to them in the shining effulgence and the ground and the ground shakes.

Trembling before the presence of the gloriously holy is the normal natural and appropriate response of a human being. Check out the rest of the Bible and what happens when mighty angels appear to mortal men.

It doesn't matter whether you're shepherds in Luke chapter 2 or whether you're holy men in the Old Testament. when heaven comes to earth there is always a seismic shift in the heart of a man.

[25 : 05] But remember that these guards so used to demonstrations of Roman imperial power went to pieces at the appearance of this mere messenger of God.

God had not appeared to them. The announcement of the resurrection of Jesus had not yet been made. How glorious must be the announcement if the announcer alone is sufficient to cause the guards to tremble.

And that's the point, is it not? If the reaction to the lesser, the appearance of the messenger, causes these strong men to tremble, surely the reaction to the greater, the message of the resurrection, should change them forever.

You see, I don't think even for one second that any of us have sufficiently understood the gravity and the glory of the announcement of the resurrection.

If the lesser event, the appearance of the messenger, causes us to tremble, sure to the reaction to the greater, the message of the resurrection should change us forever.

[26 : 21] In other words, this week's sermon is important, but next week's, next week's sermon is utterly crucial. The appearance of this angel is majestic, but the message she's got to proclaim is utterly universe changing.

We should be waiting with bated breath for next Sunday morning service. Heaven has come to earth and is about to open its mouth. Nothing which you will ever hear from the mouth of any human being, however great that human being may be, will be as important as the message you're going to hear from this angel's mouth next week, that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead and is alive forever more.

I want to close with this. If you saw a mighty angel of God appearing in front of you, he looks like starlight and his clothes are as white as snow, how would you feel?

Your knees would start to knock and your hands would start to shake. You'd start taking your relationship to God very seriously indeed.

In fact, your relationship to God would be more important than anything else in your life. You would never again say, what is the relevance of all this Christianity business?

[27 : 58] Such a question has no meaning when heaven comes down to earth. I'm sure I'm right about this. Let me tell you something. The only difference between the way things were then, on that first day of the week, and the way things are now, is that then the woman and the guards at that tomb saw the angel.

Now, we don't. But make no mistake, the angels are still here. Unseen, unheard, but poised to shout into your ear the greatest message in all of history.

Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. This angel who was at that tomb is among the angels. He's here.

It's just that you can't see him. But if you could, you would tremble. One day you will see him. The question is whether by then you will have anything to tremble about.

In other words, did you believe the message he came to proclaim? Have you trusted in the risen Lord Jesus Christ? And have you staked all your hope and all your faith in him?

[29 : 35] Trust me when I say this to you. Heaven will not come in a general way to earth to you. But if you trust and believe in Christ, heaven shall come in a particular way to your heart and mind.

And that will be just glorious. Let us pray. Amen. Heavenly Father, the curtain between this mirage of our existence and the reality of heaven is wafer thin.

We believe, oh Lord, that you were here with us this morning. The only difference between what we experience now and what these people experienced back then is that we can't see or hear.

And yet you're still here. And all it would take is for you to puncture the fabric which divides our two realms and we would see the same as these women saw.

We'd hear the same words. These guards trembled. They underwent a seismic shift in their hearts when they saw and heard and how we pray, oh Lord, today that for all of us, whether gathered here in the St.

[31 : 00] Vincent building or at home or wherever we are watching online, that we would undergo a seismic shift also, realizing that we're in the presence of glory, that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, that he is Lord, the gospel is true, and of the greatest importance to all of us is that we trust and believe in him.

Amen.