

Make Disciples of the Risen Lord

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[0 : 00] Well, I'm pretty sure all of us this Easter is hoping and praying for a post-coronavirus world. One where we're free to socialize again, to get out and do the things we enjoy.

And for me, it's things like going swimming, going to the movies, holidays even, eating out at restaurants. Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining.

I know that a lot of people are suffering far worse than me. Of course, it's probably more accurate to say that we want to go back to a pre-coronavirus world. That is, life as it was before the pandemic. If you've been following my newsletters online, I posted some pictures of us during that time. So this one, where I said no one knew what social distancing meant.

Or this one, where we didn't have any limits on people gathering, whether it was indoors or outdoors. Thankfully, I think the restrictions are working, although I think we can't get back to normal just yet.

[1 : 08] This is the new normal, we're told. Well, imagine the first weekend of Easter. I think the disciples of Jesus would have had the same longing, wanting to go back to a world before Jesus' crucifixion.

The events of Friday would have been so crushing, hope sapping. Fear and anxiety would have reigned. And that's exactly where we start in Matthew chapter 28.

Only the women were brave enough to venture out to Jesus' tomb. Not expecting any miracles, of course. Just wanting to mourn, longing for a time before Jesus died.

But as we now see in the passage, they were in for a surprise. For this is going to be a history-changing dawn. So, in verse 1, which I've got on the slides as well, we read, 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, and 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.

[2 : 26] 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. 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. Imagine how their world changed in that very instant, from sadness to joy.

Indeed, that's exactly what we read in the next verse, on the next slide. So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid, yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

Now the joy we can certainly understand, but so too the fear, I think, because they were still processing this history-changing event.

[3 : 26] After all, the angel's appearance would have been frightening, accompanied by the violent earthquake. This heavy stone rolled away with such ease. Even the battle-hardened guards were frozen with fear, like dead men.

But they were entirely fitting for the occasion. We've seen the impact of earthquakes, haven't we? So on the next slide, we see chasms open in the earth, this one of a bridge, separating one side of the road from the other.

Well, something like that occurred that day. Early that day, Christ had risen. And from that point on, the world was no longer the same. This, as I call my first point, is a history-changing dawn.

All of us now live in a post-resurrection world. And we can't go back to a pre-resurrection one. One man, namely Jesus, had succeeded in conquering death, rising from the dead, never to die again. Of course, when it first happened, it would have been a lot for the women to take in. Hence, I think, the fear as well as the joy. But as it was all sinking in, they hear the angels instruct them, go, tell the disciples.

[4 : 52] And more than that, go to Galilee, because Jesus is waiting for them there. But as they ran to tell the disciples something else happened, they go from being mere messengers to eyewitnesses as well.

So in verse 9, which is on the next slide, It's the same message as the angels, But now they see him in the flesh as well.

Jesus was really alive. They could hold him. They could fall at his feet to worship him. But notice how Jesus addresses his disciples. This was the Lord, worthy of worship.

And yet, it's his common humanity that he highlights. Tell my brothers, go to Galilee. And his first reaction was not to lord it over them, but to identify with them, fellow humans whom he died to save. Friends, Jesus has risen from the dead. And his resurrection is what he longs to share with us. Yes, even as we worship him as Lord, he shares this gift of the new creation with us, as our brother.

[6 : 31] But of course, not everyone meets this history-changing dawn with the same joy and enthusiasm. Instead, we meet two other responses. The first, my second point, is that of the chief priest, who confronts this reality with ongoing deception.

So, in verse 11, we read, While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priest everything that had happened.

When the chief priest 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 you out of trouble. So, the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.

I wonder, what would you have done in those circumstances? If you were the chief priest and the elders, what would you do? If you were the guards, would you have taken the bribe? Psychologists have long studied human behavior and reactions, and they know that as humans, we are not as rational as we think.

[7 : 48] In fact, our choices are often driven more by tradition or vested interests or fear, so that we resort to post hoc justification, that is, inventing reasons to explain our preconceptions rather than the other way around.

Well, that's exactly what happened here. The chief priests had committed themselves to Jesus' death, and as far as they were concerned, whether they believed it or not, he was the guilty one. He was the one who blasphemed. And this was the narrative that they were deeply invested in. And so when a report comes of a violent earthquake, an empty tomb, and an angel to boot, there was just too much at stake for them to stop and think whether this was actually true.

They couldn't risk it. Their status, their pride, their control over the establishment, all was at stake. Likewise, the guards, they may not have the privileges of the chief priests, but here was a pot of gold.

Gleaming in front of their eyes. Take it, the chief priests said, and forget what even happened. One group desperately clinging to their worldly power, the other enticed by worldly wealth, both willing to live a lie to retain it.

[9 : 15] I wonder how much of our lives, our own lives, are ruled by this same inertia. We're so afraid to lose what we have, so fixed on our wealth or our status, that we don't want to find out the truth.

Is this your view about the claims of Jesus? About the things you read in the Bible? Because that's what the Bible claims unashamedly. That Jesus is the Son of God.

That He really rose from the dead. And therefore, we must worship Him. We must give our lives to Him. If any of these claims are even slightly true, wouldn't you want to at least investigate, to be sure?

So friends, if any of you are listening in, and you are in that position, then please, do check out the claims of the Bible. Get in touch with us via this email on the slide.

Because ultimately, although you have to decide for yourself, and we're not going to force you, you need to make a choice, don't you? We'd love to show you why we believe, and why we're willing, people in this church, are willing to give our lives to follow Him.

[10 : 28] Because it's true. Well, I mentioned that there was a second response, and that's point three on the slide. And so aside from ongoing deception, there was also lingering doubt.

That's in verses 16 and 17. So on the next slide, 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. I don't know whether this surprises you or not, but here were the disciples, face to face with Jesus. These were the eleven, mind you.

And the women, perhaps. And yet, while some worshipped, others doubted. Again, perhaps this isn't unexpected. After all, things were happening very quickly.

The fact that anyone rises from the dead ought to cause skepticism anyway. So the issue isn't whether they had initial doubts. It's what happens afterwards.

[11 : 29] And history, as recorded in the book of Acts, tells us that notwithstanding their initial reaction, these eleven go on to become apostles of Jesus.

And in the same book of Acts, we find, too, the apostle Paul himself, a one-time persecutor of Christians, becoming a Christian himself, and becoming the church's great evangelist.

So, too, someone like C.S. Lewis, the author of the Chronicles of Narnia. He's on the next slide. If you read his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis describes himself as the most reluctant convert in all of England.

He said he was dragged, kicking and screaming, into God's kingdom. And yet many of us, me included, have been deeply influenced by his writing because he used his reason, his intellect, to strengthen his faith.

And unlike the chief priests and the guards, he didn't allow inertia or vested interest to stop him finding the truth. So, too, for us.

[12 : 38] It's okay to have doubt, particularly in times like these, where the future is uncertain. But when we feel like that, then what we need to do is to look back at what is true reality.

Not our circumstances, which can change from day to day, but back to that very first Easter, where Jesus rose from the dead. Nothing in the world can change that fact.

And that also means that we have a sure hope that we, too, will one day rise with Jesus from the dead. Well, brothers and sisters, the Gospel of Matthew doesn't end there, does it?

But rather, Easter Sunday has implications for how we live. In fact, it ought to totally shape our lives from here on in.

And so, even as Jesus was ascending to be with this Father, He leaves us with work to do, the Great Commission, which is in verses 18 and 20 of Matthew chapter 28.

[13 : 44] And so, on the next slide, 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. First, notice how Jesus has structured His Great Commission.

That it's sandwiched between two declarations, two great truths that assures us of success. So, at the start of the truth, that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him.

All things on earth are under His power, even death, which He has conquered. Nothing, in other words, can stand in His way. Nothing can resist His purpose.

But then at the other end, the other great truth, that Jesus will be with us, by His Spirit, always, to the very end of the age. And so, along with His presence, comes His power.

[14 : 54] And as we go about His work, we will not be alone. Wherever we are, whatever the time, Jesus has said that He is with us. And that is what gives us great strength in our work.

To go and make disciples of nations, incorporating them into God's kingdom. That is what baptizing them means. And teaching them to obey everything Jesus has commanded.

Friends, it is a strange kind of Easter this year, isn't it? Normally, after church, we would be gathering for our Easter meal, where we will all each bring a dish to share.

But we can't do that today, can we? Some of you, I know, have been sharing meals together over Zoom, or something like that. But it is not the same, is it? You can't smell each other's great cooking, or taste it.

In fact, I was even thinking of making this great dessert on the next slide. But too bad. There's no one to taste it this year. And I know over the last few weeks, the growth groups and the welcoming team have done a great job, haven't they?

[16:03] To try and keep people connected over the internet. The church is blessed, I think, because of the work that they've done. So, thank you to all of you that have worked so hard. But I've also actually said to the leaders that, you know, once we've reorganized and we have connected online, that actually we need to remember that as a church, church is more than just about staying connected.

Rather, that's simply the means to an important end, that of the Great Commission, to make disciples of the risen Lord. Which means once we're connected, we need to focus on word, on prayer, on building one another up in their faith, so that we can obey all that Jesus has taught us. Yes, we need social connection to do that, but it mustn't just stop at social connection. Brothers and sisters, we mustn't think that because of COVID-19, all we should focus on is, you know, like the rest of society, just hunker down and try and get through this before we start up church again. No, that would be to have the wrong idea. COVID-19 has not restricted Jesus' authority. He's still drawing people into His kingdom.

And He doesn't want us to be distracted from that. Besides, He's with us now, even as we do it. So yes, I know that some among us may have lost their jobs and perhaps be under more pressure at work because they're doctors or, you know, teachers.

[17:42] Some may even have fallen sick because of COVID-19. But in one sense, that's no different to other times, is it? These challenges in life come up all the time.

It's just that we're all now going through it together with the one cause, as it were. So as a church, yes, we need to rally around those who are in need, help them, care for them, love them.

But then we also should be asking ourselves, how do we continue to grow as disciples? How do we continue to demonstrate the power of the gospel even during these times?

And in fact, now might be the good time to do it, to reach out to those who are hurting and to show them the true power of the gospel that we believe in, to show them the true generosity of the love of Christ.

Yes, we may not be able to do it as we're used to, you know, showing hospitality, meeting up in person, but as I've seen you all exhibit such creativity in staying connected, I think we can do the same things and come up with the same creativity with the opportunities to fulfill the Great Commission.

[18:58] You know, this Easter, I've seen online some church leaders saying that the church is going through its own death and resurrection. The encouragement is for us to turn inwards, to grieve this time of isolation as loss and then somehow before long when we re-emerge, that would be our sense of resurrection as it were.

Now friends, I know that this is probably well-meaning in what they say. Some self-reflection is good, but if that's our only focus, then I fear that that's really misguided.

The only death and resurrection that matters this Easter is Jesus. Our salvation lies in His death, not our own suffering or death.

Our hope lies in His resurrection and the new creation, not some rejuvenation of the church after COVID-19. Now don't get me wrong, our lives are very much shaped by the cross.

It's marked by suffering and humility and we should embrace that. But remember too that at the same time, victory is already ours in Christ.

[20:11] This life we live is His life because the Spirit is with us. We are already part of the new creation even though we have not got our new resurrected body yet.

Nothing, not even COVID-19 changes that because we live in a post-Easter world. We live in a world where Jesus has already risen from the dead.

that's the only history-changing event that matters. And so for us, Jesus' command now is still the one that matters, that we go and make disciples of the risen Lord.

Friends, I want to finish by just reading parts of a prayer. It's from a pastor in Wuhan just before the pandemic struck. I'm only going to read excerpts of it but if you're interested to read the whole letter which I think is well worth it, I've got a slide which will show you where you can find it on the internet.

Just go to chinasource.org and then search Wuhan Pastor Pray With Us. But here's part of his letter. He writes, During these past days, the Wuhan pneumonia has been at the center of my thoughts and life.

[21 : 24] I'm always thinking about how our family and the church should face this. The situation is so critical yet we are trusting in the Lord's promises that His thoughts toward us are of peace and not evil and He allows for a time of testing not to destroy us but to establish us.

Christians may with the world face the same tribulations but such tribulations are no longer punishment but a new opportunity to grow nearer to the Almighty, to purify our souls and an opportunity to proclaim the gospel.

In other words, when disaster strikes, it is but a form of God's love. Wuhan's pestilence cannot separate us from the love of Christ and here he is quoting from Romans 8.

These words are so comforting for us. We have already become one body with Christ. We have a part in His sufferings and we have a part in His glory. All of Christ is ours and our all is Christ. Therefore, Christ is with us as we face the pestilence. If we die, it is an opportunity to witness to Christ and even more to enter into His glory. Our Lord Jesus through faith, experience and incomparable suffering of death.

[22 : 39] Yet God raised Him up from the dead and set Him at His right hand. I believe this is the command of God. We are to seek peace for this city, for those who are afflicted, for the medical personnel, for every government official, for all the people of Wuhan.

and we can, through online networks, guide and comfort our friends and loved ones with the gospel, reminding them that our lives are not in our hands and to entrust their lives to God who is faithful and true.

Friends, I don't know about you, but I found that to be such an encouraging letter to have that mindset even in the midst of such adversity. You know, and they in Wuhan, they have had it much tougher than us, haven't they?

And yet, His attitude was to keep making disciples because Christ, His Lord, is risen. Let's pray. Father, we praise the name of our Lord, our risen Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God.

Because He rose from the dead by the power of the Spirit, we too have the power of the Spirit in our lives. And we too have the hope of resurrection. help us to seize the opportunities created by this to bring glory to His name, to shake people out of their sad ways so that they may turn to Christ and be saved and be baptized into the kingdom of Your Son.

[24 : 09] We pray and ask this in His mighty name. Amen.