

The grave is empty! Christ is Risen!

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[0 : 00] Matthew 28, page 1000. And I'll pray for us as we come to look at God's word. Heavenly Father, on this glorious Easter morning, we pray that you would open our eyes to the truth and wonder of the risen Jesus, that we might know his joy, his peace, his comforts, not just today, but for the rest of eternity.

In his name we pray. Amen. Well, I have to say this is almost certainly the strangest Easter week of my life. Didn't expect it to start with nine hours in A&E;, two days in hospital, to gear up twice for an appendectomy, only for the operation to be postponed after I chatted with the anaesthetist. Sometimes our expectations of how things are going to turn out are blown out of the water, aren't they, by a sudden change in events. But if that's been true for my week, how much more so for the women here in Matthew 28.

Their expectations on that first Easter Sunday morning were low and gloomy and sad. They were anxious to complete the burial rites that had been rather rushed on Good Friday.

So they rose early. They headed for the tomb where Jesus' broken body had been laid. They came there to pay their respects, to anoint Jesus' body, to weep and comfort one another.

[1 : 26] But hope had died on the cross. Evil had triumphed. All their dreams were in tatters and they'd obviously got things wrong. Everything wrong.

Besides, despite everything they had seen and heard, Jesus obviously can't have been the Messiah, the Son of God. Because if he had all these things that happened on Good Friday, surely it wouldn't have happened to him.

I wonder if that famous poem by W.H. Auden might capture the grief of the women. This is just the first section. Stop all the clocks. Cut off the telephone.

Prevent the dog barking with the juicy bone. Silence the pianos and with muffled drum bring out the coffin. Let the mourners come. Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead, scribbling on the sky the message.

He is dead. I'm sure that's how they felt. As they headed to the tomb on that first Easter morning.

Despite Jesus' explanation of all that would happen to him when he arrived in Jerusalem, his rejection, arrest, his torture, his death, and actually his resurrection on the third day, because Jesus had predicted that at least three times to his disciples, the expectations of the women were at rock bottom.

[2 : 43] As they made that walk to the tomb, they expected to find the tomb closed up, guarded, and holding the body of their lord. But they were wrong on all three accounts, weren't they?

Their expectations were about to be turned upside down, along with all human history, because when they arrived, the tomb was open, the tomb was unguarded, and the tomb was empty, apart from the folded grave clothes.

But that sentence doesn't really do it justice, does it? This is a scene full of noise and action. Now, if you are probably under about 14, hopefully you've been given one of the colouring sheets.

That's a way of just having some mementos and thoughts about what's going on in this passage. I'll pause every now and again and say, well, this is the bit you need to look at now. But first of all, on that sheet, there are spaces to draw pictures of three things that happened.

It starts with a violent earthquake. I'm not sure how you draw that, but have a go. That's how Matthew describes it. He likes that description, actually. It's the same one he uses earlier on, in Matthew 27, when Jesus gave his final cry and died.

[3 : 53] His great victory cry, It is finished! Shook the earth, with an earthquake, proclaimed the end of Jesus' mission. Here, this earthquake, caused by an angel of God, coming down from heaven, proclaimed Jesus' victory.

He had done it! Two earthquakes. One at the crucifixion, one at the resurrection. I have to say, I feel a bit sorry for the soldiers. I don't know whether you do too.

They've obviously been given what they thought was a fairly easy job, people in tombs don't usually cause you much trouble, do they? And had Jesus' followers come to steal the body away?

Well, they would have been easy opponents for two trained Roman soldiers. But this job was not all that it seemed. The expectations of a few days' easy duty were overturned as well.

The arrival of the angel caused a violent earthquake, and when the shaking and noise stopped, where they looked up and they saw this angel in front of them, bright as lightning. Matthew says, they shook and became like dead men.

[5 : 04] I think I would have too, actually, with that sight. Those cute little cherubs that sometimes decorate churches. The flowery little angels we put on the top of our Christmas trees.

For some reason, a bunch of people these days have little angels that they wear around their necks as if that will ward off evil. Well, those kind of pictures are of an entirely different order to what true angels are like.

Everywhere in the Bible, someone sees an angel and they are terrified. They are terrified, glorious, powerful. The might of all of Rome's armies would have been no match for a single member of heaven's angelic throng.

No wonder the soldiers became our dead men. So the guards are disarmed, leaving the tomb unguarded. Then the angel pushes the stone out of the place, leaving it open for all inside to see.

The tomb the women expected to see closed, guarded and occupied was now unguarded, open and empty. And sad on the stone that once blocked the entrance was an angel.

[6 : 12] An angel whose appearance was like lightning, whose clothes were white as snow. Now, reflecting on this picture, I think this is quite an amusing scene. The Roman guards are out cold, the tomb is empty, and there is the angel perched on the stone.

Can you imagine him sat there, just thinking, job done. Everything's right with the world. He's looking very pleased with himself indeed, and rightly so. It reminded me of a scene from Lord of the Rings, if you've read the book or seen the films.

The Ents have made their war on Isengard, Sauron, sorry, the evil Saruman is inside in his tower, and who's guarding the former gateway? Well, there's two little hobbits smoking their pipes, having a glass of wine.

I don't think the angel would have been smoking a pipe or having a glass of something to drink. But can you picture the scene? The work is over. The job is done.

All is right with the world. Battle has ended. Everything is good. But the women don't feel that straight away, do they? Verse 5 tells us that they are terrified at the angel.

[7 : 21] Of course they are. Of course they are. Their expectations have been confounded, turned on their heads. And now in the place where they expected to see Roman guards and a sealed tomb is an open tomb and an angel, looking far more terrifying, yet far more glorious than any Roman soldier ever could.

Wonderfully, angels are aware of just how scary they look, and there's a message of kindness and good news for them. And I wonder if there's ever been a message, words spoken, that have been more wonderful and life-bringing, world-changing than these.

Verse 5. Do not be afraid. For I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. Verse 6. He is not here. He has risen, just as he said.

Come, see the place where he lay. It's interesting the angel affirms some of what they know. This is not totally weird.

They were right when they saw Jesus crucified. He had died. They had come to the place where his body had been buried, but that's where their expectations stopped matching reality.

[8 : 34] On that first Easter morning, everything else had changed. He is not here. He has risen, just as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. This is the next thing if you've got one of those drawing sheets, a before and after picture of what is seen.

Well, some people have tried to explain the resurrection away, saying that Jesus wasn't really dead, as if a few hours laying down in a cold tomb would somehow make him feel so much better after that brutal flogging and gruesome crucifixion.

Jesus had died. He had been buried. And in fulfilment of his own words of prophecy, Jesus had now been raised to life again, wonderfully, completely, gloriously, bodily.

I wonder if you believe that. See, the Christian faith makes absolutely no sense without that event happening. In fact, I'd argue that all of world history for the last 2,000 years makes no sense without that event happening.

Do you believe it? Deep down, in that darkest corner of your mind, do you believe that Jesus died, was buried, and rose again from the dead, as we'll declare in our creed later?

[9 : 52] If you do, then I think it changes everything about today, and tomorrow, and forever. I'll say a little bit more about that later on. But if you doubt this event happening, then you've got a challenge ahead of you, because somehow you've got to try and explain how a dead man with frightened, scattered followers, that none of whom had any semblance of worldly power, managed not just to endure persecution and death for something they knew to be false, but how this good news conquered the Roman Empire and changed the world.

How do you make sense of all those things without the resurrection of Jesus being true? Perhaps the word of an angel isn't enough.

I'm sure it would have been if we'd have had that message from the angel ourselves, but since we're only hearing the words of the angel secondhand, maybe you need more. Well, look down at verses 8 and 9. As the women ran from the tomb with the news of Jesus' resurrection crashing through their minds, what happens?

Well, they have a personal encounter with the risen Jesus. Suddenly, verse 9, Jesus met them. Greetings, he said. They came to him, clasped his feet, and they worshipped him.

Notice, three of their senses are involved here. They heard Jesus' voice. Of course, they knew what Jesus' voice sounded like, just as you and I know the sound of the voices of our loved ones and friends.

[11 : 22] And then he spoke to them. Matthew gives us just one word that Jesus speaks to start with. Greetings. That's it. Greetings. Hello, friends. It's me. I'm back.

And then, as they recognised his voice, they looked up and they saw him standing before them. And so, what did they do? Well, they knelt down at his feet, partly in worship, for as Jesus had deserved worship while he was alive, doing his wonderful miracles before his death and resurrection, how much more does he deserve it now?

I think they knelt at his feet, partly too, out of fear. Bowing down is a humble position, a place where we beg for mercy. But perhaps partly because there they could engage the third of their senses. They could place their hands on him and touch him and hold onto him for as long as possible so that through their hands they experienced what their eyes and their ears had already told them, that Jesus was alive.

He was no ghost, no apparition, no dream. Jesus had been raised bodily from the grave and they knelt and they worshipped him as they held him tight. All the lotions and ointments they brought were not needed now.

[12 : 43] Jesus had risen just as he said he would. and that's something for your last picture boys and girls, the women meeting Jesus. Can you try and capture that?

Get that idea in your minds. Twice in these last two verses the women are told to pass on the good news to his disciples. The disciples were to go to Galilee and they would meet Jesus there and they did meet Jesus there.

John chapter 21 tells us of a barbecue breakfast by the side of the lake. St Paul speaks of numerous encounters actually that people had with Jesus.

One of them with 500 people at the same time but long before that meeting in Galilee in fact this very same day Jesus would appear to two disciples on the road to Emmaus and then to most of the other disciples in the upper room.

Talk about expectations being turned on their heads. That poem from W.H. Auden needs rewriting doesn't it? Wind up the clock send out messages on every telephone get all the dogs barking with fresh juicy bones play the pianos and with pipe and drum sound the victory signal let the dancers come let aeroplanes do aerobatics high in the sky for death has been defeated and Jesus is alive.

[14 : 07] That's the Easter message right there. So on this Easter Sunday all these years later as I close let me leave you with three questions. Once again I'll start with the one I asked a few moments ago do you believe this?

Do you believe this? Matthew has given us an eyewitness account of that first Easter. Do you believe it? See if it's true if Jesus really did die was buried and rose again then he must be the one

he claimed to be the eternal son of God come to earth.

And if you're not a Christian and you've got questions about the Christian faith and you're not sure whether you can trust him or not or if you are a Christian yet you find yourself doubting your faith strongly from time to time or if you're trying to follow Jesus and you find obedience hard and the cost of discipleship high then can I invite you to look back at this event in history.

Remember that first Easter day see here that Christ has risen and let your doubts and fears and questions fall away as you rest them on this one certain fact.

Jesus died was buried and on the third day he rose again. That was the world changing event of that first Easter. Do you believe it? Secondly and I guess this is one for those of us who are following Jesus already do you live like it?

[15 : 35] Just two examples here. See if the resurrection is true then Jesus surely deserves our worship our lives our obedience our all. We can't rightfully ignore God's commands and expect to thrive in his world now let alone go through with any confidence judgment at the end of time.

The resurrection shows us who Jesus is and it calls us to come to him like these women and fall at his feet in humble obedience and then to rise sorry to fall at his feet in humble worship and then to rise and to go out and live lives of obedience.

Is that true for us? Are we living as if Jesus did rise from the dead? But the resurrection also gives us hope for the future and peace in the present.

See if death did not hold Jesus then if we are in him then it will not hold us either. That means we don't need to live with worries about today overwhelming us fears about tomorrow dominating our thoughts.

has the resurrection of Jesus calmed your soul as it should? My last question is an invitation and this takes us back to the little word search we did at the beginning.

[16 : 52] See if you believe that this is true and you long for peace and purpose but you haven't yet committed yourself to God then the invitation for you today is to come and meet the risen Lord for yourself.

That's the offer of Jesus this morning. We won't encounter Jesus in the same way as those women did at least not in this life but as we accept these truths and turn to Jesus in repentance and faith so Jesus comes to us by his spirit and makes his home with us and as he does amazing changes happen.

Though we are spiritually poor God makes us rich in Christ. Our thirst and hunger for meaning and love and joy are met in a relationship of friendship with Jesus.

We find in him a true home a new family in the church an eternal purpose to live for. We get given a message to pass on.

In Jesus we find deep comfort in our trials pardon for our sin cleansing for our guilt and the sure and certain hope of our own resurrection from the dead.

[18 : 02] Where we'll find true healing in God's eternal and glorious kingdom. Jesus' resurrection makes all that possible and it's available to all who come. If that's more than you were expecting this Easter Sunday then join the camp.

I've had one of those expectation busting weeks. The women who went to the tomb did that too.

How about you? How about you? Jesus' resurrection changed the world.

Do you believe it? Are you living like it? And if you've not yet come to him, will you come to him today and meet the resurrected Lord for yourself?

I pray you will. Amen.