Easter

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[0:00] I was at university in the last century and I had a philosophy class which was on how you know something's true.

And I thought it would be a good exercise if we made the resurrection of Jesus a case study to see if we could prove it was true or not.
The people in the group were not believers and it took a while but after a number of weeks they all agreed that the evidence was reliable and it was there.
Jesus did rise from the dead. And I said to them, so will you become disciples of Jesus? And they said, not a chance. And I said, but do you believe Jesus rose from the dead?
And they said, yeah, so what? Good for him. Doesn't mean anything to us. And it was a very good lesson to me that the basic facts of the resurrection can be established.
[1:02] But what is really significant is what it means. And as we come to Matthew 28, the end of Matthew's gospel, that's what Matthew wants to pass across to us.

He doesn't spend any time explaining or even outlining what happened in the resurrection. He doesn't describe it. He only spends a little bit of time proving that Jesus rose from the dead.
What he does is he shows what it means. And he gives us three different camera angles on what it means. First from an angel, then from the authorities in Jerusalem and then from Jesus himself.
Don't get me wrong. There's nothing dry or academic about this chapter. It's full of running and racing and passion and feelings.
And Matthew can't hold himself back six times in the chapter. He uses his favorite word, the word behold, which is a bit of a lame English translation of the word.
[2:04] Look at this. Watch this. So let's have a look at these three things that the resurrection means. And the first is in verses one to ten.

The resurrection means God's new world has begun. Matthew begins with an angel coming down from heaven and landing on earth and causing an earthquake.
In verse two, we read, behold, there was a great earthquake because an angel of the Lord descended from heaven. It is it's not tectonic plates underneath the earth that are moving.
What causes the earth to shake is the massive energy and force of the angel landing on the ground from above. And he lands some distance away from the tomb because he then has to come to the tomb where he flips away the massive stone in front of it.
And then he sits on it, not to let Jesus out, but to allow the women to come and see in because he's waiting there to give them heaven's interpretation of what's going on.
[3:13] Probably two years ago, when we began Matthew's gospel, right back in chapter one, it was an angel who announced the meaning of Jesus' birth. And now an angel does the same thing.

Only this time, what's different is that he doesn't just appear. He descends from heaven. He descends to earth from heaven to show that in the resurrection, somehow heaven and earth are connected.
And even though he is just a messenger, the way he comes bringing God's new world demonstrates something of the meaning of the resurrection.
So we've known through the gospel that Jesus is the bridge between deity and humanity. And now in Jesus' resurrection body, we have the beginning of the new heaven and the new earth, the beginning of a new connection between heaven and earth, not just for him, but for us as well.
In the last book of the Bible, we're told that this world doesn't just disappear or dissolve or fall away, but heaven comes down to earth and heaven and earth become one.
[4:28] And Jesus' resurrection gives us the beginning and the preview of that and the basis for it for each of us. And I think you can see some of this even in the way Matthew describes the angel.

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He has a heavenly appearance and he's robustly physical at the same time. In verse 3, Matthew describes his face like lightning.
It's just pure energy and electricity. I've been in a car very close to where lightning struck. It struck a number of times, about 20 feet from the car, and I thought I was going to die.
And here is an angel who is physical enough to land and cause an earthquake and throw the rock off, who's got a face like lightning. A lot of people think that angels are floaty, fluffy, furry, delicate little things.
It is not so. Just ask the guards in verse 4 who are shaking, paralyzed with terror on the ground at his appearance. This is an angel who's very real.
[5:34] He's not just spiritually real. He's physically real because God's new world is more physically solid. It's more physically real than even our world.

Our world is temporary. It's going to pass away. But the new world, the world that the resurrection of Jesus' body brings, is going to swallow up this world.
And the link is Jesus Christ. So he turns to the women when they come up, and his first words to them are, do not be afraid. In the original, it is, do not be afraid, you, you women.
You guards, you've got every reason to be afraid. And then he says, verse 5, I know you seek Jesus who was crucified. He's not here.
He has risen as he said. Come see the place where he lay. The angel's point is that just as Jesus' death was real, you've got the right address for the tomb. His resurrection is just as real in a resurrection body.
[6:38] If it was just a spiritual or a ghostly or a visionary resurrection, the body would still be there. He says, have a look. And then the angel fills the women with hope.

He says, go quickly and tell the disciples that he's risen from the dead. Behold, he says, he will meet you in Galilee. Behold, again, he says, I have told you. Now go.
And they run off with fear and great joy. And in verse 9, we have the first resurrection appearance of Jesus in Matthew's gospel.
It's very low key. The women almost run past him. As they're running, it says Jesus met them. Now, if I was writing Matthew's gospel, I might have had fireworks, at least some lighting.
But it's told so beautifully, he says. Jesus met them and said, greetings. And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshipped him.
[7:43] The word greetings is the word happy. He says, happiness, joy. Oh, happiness. It seems as though the only reason Jesus is appearing here is because he wants to be with his friends again.

And he wants them to be with him. He delights in them as he delights in all his people. And he wants them to share his risen happiness. And the women hit the ground and grasp his feet, which means he has real physical feet.
And they know he is more than human because they worship him as God, which is what the new world is all about. Here is Jesus. He has conquered death in his body.
The future is in his hands. He holds in his hands the keys of death and hell. And for these women and for every follower of Jesus Christ, it changes the meaning of death.
In the same way that Jesus only needed a tomb temporarily just to borrow it for a few days. All who belong to him are only going to need a grave or a tomb for a short period.
[8:51] And when a believer dies, it's very sad. The wrench of separation is terrible. And there's real grief. But since Jesus has risen from the dead, we can truly say that they fall asleep.

Everything that Jesus has said about life and death and heaven and the future is true. Yes, his body is different. It's transformed. It's an eternal body. It can pass through the walls of the tomb.
But God's new world is not floating around on clouds with disembodied souls. It's a new creation with resurrection bodies through Jesus Christ. And that's the first thing the resurrection means.
God's new world has begun. Second, it means that Jesus is control. And we get a wonderful picture from verses 11 to 15 of this pretending to be in control by the human authorities.
So in verse 11, Matthew wants us to track the guards in parallel to the women. But they're moving in completely different directions. Both groups saw and heard the angel.
[10:01] Now the women run back to Jerusalem with a sense of joy and hope and love on a mission from the angel. And the men also travel back to Jerusalem, the guards, with their tails between their legs.

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Their job was to keep the dead body in the tomb. And they failed. So they come to the chief priests and the elders, the authorities, and they give them a thorough debriefing.
Matthew says they told them everything that happened. And wouldn't you love to be a fly on the wall for that conversation? I mean, you can imagine the chief priests saying, okay, just go over that again.
The stone was in place and you were guarding. You had the best weapons with you. You've been trained for this. And an earthquake happened and you saw lightning or an angel.
Come on. And you have to admire Matthew's restraint as he reports that when the angel appeared, the guards became like dead men.
[11:04] See, at the root of opposing Jesus is the desire to be in control. It's wanting Jesus not to be in control. It's saying, I'm in control of me.

These men were armed and they were trained and they were paid. All they had to do was to keep the disciples from stealing the dead body of Jesus. They thought they were in control.
But the resurrection of Jesus shows that none of us are really in control. And the only way to pretend to ourselves that we are in control is to oppose Jesus and to build our life on lies.
And that's exactly what the Jerusalem authorities do. They have to suppress the truth about Jesus. They then have to pay people to spread the lies. They think it worked with Judas.
Why not now? And by doing it, they make themselves irrelevant to God's new world. And it's a pathetic, self-contradictory lie.
[12:04] I mean, the guards are meant to say we were sleeping and the disciples came and stole the body away. And the obvious question is, is that if you were asleep, how do you know they stole the body away?

And I think this is, it's a good question for all of us. How do you explain the empty tomb? I mean, do you believe the angel's explanation that shows Jesus' victory over death, that he's God in the flesh, that this is the beginning of God's new world?
The only other option is to believe a lie. Someone said this week that COVID-19 teaches us we're not in control. It's a very good point.
I mean, for a moment right now, Easter 2020, the gods of our age are unmasked as weak and false and liars.
They're counterfeit gods. They promise wealth and fame, beauty and leisure. And COVID-19 has uncovered how brittle and fragile these gods are.
[13:09] And the only way to cling to the fiction of being in control is to believe lies and to worship these gods. The point of the resurrection is that Jesus is very much in control.

He holds our future in his hands and he wants us to face the truth and trust him with our future and join him in his future. And that's the second thing the resurrection means.
Jesus is in control. And thirdly, the resurrection gives us a picture of God's new people in verses 16 to 18. This is the final scene in Matthew's gospel.
And Jesus takes center stage, which is exactly where he belongs. And it is an absolutely beautiful picture. Have you ever noticed that Jesus is not on his own?
He is surrounded with his people gathered around him. It's likely a much bigger group than just the 11. And they see and they worship and they hesitate, which is exactly right.
[14:13] I mean, what do you say to the risen Jesus? They become very self-conscious. They don't know how to respond. They don't know how to give him glory. They're aware of the very inadequate and shabby ways that they've treated him.

I mean, the 11 disciples, they were a disaster. They always got the wrong end of the stick. They always misunderstood things. They always put themselves at the center, just as we do.
And when the going got tough, they ran away. And now Jesus lifts them up to himself and he comforts them and he commissions them.
And just in case anyone is still in doubt about how fully God he is or how in control he is, Jesus says to them, all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.
All authority on earth. He is the last word on everything you do, everything you say, everything we think in this life on earth.
[15:14] He has authority over China, over Cambodia, over Canada, over Cameroon. There is no area, no people, no culture, no single person who is outside his power and authority.

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And that means he has the right to tell us what to do, what to think, where to go. And all authority in heaven means over all spiritual power, over evil, over death.
He's the driving force in history. I can't help pointing out that Matthew refers to Jesus all throughout this chapter just by the name Jesus.
He doesn't talk about the Christ. Jesus is his human name because all sovereign power and might are in the hands of this man, Jesus.
And his hands were the hands that were nailed to the cross, that healed the sick, that reached out to those in need. This is the rock on which we build our lives today and always.
[16:23] And if there's ever any doubt about Jesus, the way Jesus thinks about his divinity, Jesus then includes himself in the name of God. In verse 19, he says, when you baptize people into the family of God, you do so in one name, single name, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

This is the Christian name for God, God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus is not just saying you should have faith. He's saying I am the object of faith.
We don't just worship a vague higher power. We worship God revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But the picture is not just Jesus on his own.
Here he is at the center of his people because God's new world is made up of Jesus and his people. And he has one task, one main thing that comes out of his resurrection and his authority that he wants them to do.
You see, he says, all authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore, you make disciples of all nations. Jesus did not come down from heaven to be born as a baby for himself.
[17:41] He didn't live and suffer and die on the cross for himself. He didn't rise again from the dead for himself. He did all these things for us to create the new world where we might be with him and he might be with us.

That's why the heart of his commission is to make disciples, not make converts. He wants people who are heart followers, life followers, who will make other people disciples.
Because at the heart of being a disciple is a bond of affection and devotion that you have for your master. It's a bond of love where you say things to him like, you are my life.
You are my heart. You are my God. I trust you. I rest on you. I want to please you. Your love for me is better than life itself. Take every area of my life.
Then finally, as a final encouragement, Jesus makes a promise. He says, I will be with you always to the end of this age until all the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our God and of his Christ.
[18:57] He promises his personal companionship with us, not just every day, but in the original, it's the whole of it. It's all of every day. And if you want to find Jesus, this is where you find him with his people.

And whatever circumstances we are in, Jesus says, he is with us. His presence to us does not come and go. It doesn't matter how we feel.
And sometimes it feels very much as though his face is turned away. But here is his promise. I will be with you in success and failure, in sickness and health, in joy and sorrow, in youth and old age, in life and in death.
He will never leave us and forsake us. And that's the good news, the resurrection. Amen. Amen.

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