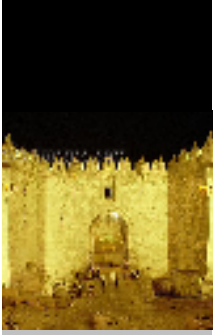


No One Takes My Life From Me

PART 24 - RESURRECTION

TEXT: MATTHEW 28:1-10 (ESV)



Rev. Russ Ramsey
April 12, 2009
EASTER SUNDAY

Oak Hills
Presbyterian Church,
Overland Park,
Kansas

Easter Sunday

This series has centered on the arrest, death and burial of Jesus. But today, at long last, we come to the reason for telling this story. Christ the Lord is Risen today! Hallelujah! This is, you need to know, the central event upon which Christianity stands or falls. Easter isn't just one of many important dates on the Christian calendar. Without Easter, there is no Christianity. Everything Christians profess is meaningless if Christ isn't raised. The point of Easter is that this world, as it stands, is not how it shall remain. Jesus' resurrection proclaims the restoration we ache for, through we haven't fully seen it.

C.S. Lewis wrote, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world." It doesn't matter how wealthy, healthy or successful you are. It doesn't matter how simply you live or how laid back you are. All of us know a longing that tells us deep in our hearts that we were made for a life where things were good and right, and this is not that world. Every so often something happens that whispers to our souls that there is hope amid the wreckage of this world, resounding deep within like a bell. It happens when the good guys win, or when we stand at the rim of the Grand Canyon, or when the bride appears at the back of the wedding hall and walks to take the hand of her groom or the first time a newborn cries.

Our hearts want to leap out of our chests at the thought of hope because we work so hard learning how to deal with people who fail us, circumstances that thwart us and disappointments that wound us that when even the hint that such struggles might be temporary comes into view, we remember things are not the way they were supposed to be. We find hope that maybe all will be made right. Today's text is the story of two women found amid the wreckage of a recent tragedy—their friend and teacher Jesus had died a horrible death. As they make their way to His tomb to grieve early one Sunday Morning, they discover something they did not expect.

Matthew 28:1-10

¹Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ²And 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. ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men.

⁵But the angel said to the women, "Don't be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you."

⁸So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. ¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."

Bearing Up Under the Weight

Once as a boy I stood over a freshly dug grave. I remember how that little mound of brown earth pronounced that my green Indiana summer had been disturbed. Things were not as they once were. And this was not the way it was supposed to be. There I stood, maybe ten years old, alone, studying that dirt. I was looking for something. I was looking for *movement*.

Dusty was a good girl—a loyal and vibrant Irish Setter. I had no category for what had happened. She always appeared when I came out to play. Well, here I was. Maybe that car just knocked the wind out of her. Maybe she'd sense my presence and fight to dig herself out like she did the night before in my dream. I studied the earth expecting Dusty to move it. That was the day I began to learn about the law of *irreversibility*. There are tragedies that happen in life which can never be undone—moments that place our lives like an iron in the fire while the hammer of providence pounds away, shaping who we are.

As they walked to Jesus' tomb, the women in our text bore in every step the weight of irreversibility. Last Sunday, Jesus was alive. Now He was dead. And that was that. They knew the world was a hard place. When Mary Magdalene met Jesus, she suffered under demonic oppression. Jesus cast seven demons out of her. (Lk 8:2) She began to follow Him, helping to care for the needs of Jesus and His disciples as they traveled. (Lk 8:1-5) The other Mary, Matthew calls her, was the mother of a follower named Joses. (Mk 16:1) These women were there at the crucifixion. They attended Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus as they buried Jesus' body two days prior. They were the last at the cross and the first to the tomb. And their hearts were broken.

They had gone to the tomb to grieve and to anoint Jesus' body, as if through their balms and scents, they could slow decay and have Jesus with them just a little longer. The stone across the mouth of the tomb was too big for them to move, but they went just the same, unsure of how they'd get in. Their spices and the problem of the stone tell us that these women were acquainted with the concept of irreversibility. Their sorrow compelled them on, but they were there to tend to the dead.

The Man Wearing Lightning

It was Sunday, the first day of the week. As they drew near to the tomb, the ground beneath their feet began to tremble. This was the second earthquake in the past three days—the first coming the moment Jesus died on the cross. Our text says, "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," implying the earthquake was the means the angel used to move the stone. Astounding! Here the women worried that the weight of the stone would be too much to move, but the angel shook the earth itself on which the stone rested.

Considering the sequence of events in this narrative and remembering that Matthew was one of the twelve, Matthew's description of the angel must be what he himself heard these women describe when they raced back to tell the disciples what they had seen. An earthquake rolled back the stone and a man appeared, sitting triumphant on that stone. He was dressed in snowy white. He looked like brilliant lightning. It must have been incredible to witness and near impossible to describe.

Roman soldiers were not obtuse, hapless clowns. Rome didn't conquer the known world by stumbling all over themselves—certainly not by shrinking away in fear at the face of opposition. But the hardened soldiers guarding the tomb had never seen anything like this angel. They fell faint at the sight. The women were filled with fear too. Their world was fragile enough as it was. Yet now it was as if even the ground beneath them was giving way—apparently due to this figure who looked like if he wanted to he could consume them with a snap of his fingers.

He Is Not Here, As He Said

Instead, the angel speaks. *"Don't be afraid. I know you seek Jesus who was crucified."* The angel knows why they are there. He knows their grief, their burden. *"He is not here, for He has risen as He said."* Nowhere in the Gospels do you find an eye-witness to the actual moment of Jesus' resurrection. He rose, and His disciples and up to 500 others saw Him ^(1 Cor 15:6)—many of them touching His resurrected body. But God raised Jesus in a way no human being was permitted to witness. I wonder if this falls in the category of things to wonderful to imagine. ^(Ps 139:6)

The angel bids the women, *"Come, see where He lay."* This detail is intriguing. If Jesus was already risen when the women arrived, but the angel shook the earth to roll away the stone, he didn't do it to let Jesus out. He did it to show the women the tomb was already empty. It wasn't as if Jesus came to life but had to bide His time until someone moved the stone. He rose and left the tomb, just as He'd later enter the room where His disciples were gathered without bothering to use the door. ^(Jn 20:19-20) The matter-of-fact manner of the angel suggests this was all unfolding just as God planned and as Jesus knew it would go.

In fact, when the angel declared Jesus was risen, he added that this was *"as He said."* Jesus had predicted His own resurrection four times in Matthew. ^(Mt 16:21, 17:23, 20:19, cf 12:40) And in case you wonder if these were vague predictions which could've been taken a number of ways, He said He *"must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."* ^(Mt 16:21) Also, *"they'll deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked, flogged and crucified, and he'll be raised on the third day."* ^(Mt 20:19) These statements were the reason for the guard. ^(Mt 27:63-64) And do you know what? He is risen. And everything about it is just as He said.

Was this a dream? Hope wells within these women, coming as hope often does—packaged together with bewilderment, fear, alarm, joy and trembling. This is such an "other-worldly" moment for these earthbound creatures. Of course they trembled! But what the angel said underscores the hope of humanity before Jesus and ever since—that all our frailty, brokenness, struggle, grief and mourning may have a remedy; that our ability to wound others so deeply with our sin and our propensity to absorb so much pain and grief from the sins of others may in fact be *reversible!* Death has been reversed, which means it has been *beaten*—conquered! And this has been Jesus' plan from the start. This is all just as He said it would be.

They Took Hold of His Feet

So He rose. Still, you might wonder, *"What does this have to do with me?"* If Jesus is risen, it changes everything. I studied that fresh soil hoping the earth would move so Dusty's grave would open and my dog would overcome death. That's how wrong death seemed to the heart of this child. I didn't want death to be the end. No one does. And what possible explanation could there be for this phenomenon except to say, as CS Lewis said, that we were made for a world where death does not prevail over life. We were made to live, not die! Death is an intruder.

For the women, the earth did move. The grave *did* open. Jesus *did* overcome death! The irreversible had been reversed, and the next thing the angel told them added even more glory to this scene. Jesus was planning to meet up with them in Galilee. Why would He do this? Because Jesus had a purpose for the lives of His disciples then, just as He has for His people today. The glory of His resurrection isn't just that Jesus beat death. It's that He rose and we are joined with Him in His resurrection for the rest of eternity when we believe His death was in our place and that He took on Himself the wage of our sin. ^(Rom 6:5, 23)

The angel bid the women to go tell the disciples Jesus was risen and He was going ahead to meet them in Galilee. Jesus' purpose for His people was just getting started. The purpose in His resurrection wasn't just for His own victory over the grave and eternal life in the presence of God. It was for *our* victory over the grave and *our* eternal life in the presence of God.

They arrived at the tomb that morning in sorrow, but they left in joy. It appeared that death itself had been beaten. The thought itself was a wonder. But it is also something of an abstraction, isn't it. I mean, after all, they hadn't seen the risen Christ, just the evidence of His resurrection. Yes, an angel appeared to them, but his contribution lay in forensic evidence and instruction. And for many—like Jesus' disciple Thomas—evidence and explanation are no substitute for the real thing.

As the women hurried away, *"Jesus met them and said 'Greetings!'"* They knew Him immediately and worshipped Him. They took hold of His feet. Why? Two reasons. One, when they saw Him, they fell to their knees in awe. So when they reached for Him, they were already on the ground. But also, they took hold of His feet that they might know that this wasn't a hallucination. This was really Jesus! They touched Him. He told them not to fear, but to keep on their mission to tell the others and to meet Him in Galilee. Death had been defeated.

The Irreversible Reversed!

It was amazing enough that these women saw the angel and the empty tomb. But to touch Jesus? How tangible is your faith? Are you one who regards religion mainly as a way of thinking? What if the whole point of true religion was to live both now and forever as you were meant to. What if death feels so wrong because it is so wrong. What if the emptiness you can't seem to fill with the things of this world exists because it can't be done. What if you were created for another world. ^(Rom 1:18-23) Someone would have to overcome this one for you.

Christ has overcome the world. ^(Jn 16:33) When He rose on Easter, we're wrong if we see it as a happy ending. It is not the end. It is the beginning. And He is the door through which we enter the life we were created to live. ^(Jn 10:9-10) *"These things are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, and that by believing you may have life in His name."* ^(Jn 20:31) Do you believe this?