

SERIES: The Good News, as Reported by Matthew

SERMON: *Gone!*

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 28:1-10

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A sharp, creative realtor came up with the idea. I refer to the practice after the sale of a house of placing one word, four large letters, across the “for sale” sign. The old word was “SOLD.” The emerging new, more picturesque word in vogue in some areas today is “GONE.” It is direct, succinct, and conveys the idea of quick and efficient success. It’s the kind of sign that makes other potential sellers say, “I want to list my house with that kind of action-oriented, get-it-done realtor.” It is also the kind of word that best describes what the women found when they arrived at the tomb of Jesus early on Resurrection morning. Jesus was *GONE!*

Most of the major world religions are based upon mere philosophical propositions. Of those based upon a great person, only Christianity claims an empty tomb for its founder. Judaism doesn’t claim resurrection for its founder, Abraham. Buddhism doesn’t claim resurrection for its founder, Buddha. Islam doesn’t claim resurrection for its founder, Mohammed.

And the same is true of the more modern religions. Over Joseph Smith’s tomb is the word OCCUPIED! Over Mary Baker Eddy’s tomb is the word OCCUPIED! Over Herbert W. Armstrong’s tomb is the word OCCUPIED! But over Jesus’ tomb the words is carved by the finger of God—*GONE!* He is not here; He is risen!

But if we are going to distinguish Christianity from every other religion on the basis that only Christianity has a resurrected founder, then we’d better be pretty sure of our facts. Fortunately, we know more about the details of the hours immediately preceding and following the death of Jesus, in and near Jerusalem, than we know about the death of any other person in all the ancient world. Let’s read some of that evidence, as found in Matthew:

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, 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. 4The 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."

So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

This morning I want us to examine the resurrection by means of three propositions:

The resurrection of Jesus was frequently predicted.

By the prophets. There are a number of allusions to the resurrection in the OT prophets. For example in the 16th Psalm David wrote a prayer:

*“Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;
my body also will rest secure,
because you will not abandon me to the grave,
nor will you let your Holy One see decay.”* (Psalm 16:9-10)

You would be excused if you thought David was talking about himself, since he uses the first person pronoun, but you would be wrong. Both Peter and Paul tell us that David was talking prophetically about Jesus. In Acts 2:29-31 Peter refers to Psalm 16 when he says,

“Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day (implying, “so is his body”). But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay.”

Paul is even clearer. In Acts 13:36-37 he said, “For when David had served God’s purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers *and his body decayed*. But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay.”

By Jesus Himself. But the most potent predictions that Jesus would rise from the dead came from His own mouth. We have come across many of those predictions during our journey through the book of Matthew. For example:

Matthew 16:21: *“From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”*

Matthew 17:9: *“As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, ‘Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.’”*

Matthew 17:22-23: *“When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, ‘The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life.’ And the disciples were filled with grief.”*

Matthew 20:18-19: *“We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!”*

Matthew 26:32: *“But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.”*

Now I would admit there is nothing particularly remarkable about someone accurately predicting his own death, especially if he has lots of enemies, as Jesus did. Martin Luther King did it; he predicted he wouldn't reach age 40, and sure enough, he was tragically killed at age 39. That prediction was interesting but it was not supernatural. After all, Dr. King didn't predict where it would happen, who would do it, or how it would be done.

But Jesus not only predicted His death, He predicted where it would happen (in Jerusalem), who would do it (elders, chief priests and teachers of the law), and how they would do it (by crucifixion). Even more amazingly, He never predicted His death without adding that He would rise again. Only a fool would dare say something like that unless he was sure it was going to happen.

The resurrection was *supernaturally accomplished*. (Matthew 28:1-4, 11)

We talked last week about all the steps taken by the religious leaders and the Romans to make sure the disciples of Jesus could not steal His body and stage a mock resurrection. Pilate's order to "make the tomb as secure as you know how," was obeyed explicitly, as an unusually large stone was placed in front of the tomb, a seal was put on the stone, and guards were positioned whose express assignment was to prevent any tampering with the tomb. If a resurrection was going to happen it could only be accomplished by the supernatural power of God. But indeed, several supernatural events did occur.

A violent earthquake occurred. (2) This is the second major earthquake connected with Passion Week. You will recall that as Jesus hung on the cross there was also an earthquake (27:51), one which caused many tombs to be opened. This one is called "violent," and it seems to be connected with an angel's descent from heaven.

An angel of the Lord rolled back the stone. (2-3) Luke tells us there were two angels, but of course, if there were two, there was also one. The one that stood out to Matthew had the appearance of lightning, with clothes as white as snow, and he was sitting on the stone. The other angel, according to Mark, was apparently sitting inside the tomb when the women entered it (Mark 16:5), so there is no necessary contradiction here.

Jesus was *Gone!* (6) The angel said to the women, "He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay." The women did not observe the resurrection itself, but they were invited to see the evidence—an empty tomb, except for the graveclothes lying there like an empty cocoon.

The unique nature of Jesus' resurrection can be seen by contrasting it with Lazarus' resurrection. He came out of the tomb *wearing* his graveclothes, and Jesus had to tell the bystanders, "Loose him and let him go." Lazarus was brought back to life in his earthly body for a short time; he would die again. Jesus came to life in a resurrection body with a whole new life principle, immortal and never to die again. He just exited those graveclothes on His own, leaving them as

they were. And He apparently escaped from the tomb in the same way. The angel didn't remove the stone from the tomb to let Jesus out. The stone was removed to let the disciples in so they could see that Jesus was already gone!

All of this, of course, stunned the guards and caused them to abandon their post. Matthew tells us that the Roman guards were "so afraid of the angel that they shook and became like dead men." Utterly powerless and perhaps even unconscious, they shortly "came to" and, realizing their dead prisoner was gone, hastily left the area of the tomb, presumably out of fear for their own lives.

I would give a lot to have been privy to the conversation of these guards. I imagine they had a vigorous discussion of the options open to them, which were few. One option was to run, but where does a Roman soldier hide in Palestine? A second option was to turn themselves over to Pilate's mercy, but Pilate was not known for his mercy. The third option was to seek help from the Jewish religious leaders, whom they knew would have a vested interest in keeping a lid on what had happened. This was the action they decided to take. An alibi was arranged that would save their necks and a payoff was made to buy their silence. This provided the religious leaders a way to counteract the truth of the resurrection. That's what Matthew 28:11-15 tells us:

While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests 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.

The resurrection was thoroughly attested. (Matthew 28:5-10, 16-17)

The resurrection of Jesus was not designed by God to be a secret event. The angel tells the women, "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.'" But the women don't have to wait for some contact in the future, for Jesus reveals Himself to the women almost immediately. This is just the first of a number of post-resurrection appearances.

By many post-resurrection appearances:

1. To the women at the tomb (8-10) Look again at verses 8-10: "So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. 'Greetings,' he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him." John gives us much more information about this encounter, focusing specifically on a conversation between Jesus and one of the women, Mary Magdalene. John 20:14-18:

She turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

"Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell

me where you have put him, and I will get him."

Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).

Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' "

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

2. To two disciples on the Road to Emmaus. (Luke 24:13-35) Luke tells us this happened "that same day," i.e. on Easter Sunday. Two of Jesus' followers (not from the Twelve Disciples) were going to a village called Emmaus, about 7 miles from Jerusalem. As they were talking about the events of the past week, Jesus came up and began to walk with them, but again they were kept from recognizing who he was. He asked them what they were talking about, and they expressed surprise that He didn't know about what had just taken place in Jerusalem. (Doesn't God have a sense of humor? I can just hear Jesus saying, "You don't mean it!") They told him all about the trial of Jesus, the crucifixion, the empty tomb, and the witness of the women that Jesus was *GONE!*

But then they express resignation: "We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel." To that Jesus responded,

"How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."

What a treat that must have been—to hear Jesus Himself expound all the OT Messianic prophecies! But it wasn't until after they sat down to eat, and they heard Jesus pray and saw Him break the bread, that their eyes were opened and they recognized Him.

Then He disappeared from their sight. Here is their own testimony about the event: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

3. To Peter. (Luke 24:34) We aren't told exactly when this happened, but it was apparently some time on the same day. The two disciples on the way to Emmaus mention it when talking to the other disciples. "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon" (Luke 24:34).

4. To the Eleven, minus Thomas (Luke 24:36-39, John 20:19-25).

5. To the Eleven, *with* Thomas, eight days later (John 20:26-29).

6. To seven of the disciples beside the Sea of Galilee (John 21).

7. To the Eleven again in Galilee (Matthew 27:16-17).

8. To more than 500 believers, to James, and even to Paul (1 Cor. 15:3-8) This passage from 1 Corinthians 15 is well worth quoting, for it summarizes these amazing post-resurrection appearances:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

Paul, I believe, is speaking of the time when the resurrected Christ appeared to him on the Road to Damascus.

What is obvious from the number and types of appearances Jesus made is that no attempt was made to keep the resurrection secret. This was not some kind of esoteric truth revealed to only a handful of people. This is a truth that could stand the test of examination by scores of witnesses.

By the transformed lives of the Apostles. This may actually be the single greatest evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. The following description of the change that occurred in the lives of the apostles after the resurrection is a powerful poetic portrayal:

On the day of the crucifixion they were filled with sadness; on the first day of the week with gladness. At the crucifixion they were hopeless; on the first day of the week their hearts glowed with certainty and hope. When the message of the resurrection first came they were incredulous and hard to be convinced, but once they became assured they never doubted again. What could account for the astonishing change in these men in so short a time? The mere removal of the body from the grave could never have transformed their spirits, and characters. Three days are not enough for a legend to spring up which would so affect them. Time is needed for a process of legendary growth. This is a psychological fact that demands a full explanation.

Think of the character of the witnesses, men and women who gave the world the highest ethical teaching it has ever known, and who even on the testimony of their enemies lived it out in their lives. Think of the psychological absurdity of picturing a little band of defeated cowards cowering in an upper room one day and a few days later transformed into a company that no persecution could silence—and then attempting to attribute this dramatic change to nothing more convincing than a miserable fabrication they were trying to foist upon the world. That simply wouldn't make sense.

By the silence of His enemies. It is an astounding fact that nowhere do Jesus' enemies challenge the claim of the Resurrection. They bribe, they badger, they persecute, they imprison—but never do they challenge the central fact that Jesus actually rose from the dead. The evidence was simply overwhelming. John R. W. Stott has well said that the silence of Christ's enemies “is as eloquent a proof of the resurrection as the apostles' witness.”¹

Conclusion: Friends, God does not expect us to believe without evidence; He has provided perfectly adequate evidence of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Tragically, should Jesus

show up today, I fear the response of most people would probably not be much different than it was in Jerusalem during Passion Week. Many would reject Him outright. Some would condemn Him to death. And if He then would rise again from the dead, most would call it trickery. Human nature has not changed.

At the same time there are many today who believe, as there were on that first Easter morning. They have seen the evidence and have responded to it. They know their faith rests, not on wishful thinking but upon the power of God. As Paul said, Christ was “declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead” (Romans 1:4)

Furthermore, these know that faith in the risen Christ brings forgiveness of sins and eternal life. I would urge you this morning to place your faith in Jesus. Trust Him with your life, your future, with everything. Jesus Christ is *GONE!* from the tomb. He is risen, He is risen indeed!

I’m going to close with a sinner’s prayer. If it is the desire of your heart to know God personally, I encourage you to pray this prayer after me—silently but sincerely—and then to let me know after the service that you did so. I’d like to help you get started on your new spiritual journey.

Father, I confess that I have violated your character and your commandments. I helped put Jesus on the Cross through my sin. I am sorry. I want to live for You. I want my life to count for something greater than myself.

Thank you for sending Jesus to die for me. Thank you for raising Him from the dead. Thank You for the forgiveness Jesus offers, and for the meaning and purpose in life that He provides. Thank you that I can spend eternity in heaven in your presence because of what Jesus did for me. In Jesus’ name, Amen!

i. John R. W. Stott, *Basic Christianity*, 51.