

Matthew 28:1–10 (CEB)

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the tomb. ²Look, there was a great earthquake, for an angel from the Lord came down from heaven. Coming to the stone, he rolled it away and sat on it. ³Now his face was like lightning and his clothes as white as snow. ⁴The guards were so terrified of him that they shook with fear and became like dead men. ⁵But the angel said to the women, “Don’t be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He isn’t here, because he’s been raised from the dead, just as he said. Come, see the place where they laid him. ⁷Now hurry, go and tell his disciples, ‘He’s been raised from the dead. He’s going on ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there.’ I’ve given the message to you.”

⁸With great fear and excitement, they hurried away from the tomb and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹But Jesus met them and greeted them. They came and grabbed his feet and worshipped him. ¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Go and tell my brothers that I am going into Galilee. They will see me there.”

1 Corinthians 15:17–20 (CEB)

¹⁷If Christ hasn’t been raised, then your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins, ¹⁸and what’s more, those who have died in Christ are gone forever. ¹⁹If we have a hope in Christ only in this life, then we deserve to be pitied more than anyone else. ²⁰But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead. He’s the first crop of the harvest of those who have died.

Fear has no place in the light of Jesus’ resurrection.

Perhaps I’m wrong about this, but it seems to me that we live in a time when people are especially fearful and anxious. There are those who fear President Trump and there are those who are afraid of those who don’t fear Trump. There are those who fear debt and those who fear cutting spending. There are fears of climate change and social change, terrorists and technology, cholesterol and gluten, and so on. Fear just seems to have become a permanent part of our cultural landscape.

But . . . and here’s the big point for this week . . . the resurrection of Jesus should drive fear and anxiety from our hearts. We are called to boldness, not timidity. We are to put our faith in God before we put it in ourselves. The light of Easter Sunday should drive all darkness from our hearts. Let’s see how that plays out in Matthew’s gospel.

Fears – everywhere and nowhere

Fear plays a prominent role in Matthew’s resurrection narrative. When two of Jesus’ followers, both women, arrive at the tomb early on Sunday morning, an angel appears during an earthquake. The guards placed at the tomb by the Jewish authorities are scared nearly to death. Indeed, they are so petrified by fear that they become like corpses! In keeping with the standard practice of angels in the Bible, an angel tells the women, “Do not be afraid,” for the women have good reason to be afraid . . . and it isn’t only because they have encountered an angel.

- Among first-century Jews, there was no expectation of a suffering, much less crucified, Messiah. The Messiah was to arrive in power and might and wonder and glory to cleanse the temple, expel the pagans, and restore God’s kingdom. The fact that Jesus ends up dead on a cross could only mean that he wasn’t the Messiah. Wonderful and beloved rabbi, yes. Prophet, yes. But the Messiah could never meet such an end . . . or so everyone believed.
- And if there was no expectation of a dead Messiah, there couldn’t be any expectation of a resurrected Messiah, or for that matter the resurrection of

any single person until all were resurrected on the Day of the Lord. The ancients knew what we know; namely, until that day comes, the dead stay dead.

- Thus, when the three women arrive and find the stone rolled away, their only thought would be that someone had beaten them to the tomb, either to take Jesus' body or to desecrate it.

Thus, it isn't surprising that neither woman takes the angel's words to heart, for when they leave the tomb to find the other disciples, they leave filled with both terror and great joy. When they run into Jesus (which is pretty much how I picture it), Jesus too tells them, "Do not be afraid."

In the space of these ten brief verses, Matthew has four specific references to fear – but there is not another single reference to fear in the remainder of his gospel. In fact, in all four gospel accounts, the only reference to fear *after* the discovery of the empty tomb is in Luke, when Jesus visits the disciples huddled in an upstairs room on Sunday. Perhaps the other disciples needed their own "empty tomb" fright before they were ready to move on. In any event, despite the remarkable occurrences that lie ahead, the confusion and fear that marked the disciples before Jesus' resurrection are gone, replaced by confidence and joy.

A new world

The disciples became resurrection people, on-earth-as-it-is-in-heaven people. They became the first colonists of a new human race, building a new world. It may be hard to grasp in the midst of day-to-day "realities," but we too are God's resurrection people. Two thousand years ago, the world was remade by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ and it is being remade still. Jesus' resurrection is the proof that this is so.

A world remade. How do we begin to understand this? Right here: *Jesus lives*. He is a figure of history, but like none other. When we take a class on Napoleon, we are talking about a dead guy. Important yes, but still dead. When we gather to talk about Jesus, we are gathering to talk about someone who lives, who participates in our discussion, who can open himself up to us, someone whom we can completely trust with all our hopes, dreams, secrets, messes – and fears. We come to meet the living Jesus.

People often want to talk about the evidence for the resurrection: the empty tomb, the guards, the witnesses, and so on. But I think that somewhat misses the point. The bigger question is this: how do we account for the Christians? What transformed this small, uneducated band of followers into a force that would reshape the world? Frankly, unless these men and women truly encountered the risen Christ, there is no explanation for the emergence of the Christian faith. Thousands of men and women would be martyred in the decades after Jesus' resurrection. When faced with their own torture and death, they would maintain their allegiance to a crucified Galilean Jew.

Why? How? Because God did not give them "a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline" (2 Tim 1:7). They encountered the risen Christ and were transformed. We too encounter the living Jesus and we too are transformed.

Too many Christians have this idea that we get through this life so we can get on to the next life, where we can leave all this behind and enjoy some sort of eternal, disembodied bliss. However, the biblical story is not about a world left behind, but a world put right. Easter doesn't point us toward some faraway place we imagine to be "heaven," but to the marriage of heaven and earth in this place.

God promises Abraham that all the families on the earth will be blessed through him (Genesis 12:3). Micah brings God's promise of a day when swords are beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks (Micah 4). Isaiah brings the promise of a new heavens and a new earth, where there will be no infants who die young, where

lions and lambs will feed together, where people build homes and plant crops (Isaiah 65).

These are all images of God's creation as God intended it. This is the hope to which Easter points us. Jesus' resurrection is the first fruits of the new heavens and the new earth; it embodies God's victory over death. And there is no place for fear.

The Basics of Jesus' Burial and Resurrection

The Jews of Jesus' day practiced a two-stage burial. When a person died, family members would wrap the body in cloth and place it on a ledge in a cave or a man-made family tomb. Perhaps a year later, when the body had decomposed, the family would return to the tomb and place the loved one's bones in a box. The bone box, called an ossuary, would then be stored in a crypt along with the bone boxes of other family members.

Jesus was crucified and died on Friday afternoon. Because Jews could not touch a dead body on the Sabbath, which began at sundown on Friday, Mary and the others had to move quickly. Jesus' body was taken down from the cross, quickly wrapped in some linen, and then carried to an unused tomb that belonged to Joseph of Arimathea. Like most such tombs, a round stone was used to block to the entrance. The stone would keep animals out but still enable the family to come and go as they tended to the bodies and bones. There, Jesus' wrapped body was laid on a stone slab. The women planned to return at dawn on Sunday, after resting on the Sabbath, to finish preparing Jesus' body for the year or more it would lie in the tomb.

At dawn on Sunday, the women returned to the tomb in which they had laid Jesus' body. There, they discovered that the stone had been rolled away and the tomb emptied! As we'd expect, the women were fearful and perplexed. They would naturally assume that Jesus' body had been taken. After all, they knew, as do we, that the dead stay dead. Surely, if Jesus' body was gone then someone had taken it.

But instead, an angel tells the women, "He is not here, for he has been raised." Jesus had passed through death to life-after-death and through that to 'life after life-after-death' - to resurrection. We need to be clear about this. Jesus' followers would not go on to claim that Jesus had been resuscitated; i.e., merely restored to a mortal life. Jesus had brought Lazarus back to life (John 11), but Lazarus had still gone on to die at some point. Lazarus had been resuscitated by Jesus, but not resurrected. The words simply don't mean the same thing.

Having been visited by the risen Jesus in the weeks after his resurrection, his followers would proclaim that in Jesus, God had begun the great resurrection of all people. Twenty-five years later, Paul would call Jesus the "first-fruits" of this great resurrection. Jesus was first and one day, upon his return, we shall all be resurrected too.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Christians are resurrection people. But what do we really mean by this? What does the phrase "resurrection people" mean to you? It certainly means much more than simply believing in Jesus' resurrection. In a letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul wrote that those "who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death . . . that our old self was crucified with him . . . [that we are to] consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." As resurrection people, we have been transformed and made new: "just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in the newness of life" (all the quotes are from Romans 6:1-11).
2. On the timeline of human history, *the* climactic moment against which all else is measured is Jesus' death and resurrection. It is upon the cross that the kingdom of sin did its worst and the kingdom of grace its best. This is what the resurrection shows us. It is Christ's raising that enables us to see the cross for what it was. Yes,

there is still much to fear in this world and, yes, we will all die unless Jesus returns first. But these fears do not define us. It is not fear that is the truest reality, but grace. How can we let go of fear and embrace, not only the grace poured out on us, but the grace we are called to extend to others? Grace is like forgiveness in this: it is meant to be breathed out, not only breathed in.

Daily Bible Readings

This week: Stories of resurrection

Monday, Mark 16 Mark's account of the empty tomb. The shorter ending may be authentic; the longer is not. How would you interpret Mark if he ended his Gospel at verse 8?

Tuesday, Luke 24 Luke's account of the resurrection. The two disciples' encounter with Jesus on the road to Emmaus is the centerpiece of this narrative.

Wednesday, John 20 & 21 John's full account. John 21 is an epilogue appended to the Gospel

Thursday, Romans 6:1-11 Dying and rising with the Messiah. Those who are "in the Messiah" are to walk as resurrected people, in the newness of life – for, in a very real sense, we are resurrected people.

Friday, 1 Corinthians 15 Paul's great chapter on the resurrection. It was written about 20 years after the resurrection, at least a decade before any of the Gospels.

Saturday, Ephesians 2:1-11 We have been saved from sin to life!

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own.

This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class

We have just begun a study of Paul's letter, 1 Thessalonians

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the Gospel of Luke

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

No class on Easter Sunday