

MBC - 12/9/2018 - Pastor Doug Thompson
"The First Easter"
Matthew 28:1-15

Turn with me in your Bibles of Matthew 28. In God's inscrutable timing here at MBC, this morning we have Easter right before Christmas! Jesus just gets out of the tomb and in two weeks He's back in the manger. . .

- Matthew 28:1-15 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, "Do not 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." ¹¹While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. ¹²And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers ¹³and said, "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' ¹⁴And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." ¹⁵So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

It's good to focus our thoughts on Jesus' resurrection at a time other than Easter. Every Sunday is the Lord's Day, because we acknowledge that Jesus Christ rose from the dead after being crucified for our sins on the first day of the week. That's not just why we worship on this day, it's why we have been born again to worship God at all. Hear the Word of God concerning Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Beginning in Acts, the Resurrection of Christ was their Gospel message—

- ACT 2:23,24 this Man—Jesus--delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power.
- ACT 2:32 "This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses.
- ACT 10:40 "God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He become visible,
- ACT 13:36,37 "For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid among his fathers and underwent decay; but He whom God raised did not undergo decay.
- ACT 17:31 He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead."

- ROM 4:24,25 [We are] those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.
- ROM 6:4 Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.
- ROM 7:4 Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God.
- ROM 8:11 But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.
- ROM 8:34 Who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.
- ROM 14:9 For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.
- 2T1 2:8 Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descendant of David, according to my gospel.
- 1PE 1:3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,
- REV 1:18 (The risen Jesus said:) I am the first and the last and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades.
- And Paul said in--Romans 10:9 if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ isn't some religious, wishful, "spiritual" story. It's not presented in a poetic genre - it's presented in the New Testament as historical reality. Jesus rose from the dead, *physically* alive, in a fully human body that could be heard, seen touched - He could even eat! Immediately after His resurrection, Jesus made it a point to reveal Himself to His Disciples as a real, back-from-the-dead Man—

- Luke 24:36-43 ³⁶As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and *said* to them, "Peace to you!" ³⁷But they were startled and frightened and thought they *saw* a spirit. ³⁸And he said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. *Touch me, and see.* For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." ⁴⁰And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" ⁴²They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³and he took it and *ate* before them.

What did the risen Jesus say to doubting Thomas?

- John 20:27 ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.”

Now His body was transformed! It was the same Jesus His men knew and loved, still fully God, still fully Man, but now, glorified, as we will be when we are raised. In 1Cor.15, Paul proclaimed the Gospel as the message of the factual reality that Jesus died, was buried, and was raised, and he underlined and highlighted it by adding that there were *eyewitnesses*—

- 1 Corinthians 15:5-6. . . [Jesus] appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.

“Most of whom are still alive” = “You could track these eyewitnesses down and *ask* them!” Paul couldn’t have made such a challenge if these people didn’t exist.

*And one of the greatest proofs that the resurrection story is not a fictional invention is that *women* were the first witnesses of the empty tomb! I’ve told you before that in that day women were considered to be unreliable as witnesses. Anyone editing Matthew’s manuscript for publishing would have begged him to change this detail for the sake of credibility, but under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, faithful women are singled out for this honor! *It was women who were last at the cross and first at the tomb.*

This morning we’re going to see the response of believers and unbelievers to Jesus’ resurrection. First let’s look at—

I. The response of genuine, but weak believers.

- Matthew 28:1 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.

Now stop right here. These women weren’t rushing to see an empty tomb! They weren’t singing as they went along, “Christ the Lord is Risen Today!” They were going to see the tomb just as they left it, and they firmly believed that Jesus was still inside. Luke tells us—

- Luke 24:1 ¹But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared.

Now Joseph and Nicodemus had already wrapped Jesus’ dead body in over 75 pounds of spices and linen strips. Either the women didn’t know that, or they were going to add more spices, but the fact is, they thought that Jesus was still there, and still - *dead*.

- In Mk.16:3 they even said to each other, “*Wait a minute, who is going to roll away that massive stone for us?*”

All the Gospel writers stress that none of Jesus’ disciples expected Him to rise from the dead. None of them. They had heard Him say it from His own lips. I’m sure they nodded their heads. But they didn’t expect a resurrection.

*This is important to remember when you are talking to unbelievers. They might say, “Well, Jesus’ followers wanted Him to rise from the dead so badly, they wished it into a religion! Or they had a mass hallucination because they believed it so intensely.” No, they didn’t believe it and they were shocked out of their wits when they finally realized that - *He is risen, just as He said!*

*I hope that encourages you in your faith this morning! Do you ever have a hard time believing all of this (in the Bible)? You're not alone. Even Jesus' disciples had a hard time believing it. And they had even seen Jesus raise others from the dead! But everything that happens after Jesus' resurrection is for the sake of strengthening the weak faith of genuine disciples. Jesus doesn't punish them out for not believing. His first words were not, "I told you so!" (Although the angel came close in v.6: "He has risen, *as He said!*")

When you struggle to believe what you believe, you can cry out to Jesus, "Lord, I believe, help me unbelief!" Oh, Jesus will answer that cry from His children. I want you to see how God strengthens the faith of these ladies as they come to Jesus' tomb that cold morning—

- Matthew 28:2 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.

Another earthquake! And just like the earthquake when Jesus died, this was a powerful sign of judgment on Jesus' enemies, but it was a sign of God's presence for His followers. The "for" after "earthquake," gives the *cause* of this earthquake—

- *for* an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. (v.3) ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow.

This powerful, glorious, creature literally descended from heaven, like a ball of fire, and moved this massive boulder like it was nothing - flicked it with his finger! And then he sat on it - grinning! His Master, Jesus Christ, has just conquered His enemies and He has conquered death!

A. *The stone.*

We need to talk about that stone. It was massive. Remember, the women knew that they weren't going to be able to move that stone. Over 50 years ago, an agnostic engineer and lawyer named Frank Morison set out to write a book disproving Christianity. But as he studied the events around Jesus' resurrection, he became a believer, and his book became an apologetic for Christianity. He entitled it, "Who moved the Stone?" His research indicated that it probably weighed about 2 tons! In the Gospel accounts we have 3 different words describing how the stone was moved:

- In Mk. 16:4, the word *anakulio* is used = "rolled up and away" i.e., against gravity.
- In Lk.24:2, and Mt.28:2, the word is *apokulio* which indicates separation = "away from the entire tomb." i.e., not just nudged out of the way a little bit.
- And in John 20:1, the word is *airo* - which means to pick up and carry away. Could it be that those soldiers literally saw that angel pick up that tombstone and set it down away from the tomb? God did it this way to make sure that the first visitors to Jesus' tomb on Easter morning knew that something supernatural had happened.

And these two women saw all of this? But so did the guards—

- Matthew 28:4 ⁴And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men.

The earth was shaking, and these men were shaking! They were frozen with fear. Completely incapacitated. Everyone watching this is *speechless*, so the angel speaks to these ladies—

- Matthew 28:5-6 ⁵But the angel said to the women, “Don’t you be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.

God sent this angel to personally strengthen the faith of these faithful women: “I know you came seeking a crucified and dead Jesus, but I have good, good news: He isn’t here, for He has risen!”

*Now this is really important to notice: the angel said, “He is not here.” i.e., “He is some-where, but not here.” Why is this important? Beloved, Jesus rose bodily, physically from the dead, and He is now alive, in a location, in a glorified physical body. If Jesus had just risen spiritually, the angel would have said, “He is now everywhere!”

- Yes, in His divine nature, Jesus is omnipresent: “Lo I am with you (all of you, everywhere) always.” - but in His human nature, His glorified, risen body still has a physical location - right now it’s in heaven, one day, it will again be on earth -these ladies would soon encounter their very physical Lord. And then, Jesus will appear, and talk and even eat with His men in Galilee. Remember, the Incarnation did not have an expiration date! Jesus will always be the God-Man in a body!

*Now this angel did give a gentle rebuke: “He has risen - *just like He said* - Luke tells us that he said even more—

- Luke 24:6-7 Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise.”

Oh, God is always, always, pointing us back to His Word, isn’t He? “Learn to trust in Jesus’ Word, ladies! Heaven and earth will pass away, Jesus’ words will abide forever. Believe what Jesus says, because what He says, He will do. Including coming back!”

And then the angel invites the ladies to actually come into the tomb to see with their own eyes that Jesus wasn’t there. He doesn’t tell them to “take a leap of faith,” He invites them to see the evidence for themselves. And remember: the angel didn’t move that huge stone to let Jesus out - He had already passed through the tomb. He move to let others in to see that Jesus was gone!

I want to take you to John’s account of what Peter and John saw, after the women told them about their trip to Jesus’ tomb. *It wasn’t empty* - there was something in that tomb that was proof of Jesus’ resurrection—

B. The empty graveclothes.

- John 20:3-9 ³So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. ⁴Both of them were running together, but the other disciple (John) outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, ⁷and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

Look at v.9: up to this point, even Peter and John did not understand all of Jesus' predictions that He would rise from the dead, but as they took in what they saw in that tomb, it finally clicked - they became convinced of Jesus' resurrection, on the spot. What was it? It wasn't Jesus! But there was something in that tomb—

- Over 75 pounds of expensive spices and cloth lying there, intact, like a collapsed cocoon. The word John uses means “lying in a neat, undisturbed manner.” And Peter and John immediately grasped the implications: The graveclothes were there - Jesus was not. If someone had stolen the body, why would they bother to remove the graveclothes? And then fold the face cloth neatly and put it in a separate spot? No! They would have been scared, in a hurry, and they would have taken the body still wrapped up.

And if they had *tried* to extricate Jesus - can you imagine the mess it would have made in that tomb? But that's not what Peter and John saw. They saw a calm, orderly scene. Jesus had passed right through the cloth and spices, folded His own facecloth, and then passed right through that tomb! No other explanation. And they *got it*.

Now let's get back to these women. The angel says to them—

- Matthew 28:7 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.”

These women will be the first to proclaim Jesus' resurrection. What an honor. And it doesn't go to Peter, the Rock - or any of the other men. Jesus is making a point of showing that this brand new body of Christ, the church, is under new management, and—

- Galatians 3:28 ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Divine diversity. You bet!

- Matthew 28:8-10 ⁸So they departed quickly from the tomb with *fear* and *great joy*, and ran to tell his disciples.

I love that: “*fear and great joy!*” A little terrified, but really happy! Don't you feel both of those emotions at once when you really grasp the resurrection?

- ⁹And behold, Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” (Actually, it's the same word Paul uses over in Philippians: “*Rejoice* in the Lord always, and again I say, *Rejoice!*” It was a common greeting, it was like saying “Hi!” Nothing formal or theological here: Jesus was back, and greeting His dear friends, on the other side of death. But looked at how they responded—
- And they came up and took hold of his feet and *worshipped* him.

They worshipped! And that means they regarded Jesus as God, and Jesus accepted their worship because He is God! And then He repeated their commission—

- ¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.”

He calls His disciples, “*my brothers*.” The sheep that abandoned their Shepherd, left Him to die alone; one of them denied Him three times, and He still calls them “my brothers.” Even Peter. Isn’t that precious? And when you sin, and wander off from Jesus, again and again, if you are one of His own, He still calls you, “My brother, My sister.” He will hold you fast.

- And Jesus gives His failed disciples another chance to pick themselves up and obey Him: “Go to Galilee.” “Don’t stay here huddled up, sniffing, having a pity party. You’ve got work to do. I’m about to give you a worldwide commission, so put on your sandals, act like disciples, and start walking. By faith. I’ll see you in Galilee.”

*Our Lord is always, always, working on strengthening our faith, isn’t He? Let me say this: Some of you have spiritually stalled out, and the truth is you’re stuck in a rut, feeling sorry for yourself. You aren’t spending time in the Word, you’re avoiding other Christians, and you aren’t believing Christ and the Gospel. You need to repent and get moving! You are a *servant* of the Lord Jesus Christ! You have “good works to do which He prepared beforehand that you should walk in them.” So get up and go to Galilee! Or wherever. (That is biblical counseling!)

II. The response of convinced unbelievers.

So as the women rush out on their commission to proclaim Jesus’ resurrection, the devil launches his **counter-mission** in vv.11-15 to cover up the resurrection. Literally, v. 1 says, “While they were going,” these faithful women running with the truth on their lips! - as the same time, *behold*, the enemies of Christ are concocting a lie about Him. Amazing.

*We don’t talk about this when we talk about the resurrection, do we? The Easter story isn’t just glorious angels, an empty tomb, and Easter lilies - it’s also evil, lying people who hate Jesus and they hate you and me because we follow Him. Until Jesus returns we will be opposed by enemies of the cross who are animated by Satan and his demons who want to replace the truth of the cross and resurrection of Jesus with lies and deceptions. We’ve got to get this. We’re always, always, at war.

Now I call these people believing unbelievers. They knew Jesus rose from the dead. They couldn’t explain what they knew *did* happen so they made up a lie that they knew *didn’t* happen! They couldn’t handle the *implications of Jesus’ resurrection*, so they had to cover it up. They rejected the sign of Jonah - they couldn’t deny it, but they would not accept it.

- The soldiers sure couldn’t deny it! They were there when it all went down. All of the careful precautions they had taken to make sure nothing would disturb the tomb, only validated the fact that Jesus rose from the dead, just as He said He would.

They were believing *unbelievers!* And they set out to replace the Good News with - fake news.

- Matthew 28:11-15 ¹¹While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. ¹²And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money (i.e., a bribe) to the soldiers ¹³and said, “Tell people, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ ¹⁴And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will satisfy him (i.e., we will bribe Pilate too) and keep you out of trouble.” ¹⁵So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

So let's examine this story. Was it a reasonable explanation of the facts. There are at least 5 major problems with their story—

1.) How likely is it that Jesus' disciples would actually come and steal His body?

Body stealing was a capital offense back then. Peter wouldn't even admit that he knew Jesus - would he take a chance like this? These are not brave men at this point. They've abandoned Jesus in His death, they don't see any future for followers of Jesus. They didn't have the guts to even take His body and bury it - why would they steal it now? And then they would go out and start a world religion based on a lie and die martyr's deaths - for a lie?

2.) Even if they wanted to, could they have pulled it off?

So how many of them would it have taken to roll away that stone? All of them, plus a few more buddies? Now even assuming that all the guards fell asleep at the tomb, how much noise would it make to move this stone, creep into the tomb, remove all of the spices and wrappings and fold them neatly, then get away with Jesus' body? These were the soundest sleeping guards in history!

So the disciples *wouldn't* have stolen Jesus' body, and they *couldn't* have stolen His body - period. But there are more problems—

3.) How likely is it that all the guards fell asleep?

What was the penalty for falling asleep at their post? Death. And as we said last week, we read in the book of Acts that Herod did execute all the guards who were keeping an eye on Peter when an angel set him free. That's a pretty good motivation to stay awake! But there's something else: the Roman military divided the night into 4 watches of 2-3 hours for each watch, just to keep the men fresh and alert. There's no way these guards all fell asleep, so soundly that anyone could break into and out of Jesus' tomb.

4.) Why weren't the Disciples prosecuted for stealing Jesus' body?

As I said, that was a capital crime. We read nothing in the Book of Acts of either Roman or Jewish authorities hunting down the Disciples for this crime. It's never even mentioned. Oops, looks like they weren't consistent in their lie. (Even O.J. Simpson said he still looks for Nicole's killer!)

5.) How could sleeping guards know what happened to Jesus' body?

By their own admission, they weren't eyewitnesses if they were asleep!

- Pretty lousy story. You and I could probably do better, but Justin Martyr, in his *Dialogues with the Jew, Trypho*, in the middle of the first century, said that this story was still well known as the Jewish explanation for the empty tomb.

It was a lot harder and took a lot more work to concoct this lie, than to simply believe the truth: Jesus rose from the dead. But they had to say something if they weren't willing to believe the truth.

III. Believing unbelievers and doubting believers.

But Matthew includes this story because he wants to contrast the nature of belief with the nature of unbelief. Someone said this—

- When an unbeliever is determined not to believe, no fact or reason, no matter how obvious and convincing, can enlighten him. The person who is sold out to darkness refuses to recognize the light, even when it is blindingly clear.

The French atheist Voltaire showed his evil heart when he wrote: *“Even if a miracle should be wrought in the open marketplace before a thousand sober witnesses, I would rather mistrust my senses than admit a miracle.”* Unbelief will always find a way to reject the truth.

The evidence was right in front of their eyes - they still wouldn't believe. Why? Jesus said why back in John's Gospel—

- John 3:19 ¹⁹And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.

Never, ever forget this: faith in Jesus Christ, His death for our sins, and His resurrection from the dead, is a spiritual issue - not an intellectual issue. You didn't become a follower of Jesus because you studied the evidence and drew the right conclusion. *God had mercy on you, and changed your heart.* He opened your blind eyes so that you could see what is true. Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but our Father who is in heaven.

So unbelievers might believe the truth, but they won't embrace it. They've been blinded by the light. Remember that! You will never argue or convince a person into the Kingdom. God must melt their hard heart. So keep sharing the simple Gospel, and pray.

But let me turn it around and end with this: True believers can have doubts! Look with me at —

- Matthew 28:16-17 ¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷And when they saw him they worshiped him, *but some doubted.*

We know the name of at least one of those doubters, don't we? Old Thomas. But he was also a worshiper. Thomas went on to start a church in southern India and die a martyr's death. There are Christians there to this day called “Thomas Christians.”

You can be a worshiper of Jesus and still have doubts. Maybe that's you this morning. Sometimes it's me. What does Jesus do about His doubting worshipers? He holds them fast! He comforts them. He encourages them to believe. When Jesus heard that Thomas had some doubts, He made a special appearance, just for Thomas—

- John 20:27-31 ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.” ²⁸Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” ³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.