



# “Fear Overcome!”

Matthew 28:1-10

***Christ the Lord is risen! The blinding brilliance of Easter banishes our fears, for we are God’s Easter people, filled with a spirit of power and of love. Alleluia!!***

Over the last seven weeks, we have talked about and reflected upon our fears. Many of us have trouble counting all our fears, much less naming them. Surely, being fearful and anxious is just part of the human condition. Or is it? Can our fears truly be overcome?

## God’s Vindication of Jesus

It would be a mistake to see Jesus’ resurrection as merely the greatest of all miracles. The resurrection of Jesus was much more than a demonstration of God’s power. The resurrection was God’s vindication of Jesus.

On Friday afternoon, Jesus hung upon a Roman cross, a failed Messiah condemned as a traitor to Rome. Abandoned by all but a few, Jesus had cried out to God just before his death, “Why have you forsaken me?” To all appearances, Jesus’ life and ministry had met an ignoble end. He was despised and rejected and the world “held him of no account” (Isaiah 53:3).

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, to vindicate someone is to demonstrate that the person is “free of blame, criticism, or doubt.” Jesus’ crucifixion seemed to dash all hope that this man had been Israel’s Messiah. As far the Jews were concerned, there could simply be no such thing as a crucified Messiah.

However, Jesus’ resurrection, this defeat of death, was a mind-blowing demonstration that the crucifixion was not all it had seemed. Rather than marking Jesus’ failure, the cross was the place of God’s victory over sin and death. Jesus had not been found guilty in God’s law court; he had been found innocent! And, because Jesus stands before God in our place, we too are vindicated, standing before God as forgiven, blameless people.

## 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, this angel of the Lord tells the women, “Do not be **afraid**.” 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 tells them, “Do not be **afraid**.”

In the space of ten brief verses, Matthew has four specific references to fear – but there is not another single reference to fear in the rest 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 appears to 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 faith of Jesus Christ and it is being remade still. Jesus’ resurrection is the proof that this is so.

## 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 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, that death is a one-way street. 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.

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.