



“He Has Been Raised”

Matthew 5:43-48; Matthew 21:1-11

Alleluia! Christ is Risen. Alleluia!

I imagine most of us keep hoping we can settle into lives with less anxiety and worry. But no . . . not at all. For a host of reasons, we seem to be an unhappy, worry-filled nation filled with anxious, stressed-out people. Every poll I see paints a similar picture.

However . . . and here’s the big point for this week . . . the resurrection of Jesus should drive fear and anxiety from

our hearts – yes, now and every year. 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. We will see how that plays out in Matthew’s gospel, but first, we need to ground ourselves in a few of the basics of resurrection that too few Christians know.

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. A year later or so, 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 nearby 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, after which, Jesus’ bones would be placed in a bone box.

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” (Matthew 28:6). Jesus had passed through death to a life-after-death and through that to a ‘life after life-after-death’¹ – 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.

So . . . on to more about Matthew’s story of the resurrection.

¹ One of N. T. Wright’s many helpful phrases.

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 since 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.

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.

The Easter Challenge

We tend to diminish the meaning of Easter in two ways. First, we sometimes make the mistake of seeing the resurrection as no more than a demonstration of God's power, perhaps the greatest "miracle" ever but little more than that. Second, we might think of the resurrection as Jesus proving something about what will happen to us after we die, showing us the "way to heaven" as it were. The problem is that both meanings shortchange Easter. For the New Testament writers, Jesus' resurrection meant that the kingdom of God had arrived and that it was time for the people of God to get to work being the light to the world and the salt of the earth, feeding the poor and clothing the naked, making disciples of all nations.

Hence, when Paul concludes his glorious chapter on the resurrection in his letter to the Corinthians, he doesn't say, "Jesus has been raised and God's victory won, so have faith and you'll get to heaven." Instead, Paul writes, "Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Easter is a very public proclamation that God has acted decisively in human history to rescue us and to renew all of creation. God has called us to build for his kingdom as we confidently await its final consummation. And, thankfully, God is with us in this. God's Spirit enables us to do the work that God has given, refreshing us in our prayers, our worship, our learning, our loving, and our serving. God's new creation has begun and we are summoned to be part of it. Alleluia. Christ is risen indeed!

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. That is all well and good, but 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, in this world.

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 heaven 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 fruit of the new heaven and the new earth; it embodies God’s victory over death. And, thus, there is no place for fear or worry.