

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Easter Series 2017: Matthew 28:1-20

Introduction

Every story has its characters; some major some minor. The resurrection story is no different. On this Easter Sunday we are going to survey the nine characters, or groups of characters, that can be found in Matthew 28:1-20. We will see how the resurrection impacted them and, in doing so, endeavour to get some new light on how this most wonderful of events should affect us. Let's read the first half of the chapter.

"Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it. His countenance was light lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. And the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men. But the angel answered and said to the women, 'Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and indeed He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him. Behold, I have told you.' So they went out quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to bring His disciples word. And as they went to tell His disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, 'Rejoice!' So they came and held Him by the feet and worshipped Him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me'" (Matthew 28:1-10).

The women (the two Marys)

The two Marys were the first human beings to see the Lord Jesus in resurrection! They set off while it was still night to be at the tomb as soon as practically possible under Jewish law. They came to see a tomb and the body within it. They were animated by love for their Lord and a desire to do what they could for His body, but they had no hope. They had seen Jesus crucified, taken down from the cross and placed in the new tomb. They knew He was dead and could not understand how this could have happened to the One they were convinced was God's Messiah. Expecting a body, they saw an angel! If the shining angel was remarkable, his words were more amazing still! It was these two women who first heard those famous words of Easter, *"He is not here, for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay."*

"He is risen": the wonderful truth of Easter Sunday compressed into three short words! They were looking in the wrong place if they wanted to see Jesus Christ. The angel invites them to look at the empty tomb and see where the Lord once lay, but the laying down and death, are now in the past tense. He is risen: just as He had said that He would.

In an era when the testimony of women was not acceptable evidence in court, God, via the angel, commissions these women as the first messengers of the good news of resurrection, and they are sent to bring the tidings to the disciples and to give them instructions as to where they are to meet Jesus, in Galilee. They had arrived in sadness, probably with hands hanging down. They left running, with great joy. What a transformation!

As they were fulfilling the errand the angel has given them, the Lord Himself met them. Now they were the first eye witnesses to the Lord being truly risen. The Lord's one word greeting is, *"Rejoice!"* (Matthew 28:9), and they did just that! The two Mary's did the most appropriate thing possible: they worshipped the resurrected Christ. The message for the eleven is more or less repeated but, whereas the angel refers to "His disciples", Jesus calls them "My brethren" (Matthew 28:10) - a title made possible by His death for them and His rising again.

The Angel of the Lord

Heaven is the home of angels, and that is where this angel descended from to roll away the stone. Doubtless Jesus had all the power necessary to roll the stone away Himself, but the One who did not call on twelve legions of angels (see Matthew 26:53) to defend Him on Good Friday, has one angel sent from heaven to open His tomb on Easter Sunday. In His resurrection body, Jesus could have passed straight through the stone, but then the women, and others, would not have been able to look in and see that the grave was empty.

The angel is so powerful and splendid that the guards shake in fear and fall down like dead men. The angels are God's messengers and heralds. Indeed, the word angel means, quite literally, "messenger". The angels were the heralds of the wonder of incarnation and the words, "*Do not fear*" (see Luke 2:10), that were spoken at that time to the shepherds, are repeated now to the two women. An angel is now a glorious herald of the glorious resurrection!

Angels are obviously powerful, even terrifying, beings but the writer of Hebrews says, "*Are they not ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?*" Hebrews 1:14. And that is what this one is doing here.

We'll read the second half of the chapter now.

"Now while [the women] were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened. When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, saying, 'Tell them, "His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept." And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will appease him and make you secure.' So they took the money and did as they were instructed; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day. Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them. When they saw Him, they worshipped Him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.' Amen" (Matthew 28:11-20).

Soldiers (the guard)

The soldiers had a job to do. They had been posted to guard a tomb (not a very exciting duty!) and they had settled in to wait until they were relieved at the end of their watch. They were indifferent to what had happened on the Friday, just another crucifixion, and today they were just doing their job. They were certainly stirred up when the angel appeared! We have already noticed their trembling and collapse, but it is noticeable that the angel does not speak to them at all. His words of comfort are for the Marys. The soldiers are simply ignored. They had not come to "seek Jesus", they were posted to stop people doing that.

Their character is made plain when the chief priests offer them money to tell lies in an attempt to cover up the resurrection. They happily take the money and do as they are asked. They are much more interested in cash than the truth, or the miracle of the resurrection, so they became collaborators in a wicked deception.

The appearance of the angel, despite its initial, dramatic impact, seems to have had little lasting effect on these men. They were like so many people in the world today, with no real interest beyond what is immediate and material.

Chief priests and elders

Sometimes it's hard to remember that the chief priests were meant to be the teachers and moral leaders of the nation, the guardians of God's law. The phrase that springs to mind is,

*"O what a tangled web we weave,
When first we practice to deceive."*

"Marmion", Sir Walter Scott, 1771- 1832

They had bribed Judas to betray Jesus. Then they procured false witnesses to accuse Him. After overturning any number of the law of Moses' provisions to condemn Jesus before the Sanhedrin, they cajole Pilate into subverting Roman law to have Christ crucified. Now they indulge in more bribery and corruption to suppress the resurrection. They consult together with the elders, but this unity and consultation is in an evil cause. They were determined to suppress the truth during the Lord's life, even while claiming to represent it. They are still doing the same now.

Having broken all the rules to have Jesus condemned and killed, they simply cannot accept that He might now be alive again. That would catastrophically undo all they have schemed for and prove that they had been wrong from the beginning and that Jesus really was God's Messiah. They simply could not, would not, contemplate the possibility!

The Lord Jesus once described them as "*whited sepulchres*" (Matthew 23:27). They were religious and pious on the outside, but corrupt and dead within. How ironic that the events around the Lord's tomb highlight that they are still "*whited sepulchres*" now!

Governor (Pilate)

Pilate is not named in Matthew 28. He is inferred when the chief priests talk to the soldiers about the possibility of reports of the guards sleeping coming to the “governor’s ears”. Pilate simply was not interested enough in the whole affair. How terribly ironic it would be, if Pilate turned out to have been angrier at the soldiers’ invented negligence, than at the dreadful injustice of Christ’s crucifixion.

He was concerned with the great ‘affairs of state’. How the peace might be kept in his jurisdiction around Judea. He was interested in his own position. How he might keep his post as governor: maybe even get a new, bigger job. He was prepared to expend some effort salving his conscience. Washing his hands to try and distance himself from a miscarriage of justice he saw plainly, but refused to stop. He was far from indifferent about the opinion of Caesar. Hints about him ceasing to be Caesar’s friend were enough to make him ignore his conscience and to do the expedient thing.

If Pilate had not been interested enough to intervene on the side of truth, in fact the one who is The Truth (see John 14:6), on Friday afternoon, he was not even anywhere on the scene on Sunday morning.

The Common people (The Jews)

The common people of the Jewish nation are spoken of as still repeating the lies about the disciples stealing Jesus body, even when Matthew is writing, around forty years later. Far from seeking out the truth, they were content to accept the lies they had been told and not look beneath the surface. Furthermore, they passed those lies on to the next generation. At the crucifixion, they had been complicit, at the very best. Some of them had been paying for Jesus death. The resurrection didn’t seem real to them at all. They continued on just as they had before. No doubt those who had shouted for His death were still active voices against the Lord Jesus. The quietly complicit continued in quietness. The outcome was the same for both. No faith, no life and no relationship to the Living Lord.

The Disciples

The first thing we observe about the disciples is that they were noticeable by their absence! They were not to be seen at the tomb. We know, from the Gospel of John, that Peter and John came to the tomb later, but only when they had received the news from Mary (See John 20:1-4). Were the women braver? Did they love the Lord more ardently? The questions are not answered, but the fact remains that they were not there to hear the first testimony of the angel to their Master’s resurrection. However, the Lord has certainly not forgotten them. They are sent messages via the women from both the angel and the risen Lord. Still, I can’t help feeling it would have been good for them to have heard themselves addressed as “*brethren*” first from the Lord’s own lips. What a lovely way to speak about those who had run away or denied Him just two days ago.

They are given the promise of seeing Him again and they travel to Galilee, just as instructed. It is always a good thing to do just as the Lord commands - something I’m afraid we are very slow to learn. Just as the two Marys do as the angel instructs, and are met by the Lord, so too the disciples obey and see Him. Their reaction is also the same: they worship.

Sadly, “some doubted”. This appears to be a reference to Thomas (see John 20:24-29), although perhaps others of the wider company of disciples, beyond the eleven, doubted as well. We don’t know why Thomas was not present with the other disciples when Jesus appeared in the upper room, but being absent certainly did not help his doubts. Being together with other believers, coming together with them to meet with the Lord Himself, is the right way to feed faith and dispel doubts.

Having been obedient to the first instructions, sent via the women, the disciples received a further commission. The last two verses of Matthew are often referred to as the ‘great commission’. They consist of a threefold command:

- To make disciples;
- Baptise those who believe; and
- Pass on Christ’s commandments, or teachings, to them.

This is what believers in the church have been doing ever since, and what we are privileged to have our part in today.

Christ

The central character of this whole chapter, indeed the whole Gospel and the whole Bible, is the Man Christ Jesus. We have already been judging all the other characters by the way they responded to the Christ. In Matthew 22:42 Jesus, speaking to the Pharisees said, “*What do you think about the Christ?*” It is the most important question we can

ask. In the immediate context, Jesus was asking them a question that would make clear that the Christ was much more than finite human being. Today, whether we accept Christ as our risen Saviour, and come to Him in worship, or choose some other response, is the single most important decision any person can ever take.

I like to think of the Lord as resting in the tomb. He wasn't held in place by the stone or the guards. He had not been defeated by His enemies, or by death or Satan; despite all appearances to the contrary. He was not going to remain in the grave. He was simply resting there.

Angels are not frightening to Him! They worship Him as their Creator God and always do His bidding. I can't repeat often enough those three lovely words the angel uses to describe Him, "He is risen"! Jesus quite properly receives the worship of the women and the disciples on earth, just as He receives the worship of angels in heaven. He is God, but He is also a man, risen from the grave!

As *"the Good Shepherd who has given His life for His sheep"*, He now sends messages to His own. It is significant that the angel says, *"He is going before you into Galilee."* An eastern shepherd never drives his sheep, he always leads them. Our Lord never drives us on ahead of Him. He always goes ahead and calls us to follow after Him. But he is more than just a gentle shepherd: *"All authority has been given to Me, in heaven and on earth"*, He says. And He sends His own out - to all nations. It should give courage to all the Lord's servants that they are the heralds of the One with all authority in every domain. Whether our struggles are physical or spiritual, they are in a sphere where our Master has all authority! Whatever our small role might be in the making, baptising or teaching of Christ's disciples, and some of us have supporting roles rather than direct involvement, we are connected with the names of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit!

The Lord looks forwards to many more sheep and lambs, yet to be gathered in. In fact, to...

Future disciples (us!)

It is encouraging to remember that we, Gentile believers of this century, were in Christ's thoughts from the very beginning. Not just from the beginning of the church, or the beginning of His life. Ephesians 1:4 says that we were chosen, *"In Him before the foundation of the world"*! We were no afterthought! We were included in Christ's prayers before His crucifixion (as recorded in John 17:1-26), and we are noted here in the great commission of the Lord's servants. We also now have our part in passing on the great message of Easter to others who still need to hear.

We can take for ourselves the last words that Matthew records Jesus as saying, *"Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age"* (Matthew 28:20). He had been physically with the disciples for the two or three years of His ministry on earth. Now He would soon return to the Father in heaven, but, still, He would be with them always. We have never had Jesus physically present with us, but we can be assured that He will be with us always too. All believers, down to whoever is here at the end of the age, when He will return for His own, are promised His presence with them. The closing word, "Amen", meaning 'may it be so', is beautifully appropriate.

So, as we look back on Easter Sunday to that marvellous day when Christ Jesus arose from the dead, which of the characters are we most like? Are we:

- Opposing
- Indifferent
- Doubting or...
- Worshipping?

Prayer

"Our God and Father, we thank You that we can echo the words of the angel with confidence and joy, 'He is risen'! You did not leave Your Beloved Son in the grave, but have seated Him at Your right hand. We are delighted that You have given Him 'all authority', and that He will one day reign over everything and everyone. On this day when we remember His rising again we ask that You will remove our indifference, dispel our doubts and cause us to worship the risen Lord. Amen."

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