

Matthew's Gospel – Chapter 28: The Resurrection

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New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

The Great Stone is rolled away

Matthew gives the first and the shortest account of the resurrection of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. So, in this talk, I will also be referring to the accounts given by Mark, Luke and John. When Jesus was born and laid in a manger, no one was present as Mary gave birth to the Saviour of the world apart from her husband, Joseph. It was a lonely birth. Luke tells us that angels appeared to shepherds to declare,

"For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11).

Eventually these shepherds arrived to witness the arrival of the Good, Great and Chief shepherd (John 10:11, Hebrews 13:20, 1 Peter 5:4).

The Lord died the death of a criminal. It was a lonely death. If the Romans had their way, they would have discarded His corpse. The Jews would have buried Jesus in a public place, a pauper's grave, not in a family tomb. But when Jesus died, the first person to respond was not one of His close disciples but a secret disciple, Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph, anticipating the further shame intended to be heaped on the Lord, and at high personal cost, intervened to ask Pilate's permission to take down Christ's body from the cross (Matthew 27:59-61).

"When Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his own new tomb which he had hewn out of the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the door of the tomb and departed. And Mary Magdalene was there, and the other Mary, sitting opposite the tomb."

Matthew explains that Joseph was a rich man from Arimathea who was a secret disciple of Jesus (v.57). He also tells us Jesus was laid in Joseph's "own new tomb" prepared for his own death (v.59). This is a vivid reminder that Christ died for me. He was my substitute as described in Isaiah 53:4-5 and 9.

"Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed."

Isaiah adds,

“And they made His grave with the wicked -But with the rich at His death.”

Christ was crucified on the cross intended for Barabbas and he died between two thieves, one of whom he redeemed. Afterwards, He was laid in the tomb of a rich and righteous man. Both the thief and Joseph needed the same Saviour.

Mark tells us Joseph was "a prominent council member, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God" and courageous, "taking courage, went into Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus" (Mark 15:43). Luke tells us Joseph was "a good and just man. He had not consented to their decision and deed. He was from Arimathea, a city of the Jews, who himself was also waiting for the kingdom of God" (Luke 23:50-51). John tells us Joseph was a secret disciple supported by Nicodemus, a fellow secret disciple (John 19:38-39).

The death of Christ had so profoundly touched the hearts of these two hidden disciples that it transformed them into men of courage to ensure that those who placed Jesus on the cross would not be allowed to abuse his dead body. The gentle hands of those who loved Him laid him in the tomb.

At the same time, other minds were at work in Matthew 27:62-64.

"On the next day, which followed the Day of Preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees went to Pilate, saying, 'Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise.' Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night and steal Him away, and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead.' So the last deception will be worse than the first."

Christ was slanderously accused of being a deceiver, and the self-righteous chief priests and Pharisees hypocritically and cynically broke the Law they professed to be guardians of, by securing the tomb and sealing the stone on the Sabbath (Matthew 27:65-66).

"Pilate said to them, 'You have a guard; go your way, make it as secure as you know how.' So they went and made the tomb secure, sealing the stone and setting the guard."

This was a futile action, but Matthew uses it to leave us in no doubt that Jesus had died and was buried, and the authorities took action to ensure that He stayed in the tomb where He was laid.

At the beginning of the last chapter of His Gospel, Matthews tells us the two Marys arrived at the tomb at dawn on the first day of the week. Matthew condenses his narrative to focus on the critical facts of Christ's death, burial, resurrection, and visit to Galilee to announce His supreme authority and to call on his apostles and followers to make disciples.

Matthew writes about a great but localised earthquake in chapter 28, verse 2. There was also an earthquake when Jesus died (Matthew 27:54).

"So when the centurion and those with him, who were guarding Jesus, saw the earthquake and the things that had happened, they feared greatly, saying, "Truly this was the Son of God!"

Earth quaked when Christ died, and it did so again at His resurrection. Nature recognised what humanity did not, Christ's sacrificial death and His glorious resurrection.

Matthew also writes of an angel of the Lord descending from heaven and rolling back the stone at the entrance of the tomb and sitting on it. At Bethlehem, an angel announced the birth of Christ, and a host of angels praised God in Luke 2:9-14.

"Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"

Angels also announced Christ's glorious resurrection. The angel did not roll the stone away to allow Jesus to rise but to show that He had risen. The angel's presence shocked the guards into unconsciousness, but he spoke words of peace and joy to the women (vv.5-6).

"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."

I love how Matthew tells us the angel sat on the stone and invited the woman to see an empty tomb. Mark and John write about the angels who sat down inside the tomb (Mark 16:5, John 20:12). Angels were created for ceaseless service to God they were not made to rest. Their energy was constant. Above the ark, in the Tabernacle, in the Old Testament, two golden cherubims stood looking down at the Mercy Seat. This was a permanent reminder to the nation of the need for the Saviour who would offer one sacrifice forever, be risen from the dead and ascend into heaven. The angels sitting down has always seemed to me a powerful illustration that Christ's work was finished, and heaven rested in the wonder of that completion.

No mention is made of angels at the death of Christ, but their testimony was given at His birth and resurrection. Just as they had instructed the shepherds to see the Son of God in the manger, they instructed the women to give the news of the risen Christ to His disciples (v.7).

"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."

In John chapter 20, we learn that Mary Magdalene rushed back from the tomb to tell Peter and John, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him" (v.2). But Mary's mind was still fixed on a dead, not living Christ. Peter and John ran together to the tomb. John outran Peter and arrived at the tomb first. He stooped to look inside and saw the linen cloths which had covered Christ's body. But the body of Christ was not there. He hesitated to go in, but Simon Peter, arriving afterwards, went straight into the tomb and then John followed him to see the evidence of Christ's resurrection. We are told John saw and believed, but they still did not fully understand the reality of Christ's resurrection from the dead. Peter and John returned home (John 20:1-10), but Mary Magdalene stayed at the tomb.

The Good Shepherd and Mary

Matthew does not record Mary's meeting with the Saviour. But her history is compelling. Mary Magdalene is mentioned in all the four Gospels. It is touching that Luke, "the beloved physician", gives us an insight into her history. As a doctor, he would have understood, more than most, her hopeless situation before Jesus, in the words of Paul, delivered her "from the power of darkness and conveyed" her "into the kingdom of the Son of His love" (Colossians 1:13).

Luke writes about the Lord visiting every city and village in Israel to preach and proclaim the glad tidings of the kingdom of God. The twelve disciples were with him, and also a group of spiritual women (Luke 8:1-3).

"And certain women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities - Mary called Magdalene, out of whom had come seven demons, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others who provided for Him from their substance."

Mary is always placed first in this remarkable group of wealthy and influential women whose lives had been ruined by Satan and sickness. Luke is specific about Mary's deliverance. The Lord had rid her of seven demons and given her a new life, and she became His most devoted follower. Not only did Mary work ceaselessly in the material support of the Lord and His disciples throughout His ministry, but she was there at the cross (Matthew 27:56, Mark 15:40).

"And many women who followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to Him, were there [at Calvary] looking on from afar off, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's sons."

It is hard for us to imagine the tears that flowed from the eyes of these women as they witnessed the brutality of the cross and saw the Lord of Life die. They loved because they were first loved. This expression of devotion did not end at the cross. When Joseph forsook his anonymity as a disciple of the Lord Jesus and courageously went to Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus and publicly took the Saviour from the cross to lay Him in His own new tomb, Mary Magdalene was there. She followed Joseph and Nicodemus (Matthew 27:61) and, at the earliest possible opportunity, the break of dawn on the first day of the week, returned to the tomb to minister to the Lord in his death.

On the day of resurrection, Mary witnessed the extraordinary interventions of angels. But where was the Lord? When everyone had gone, she remained alone in the garden, overwhelmed by confusion and sorrow. The Gospels do not record how Jesus delivered Mary Magdalene from the seven demons. I suspect, like Legion, his voice banished the demons from her heart, and she was found sitting, clothed and in her right mind. It was a voice she would never forget. The Lord sent Legion home (Mark 5:19).

"Go home to your friends, and tell them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He has had compassion on you."

But the Lord did not send Mary Magdalene away. She remained close to the Lord and exemplified what Paul describes as a "living sacrifice" in Romans 12:1.

Mary was the first person to see the resurrected Saviour. She found it impossible to leave the garden until she had found the Lord. Instead, it was the Lord who found her. Mary was broken hearted, and she stood outside by the tomb weeping. As she looked inside the tomb, she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. It was as though the angels could not understand why Christ's disciples would be mourning on such a glorious day and not be overcome with joy. They asked her why she was weeping? She explains, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him" (John 20:13). As she turned away, she saw but did not recognise the Saviour, assuming him to be the gardener. Jesus repeats the angel's question and adds, "Whom are you seeking?" This question takes us back to the beginning of John's Gospel when Andrew and his friend followed Jesus, and He asked them, "What do you seek?" Mary demonstrates a love for the Lord which was not confined by obstacles which she did not have the power to overcome. "Sir, if You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away." And the Lord responds to her broken heart with one word, "Mary."

The Saviour says in John 10:14, "I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own." This relationship is beautifully highlighted in the briefest conversation between Jesus

and Mary. It consisted of two words, "Mary" and "Master" (Teacher). The connection between the Saviour and His loving disciple instantaneously ensures Mary's heart, once possessed of demons, then engulfed in untold sorrow, overflowed with inexpressible joy. The Saviour was alive! He wastes no time commissioning Mary to, "Go to My brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God'" (John 20:17). The Lord speaks of "My Father" as the Son of God and "My God" as the Son of Man. Mary returned to the disciples to tell them she had seen the Lord and to convey His wonderful message. Mary loved much and expressed by her character, closeness to the Lord and sacrificial life how much He meant to her. She stimulates us to respond in the same way.

The Good Shepherd appears to the group of female disciples

Although Matthew does not record the Saviour's personal meeting with Mary, he does record one of the returning groups of female disciples being met by the risen Saviour (Matthew 28:8-10).

"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.""

Jesus uses one word, "Rejoice!" The Lord rewarded the loving devotion of the women who had supported Him in practical ways during His ministry and had watched Him die at Calvary. Like Mary, their broken and confused hearts were transformed into worshipping hearts. They bowed at His feet, holding on to him. In doing so, He demonstrated He was not a spirit but the living Christ who would later show His disciples His wounds (Luke 24:39).

"Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have."

The women's fear was removed, and they were commanded by the Saviour to, "Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me." (Matthew 28:9-10)

The great deception

In contrast with the woman whose hearts were overflowing with joy and worship after seeing the risen Saviour, Matthew records the evil at work elsewhere. Still shaken from their encounter with the angel, the soldiers returned to Jerusalem to report what had happened to the chief priest in verses 11-15.

"Now while they 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"

On hearing the soldiers' report, the spiritually corrupt chief priests bribed them to lie about what had happened. Matthew writes about this amoral group who called Jesus "that deceiver" in Matthew 27:63. He now exposes their hypocrisy as they corrupt the soldiers with a large sum of money to deceive the people into believing Christ's body was stolen by His disciples. This group who should have been the first to recognise and welcome the Son of God. Instead, paid Judas money to betray Jesus and conspired to ensure the Saviour's crucifixion and then bribed the soldiers to deny His resurrection.

The Great Shepherd

Matthew does not detail the other appearances of Jesus up to his ascension. But it is helpful to trace these to understand the way the Saviour undertakes a striking shepherding ministry through which He addresses the needs of his disciples when they were afraid, confused and uncertain. Jesus describes Himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep in John 10:11. In Hebrews 13:20-21, we read of Jesus as the Great Shepherd in the context of His resurrection.

"Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen."

It seems to me that we see the Lord's ministry as the Great Shepherd in each of His appearances in resurrection. First, calling His sheep by name in the case of Mary Magdalene, then appearing to the group of women to assure them of the reality of His resurrection and call them to be witnesses to His disciples.

In Luke 24:34, there is a reference to the Lord appearing to Peter: "The Lord is risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!" This was probably the afternoon before the Lord met with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Paul refers to this meeting with Peter in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5.

"For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve."

Before Christ was arrested, Peter believed he would never forsake his Lord. But Jesus knew Peter would deny Him. But He prayed for His self-confident and self-deceived disciple in Luke 22:32.

"But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren."

It is touching that Peter is uppermost in the thoughts of the Saviour and how, as the Great Shepherd of the sheep (Hebrews 13:20), He sought out His failing disciple, Peter at the earliest opportunity. He still seeks not only the lost but disciples overtaken by failure who need restoration.

Mark and Luke record the Great Shepherd's care when Jesus joins two of His disciples on the road to Emmaus to ensure they return to Jerusalem to join the rest of the disciples (Mark 16:12 and Luke 24:13-32). Here, the Great Shepherd ministers to them by walking alongside them, listening, asking questions, giving answers through the word of God, and revealing Himself to them. This is how the Lord continues his shepherding care towards us.

In Jerusalem, the Great Shepherd appears to his disciples to assure them of His resurrection, but Thomas is not present and refuses to believe his fellow disciples. (Mark 16:14, Luke 24:36-43, John 20:19-25). Several days later, the Lord comes to the same group again, and this time, Thomas is present. The Lord invites him to inspect His wounds. Thomas declares to his Great Shepherd from a contrite and worshipping heart, "My Lord and My God" (John 20:26-31). In Luke 24, the Lord shows them his hands and his feet. In John, he shows them His hands and His side. The Saviour presents Himself through His wounds as the Good Shepherd who suffered and died for them and, simultaneously, the Great Shepherd who was alive for evermore.

The Great Shepherd next reveals Himself to the seven disciples beside the Sea of Galilee. He teaches them about fishing (Evangelism), feeding (Pastoral Care) and following (Discipleship) whilst recovering and calling Peter to be a shepherd to the flock of God (John 21). Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:6 of the Great Shepherd being seen by many disciples.

"Seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep [died]."

This is believed to be a reference to Jesus revealing himself to the apostles and many brethren in Matthew 28:16-20 and Mark 16:15-18. Paul also tells us of the Great Shepherd meeting His half-brother James (1 Corinthians 15:7). In these two instances, we see the Great Shepherd presenting Himself to the many and to the few.

Finally, the Lord as the Great Shephard, Jesus ascends into heaven in Mark 16:19-20, Luke 24:44-53, and Acts 1:3-12. There, He ever lives to make intercession for us (Romans 8:34). We are always in His heart. And one day He will return as the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4).

"And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away."

The Great Commission

"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 closes His Gospel in verses 16-20, with Jesus with the eleven disciples in Galilee. He declared that He had all authority in heaven and on earth. This authority belongs to the One who is the Good, the Great and the Chief Shepherd. One day, Christ will return as the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4). But in the present, the Day of Grace, Christ's people are given the Great Commission to go into all the world with the Gospel and "make disciples of all the nations." The expression "make disciples" is powerfully connected to Matthew's own salvation. He describes this in Matthew 9:9.

"As Jesus passed on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, "Follow Me." So he arose and followed Him."

Matthew's words "making disciples" describe how Jesus had transformed his life by saying, "Follow Me". Soon afterwards, Matthew's house was opened to all his friends, and Jesus called sinners to repentance there. Matthew had not only been saved but was immediately involved in ensuring as many people as possible were brought into the presence of the Saviour. Matthew wanted others to know the Good Shepherd who died for us, the Great Shepherd who lives for us and the Chief Shepherd who is coming for us.

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