

The Triumph of Life

Matthew 27:62-28:10

April 24, 2011

We saw last week as Jesus died on the cross. Since then, He has been buried in a new tomb and a large stone was rolled into place to seal it. Mary Magdalene and the mother of James and Joses watched the whole thing. Jesus died and was buried on Preparation Day as the Jewish people got ready to celebrate the Passover—God’s redemption of His people. Jesus had died on the cross around three in the afternoon, about the same time the sacrifices were being killed in recognition of God’s rescuing His people from slavery in Egypt. We re-enter the events the next day.

Preparation Day has passed. It is a Sabbath, and these men who so carefully forced the practice of the Sabbath on others now violate it themselves in order to fulfill their designs. They have made certain Jesus is dead, and yet still their hatred of Him lives on. It was not enough that Jesus was dead and buried. His tomb had to be sealed and a guard posted in order to prevent any attempt by the disciples to say He had risen from the dead.

It’s remarkable how these religious leaders knew and understood what Jesus said even as Jesus’ own followers missed it. These men expected that Jesus’ disciples would claim Jesus had risen and would try to fabricate evidence to that effect. They understood Jesus to have claimed to rise again on the third day after His death. They did not believe He would, for they called Him a deceiver, but they knew He made that claim.

The disciples were too busy hiding and trying to figure out what they were going to do next. They were not trying to formulate a plan to get Jesus’ body from the tomb. They were more concerned with not joining Him there. They were not getting ready to tell lies about Jesus. They were struggling to understand the truth about Him.

A detachment of men was available to the priests and Pharisees. There is some question whether these men were under the command of Pilate and he placed them at the religious leaders’ disposal, or if they were part of the Jewish Temple Guard and the priests and Pharisees were seeking permission to use them outside the city gates in this unusual way to guard the body of a man Pilate had ordered executed. Either way, the leaders enlist Pilate’s help and support in preventing the rumor that Jesus had risen. They understood that, if Jesus’ followers could claim He kept that promise, it would be a bigger problem for them than Jesus’ life and ministry were.

Pilate told them to do what they could to secure the tomb against any foul play. So the leaders took the soldiers and had them help seal up the tomb and then guard it for a couple of days. After all, only a couple of days would be needed. If Jesus did not rise on the third day as He claimed He would, then He would be shown to be the liar they believed Him to be.

Matthew Henry points out that, either way, their attempts at sealing and guarding the tomb were foolish, even as they thought themselves very wise for taking the precautions. If they were guarding the tomb from the disciples as they said, it was foolish because, as we have

said, such precautions were not needed. The disciples were not the crafty schemers the priests and Pharisees were. They were just trying to get their lives back together and stay away from Jesus' fate.

If, however, the leaders were trying to guard the tomb against the idea of Jesus' actual resurrection, it was even more foolish because then they would be pitting a handful of soldiers against the power of God. This would be fruitless. It could not end well.

Of course, we are here this morning because we know how it ended. Thinking they were protecting themselves against what they thought would be the lies of Jesus' followers, the priests and Pharisees found themselves the opponents of the very God they thought they were serving in killing Jesus and guarding His tomb. This is where they were at the end of the Sabbath. Instead of spending the day in worship of God the Jewish leaders profaned the **Sabbath** by continuing to conspire against the One they had killed—even God's anointed.

As we come to the next part of this text it is vitally important that we recognize one crucial truth. Jesus was **dead**. Everybody agreed to that. There was no question that Jesus was pretending to be dead, or had fallen into a coma. There was no concern He might not really be dead and might wake up after a long rest. Everybody agreed Jesus was dead. His death on the cross was verified before He was taken down. He was not given medical treatment, but was hastily prepared for burial and then placed in a tomb with a heavy stone over the entrance and, the next day, a guard placed outside. All parties were witnesses to all of this. It really is foolish to

believe any nonsense about Jesus not being dead as people have long been wont to do.

It is into this period of death and mourning that the text next speaks. After the Sabbath was over (and had been observed by Jesus' followers, if not by His enemies) we find the women who had watched Jesus be buried heading back to the tomb. Matthew does not tell us why they were going aside from saying they went to look at it. The other evangelists tell us they wanted to anoint Jesus' body and finish the burial preparations they had not been able to do in their haste on Preparation Day.

In the end it really isn't important why they went to the tomb, because it was irrelevant. The tomb was not how they had left it! It's not just that it had been sealed and a guard posted. It was changed far more than that.

Matthew steps back in time. We do not know when the events of the next verses two took place, but look at them again with me. *“There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.”* (v.2-4) Some time during the night the ground shook as God's angel rolled the stone away and sat on it. This heavenly messenger wasn't going anywhere and his presence so frightened the guards that they fainted. Note that Matthew tells us the guards were afraid of the angel. It wasn't the earthquake that frightened them. It was the presence of this messenger of holiness from the throne room of God, Himself. When the women got there they

found the tomb open and the angel still sitting on the tomb.

What the angel **said**, however, is the most remarkable thing of all. *“Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said.”* (vv.5,6) After the soldier had fainted from fear, I guess the angel didn’t want to take any chances with the women. Yet they were not there opposed to God’s will and so they had nothing to fear.

The angel knew why they had come. The women were looking for **Jesus**. They were looking for His body, but they found so much more. Any time we go looking for Jesus we have nothing to fear, and we always find more than we imagined we could. Any time we seek Him out for who He really is and we seek to serve and worship Him we can expect joy to follow, even in the midst of suffering and pain. The Jewish leaders sought Him out to kill and remove Him. The women sought Him out to serve and follow Him. What a difference! The women could stand where the soldiers had fallen. The women heard the voice that the guards could not bear. They came looking for Jesus and they found the truth that life had won out over death!

Jesus had kept the **promise**! It turns out the priests and the Pharisees were right to be concerned about the news getting out that Jesus had risen from the dead as He said He would. They were wrong in thinking Jesus’ followers would have anything to do with it. Jesus’ disciples were just as surprised as anyone else.

The angel invited the women to check out the evidence. *“Come and see the place where he lay.”* (v.6)

Jesus’ resurrection has never been something we are to accept in blind faith. From the very beginning people have been called to examine the evidence. We do not believe life wins out in Jesus in spite of the **facts** of history. We believe because of them. The women came looking for Jesus and instead were invited to see the place where His body had been placed. He was gone.

They were not to sit there and contemplate what had happened, however. There wasn’t time to sit around and meditate on Jesus’ victory over death, how it had come about, and what it meant. There was too much to do! The angel continued, *“Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you.”* (v.7) The women were not to dally. They were to hurry back to Jerusalem and let Jesus’ other followers, especially the apostles in on the great events of the night. The mourning could stop. Life was victorious over death. Jesus could not be kept in the tomb. He has risen!

The women did as the angel told them. They hurried back filled with mixed emotions. They, too, were affected by the angel and the time they had spent in the holiness of God that shone from his face. They did not know what the future held. They did know the tomb was empty and they were given the message that Jesus had risen. It was enough for them and with great joy they ran to tell the others.

As Matthew tells it, they didn’t get very far. *“Suddenly Jesus met them. ‘Greetings,’ he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him.”* (v.9) All the Gospels tell the story of the women finding out

Jesus is alive differently. This isn't evidence they made it up. It is consistent with eyewitness testimony to a real event. It is evidence that they are all telling the truth. They just tell it from different perspectives and with different emphases. As the women were seeking to fulfill their mission Jesus **met** them. He comes suddenly, as if out of nowhere, and He speaks.

Basically, Jesus said, "Hello," but that was all it took. Recognizing Him and His voice the women fall to the ground and worship Him. They reach for His feet. The angel had scared them, but this was too much. They were not certain what to do with someone who had risen from the dead! We wouldn't know what to do with Him either!

Jesus continued, "*Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.*" (v.10) With this instruction to the women, Matthew ends his account. Jesus added to the angel's instructions. The women were to tell the disciples that Jesus was risen. They were also to tell them to return to Galilee.

After all the events of the previous week, this was the least likely outcome—except that Jesus had said it would happen. That made it sure. People just don't rise from the dead. Our experience is that **death** has the last word. Everyone dies. Everyone gets laid in a tomb. Yet Jesus died as the perfect sacrifice for our sin. He alone is life in the flesh and so death could not have mastery over Him! He knew He was to be crucified. He also knew the grave could not hold Him and He would rise again! In the resurrection of Jesus Christ **life** triumphs over death! Far from having the final word, death's power is broken.

Christ is risen! The power of God has been brought to bear on Him. We saw God's wrath poured out on Him as He hung on the cross that all who believe in Him might be forgiven. Now we see the power of life pour out through Him that all who are forgiven might have life and have it abundantly! Life won in tomb. It still wins today for all who believe in Him!