

Week 32: Matthew 28:1–15

Hook



Main Point: Though Jesus died as the Suffering Servant, He proved Himself to be the victorious King who defeated death.

On December 11, 2020, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration granted emergency approval for the Pfizer and BioNTech’s coronavirus vaccine candidate. This step officially provided the path for the widespread distribution of the vaccine.ⁱ For many, this was one of the brightest pieces of news in an otherwise bleak year.

Q: What is the best news that you were given in 2020?

Q: What is the best news that you were given in your life?

Q: Gospel means “good news”; what makes the Gospel message such fantastic news?

Transition – Today provides incredible news to the devastated disciples – Jesus has risen from the dead!

Week 32: Matthew 28:1–15

Book

Main Point: Though Jesus died as the Suffering Servant, He proved Himself to be the victorious King who defeated death.

Matthew 28:1–7 [Read]

Talking Point 1: The Resurrection changes everything.

Q: Why were the guards so scared? Why shouldn't the women have been scared?

Each of the Gospels provides an account of the Resurrection, and in all of them, it is women who find the empty tomb, and Mary Magdalene is always named as one of them.ⁱⁱ Having women be the first witnesses to the Resurrection was completely consistent with Christ's heart and His ministry. Jesus was completely radical in the way He treated women with honor equal to men.

Any time divine beings appear in Scripture, they tell the humans not to be afraid, presumably because their presence was terrifying. Not because God is scary, but because the majesty of the divine would make any human being fall to his knees in awe. The angel's bright-white clothing represents purity or holiness, "like lightning" shows His glory.ⁱⁱⁱ The angel sits on the stone as a statement of triumph or victory. When ancient kings won their battles, they sat on their thrones as a public statement of being finished with their battles, being at peace or rest. The angel represents the power and strength of God, not just in rolling away the stone, but in overcoming death and raising Jesus from the dead.^{iv}

Although the guards also saw the earthquake and the angel rolling the stone away, the angel spoke only to the women. The guards trembled and froze in fear, but the angel told *the women*, "Do not be afraid." He ignored the guards completely. It was the women he entrusted the gospel message to because they were Jesus' followers. The message was the one we proclaim every Easter Sunday – He is not here, for He has risen! This is the good news of the Gospel, the message that changed everything.

Adrian Warnock, author of *Raised with Christ: How the Resurrection Changes Everything*, said in an interview that while much of our preaching and witnessing today emphasize Christ's work on the Cross, "without the Resurrection, the Cross is a meaningless tragedy. Without the Resurrection, Jesus could not have been our Savior. Without the Resurrection, we have no hope for our future. We would still be dead in our sins."^v The apostle Paul wrote something similar. "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:14). The NIV says "useless." Without the Resurrection, our faith means nothing.

The Resurrection is the plot twist that changes everything, except it's not really a surprise because Jesus told His disciples it would happen. They just didn't really get it. Their mission was over. All hope was lost. They thought they were participating in ushering in the kingdom of God, but the king was dead. He was gone. There was nothing left for them. Until now. This rabbi was so much more than they ever envisioned the Messiah to be! He wasn't defeated on the cross; He had *defeated death* by the cross and through the Resurrection! Because Jesus was resurrected, they would be resurrected, too! The kingdom of God was more than they anticipated – not just a human kingdom on earth, but an eternal kingdom in heaven.

The angel didn't just tell the women He had risen; he showed the women the empty tomb, "the place where He lay." These women had seen Jesus' dead body there just a few days before when Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus buried Him there (Matthew 27:59–61). They had gone to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body with spices, which a family would do to remove odor as their loved one's body decayed in the tomb.^{vi} They knew He was really dead. These women were witnesses to His entombment, and now they were witnesses to His Resurrection. The angel told them to go tell the eleven disciples that He had risen and to meet Him in Galilee, as He had told them to do at the Last Supper (Matthew 26:32). This tidbit of information would certainly help the disciples believe the women were telling the truth.

We don't know why Jesus didn't appear to the disciples first, instead letting the women tell them He had risen. Jesus was always choosing and valuing those the world considered less than honorable. Just as Jesus chose unschooled, ordinary men to be His disciples, just as He healed lepers and ate with sinners and spoke with Samaritans and even used them as heroes in His parables, He chose women to be the first witnesses to His Resurrection. In all He did, Jesus showed He values all people equally – Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free. God chooses the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, to show the world that His kingdom is not like the kingdoms of this world. If one wants to be great in His kingdom, they must become like a little child. In His kingdom, the first shall be last and the last shall be first. Jesus does not define greatness by the same standards the world does – strength, power, wisdom, honor, prestige – but only by faith in Him and choosing to follow Him.

Q: What difference does the Resurrection make in your life, both eternally and now?

Q: Imagine you were telling someone about the Resurrection for the first time. What would you say? How would you explain it and why it matters for our lives?

Matthew 28:8–10 [Read]

Talking Point 2: The Resurrection is good news for all who believe.

Q: Why did the women have both fear and great joy? What does that say about this moment?

Q: Why did they worship Jesus when they saw Him?

The women left the tomb quickly with great fear and great joy. They ran to tell the disciples the good news. Imagine if you were them. No one else in the whole world knew yet that Jesus had risen. No one knew yet that He had defeated death. No one knew yet that this meant His followers would all rise again with Him in the last day. They would have been bursting at the seams to tell someone. This is how we should feel every day about the good news of the Gospel.

The women had some fear. How could they not? They had just experienced an earthquake and seen an angel shining like lightning coming down from heaven to roll away the stone from the tomb. They had heard the angel speak and seen the empty place where Jesus' body had been. But they only had *some* fear, while they had *great* joy. Just like the shepherds who heard the angels the night Jesus was born and ran to find the baby (Luke 2:15–16) and the magi who were filled with “exceeding great joy” when they saw the star (Matthew 2:10). The good news of Jesus fills all His messengers with great joy.

Think about all the good news we share with our friends and family on a daily basis. When we see a great movie, find a great new restaurant, or get a great haircut, we can't wait to tell our friends or post about it on social media. Not just so we can tell them about it, but in hopes that they might see the movie or try that new restaurant themselves. We do it so easily with these day-to-day things that really don't matter in light of eternity. Why are we not as excited and eager to share the Good News about Jesus? It's not because the news of the Gospel isn't as good as those things. *It's way better!* Maybe we are afraid of what our friends will think of us, or we think they've heard it all before, so what would it matter what we say? Maybe we don't want people to think we're judging them or preaching at them. But if we really had the same understanding of the importance of this good news that these women did, nothing would stop us from sharing the Good News whenever we could. We would be so filled with joy that we wouldn't have to figure out how to witness to people. They would be asking us about what makes us so joyful!

As they ran to the disciples, Jesus met them on the road. Again, He hadn't appeared to the disciples yet. They were humbled and awed. They took hold of His feet – an act of humility – and worshipped Him. The whole concept of Resurrection would have been unbelievable for them, even though Jesus had told them it would happen. Most Mediterranean people did not believe in a bodily resurrection after death; it was not even something they considered. By contrast, the Jews (except the Sadducees) did believe in a bodily resurrection, but they didn't think it would happen until the last day, as Martha described when Jesus talked to her about raising Lazarus (John 11:24). Resurrection was an eschatological event, something that happened only at the end of the world, at the day of the Lord. The idea of a bodily resurrection in their current time was unheard of. They would have thought this was the end times, at least on some level. And it was, in a way. Jesus' Resurrection was the firstfruits of the resurrection of all the citizens of the kingdom. This was the “already/not yet” of the kingdom of God. The kingdom is already here, but not yet in all its fullness as it will be at the consummation, when all of creation will be made new.^{vii}

Jesus told them the same thing the angel had told them, nothing more. He didn't need to appear to them; they were already running to tell the disciples, and yet He did. Not only did Jesus solidify their belief with evidence, but He reminds us that He is a God of relationship. Jesus appeared to them personally, spoke to them personally. They touched His feet, an act of intimate relationship *and* submission in worship. In the other Gospels, Jesus appeared several times to several different people. The opening of Acts tells us He appeared to His disciples many times over the course of 40 days, offering many proofs of His Resurrection. But in Matthew, this is it. He appeared just this once to the women, then once to the disciples in Galilee, giving them the Great Commission. After three agonizing chapters detailing Jesus' arrest, trial and crucifixion, this feels very fast. The story leads us quickly to the ending – the Great Commission, which is consistent with Matthew's focus on the kingdom of God. The Great Commission is Christ's instructions for how to build that kingdom. Matthew ends His Gospel quickly to say, "Okay, disciples, Jesus has risen. Now let's get to work!"^{viii}

Q: Think back to when you first became a Christian and describe your excitement about Jesus. Did you have the same kind of joy these women did? Did you share the good news more easily and naturally with other people?

Q: What holds you back from sharing the good news of the Gospel? What fears, doubts or obstacles do you have about sharing your faith?

Q: How can you focus your life more clearly and intentionally on the Great Commission? How can you live more missionally?

Matthew 28:11–15 [Read]

Talking Point 3: There will always be those who don't believe.

At first glance, this paragraph might seem kind of random or unimportant, just sort of stuck in there, interrupting the flow between Jesus saying He would meet them in Galilee and the story of Him meeting them in Galilee. But these verses are not there by accident. The last chapter of Matthew is intentionally written as a contrast of three different groups of characters' reactions to the Resurrection of Jesus:

- The women (vv. 1–10)
- The guard/chief priests (vv. 11–15)
- The disciples (vv. 16–20)

In contrast to the women, when the guards found out about Jesus' Resurrection, they went to the chief priests to report what had happened. They also were witnesses to the Resurrection; they experienced the earthquake, saw the angel and heard him speak, but they had the opposite reaction. Instead of joy, they only had fear. Instead of going and telling Jesus' followers, telling their families and friends, or shouting the good news in the streets, they went

to the powers that be, those who had killed Him! In their defense, that was their job, what they were hired to do. But it still tells us a lot about their hearts. Though they knew an angel had appeared, though they knew a dead man had disappeared from the grave and not been stolen, they chose to lie about it and take the money.

The chief priests were still trying to keep this revolution under control, and they manipulated the guards to get them to lie. The guards were worried they would get in trouble with the governor for “losing” the body, even though they knew an angel said He had risen. But they didn’t respond with faith and repentance. They lied to save their own skin. Throughout the Bible, many Gentiles or pagans had an incredible experience with God and converted, but not these guards. There will always be those who don’t believe, even if the evidence is right in front of them.^{ix}

Verse 15 tells us, “This story has been spread among the Jews to this day.” Even today, there are people who believe this. Because they don’t want to believe in the Resurrection, they believe the disciples must have stolen His body and just pretended He had risen. The guards spread their message just as the disciples spread theirs. But their testimony wasn’t true. Matthew, Gospel writer to the Jews, yet again contrasts the leaders of the established Jewish religion to those of this new movement of Christ:

- The elders denied Christ’s power and authority; the disciples worshiped Him.
- The elders covered up the message; the disciples spread it far and wide.
- Christ did not appear to the elders; He did appear to His disciples. ^x

Remember that a woman’s testimony was not considered reliable in that culture. People would have been more likely to believe the guards, but their story was not true. Though men were usually believed over women, the guard’s story would have been far-fetched. How could the disciples have moved that huge stone and stolen the body without waking them? Their whole purpose had been to guard the tomb; why would they even sleep on the job? If the disciples all fled out of fear the night of Jesus’ death, why would they risk their lives to steal His body afterward? Finally, if they stole His body and then preached that He had risen, then they knowingly preached a lie. Why would anyone willingly be persecuted and die for something they knew was a lie?

Matthew laid these two reports out side by side, forcing his readers to decide for themselves what they believe. Their answer to that question makes all the difference – in their eternal destinies and their whole life’s purpose.

Q: How do you personally know the Gospel is true even though you were not one of the eyewitnesses to Jesus’ Resurrection?

Q: Describe how apologetics (reasoned arguments for Christianity, like the reliability of the New Testament and the historicity of the Resurrection) can help those who have a hard time believing in Jesus. How can personal testimonies help?

Q: Is there anything we can do about those who refuse to believe, even when there is evidence right in front of them, even when our testimonies are very convincing?

Week 32: Matthew 28:1–15

Took

Main Point: Though Jesus died as the Suffering Servant, He proved Himself to be the victorious King who defeated death.

The significance of the Resurrection cannot be overstated. Paul put it this way when rebuffing those who would deny it:

But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain (1 Corinthians 15:13–14).

Teacher, on the whiteboard, write “The Resurrection is important because...” and ask the group to contribute. Write their answers on the board and, during your dismissing prayer, thank God for the Resurrection.

CHALLENGES

THINK: What difference does the Resurrection make in my life, both my eternal life and my day-to-day life? How does knowing Jesus rose from the dead affect my faith in God’s promises? How does it show God’s power? How does it give me new life in the here and now? How does it enable me to live in the power of the Spirit? How does it enable me to seek the things above? How does it give me hope for the future?

PRAY: Pray for those in your life who don’t know Jesus, especially for those who stubbornly refuse to believe even though many have shared the Gospel with them. Pray for God to soften their hearts. Pray for God to use circumstances in their lives to reach them, break through barriers, and speak to them in a new way.

ACT: Write your testimony. Describe how you know the Gospel is true even though you weren’t an eyewitness to Jesus’ Resurrection. What have you witnessed in your life that makes you believe the Gospel is true? How has a relationship with Jesus changed your life? How has He given you new life? Pray about whom God is leading you to share this testimony with, asking Him for opportunities to share your story with friends, family, and even strangers!

ⁱ <https://www.foxnews.com/health/fda-approves-pfizers-coronavirus-vaccine-for-eua>

ⁱⁱ E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 1993).

ⁱⁱⁱ Naphtali Lewis, *Life in Egypt Under Roman Rule* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1983).

^{iv} Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1999)

^v Collin Hansen, “The Resurrection Changes Everything” *Christianity Today*, Mar 22, 2010 - <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/marchweb-only/22-12.0.html>

^{vi} Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1982).

^{vii} Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1999).

^{viii} N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part II* (London, UK: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2002).

^{ix} Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1982).

^x Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1999).