

FEAR AND JOY
Matthew 28:1-10

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Introduction

You have been there. You know how the disciples felt. Jesus was gone. The echoes of the pilgrims, “Hosanna to the King who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna. Hosanna in the highest”—those shouts of Messianic acclamation—were still ringing in the disciples’ ears. Just a week earlier, Jesus was on the top of a colt. The pilgrims were praising; the stones were singing. But now, all they heard was the deafening roar of silence—the silence that accompanies the emptiness of death (Matthew 21).

They had left everything to follow Jesus—their jobs, their families, their futures. They had created their own image of Jesus as Messiah, with Him sitting on a throne, and themselves sitting on the right and the left hand of the new king.

But you cannot have a kingdom without a king. You cannot have a kingdom without a Christ. Real messiahs don’t hang on trees—that’s reserved for the cursed (Deuteronomy 21:23; Galatians 3:13).

After a funeral, it is hard to know what to do, how to move on. You have buried the body, but how do you bury despair? How do you bury that hollow emptiness in the pit of your stomach?

And they were fearful for their own lives. The disciples were now hiding, afraid lest they, themselves, be next in line for crucifixion. They even denied that they knew Him—every one of them (Matthew 26:56b, “Then all the disciples left him and fled.”). John’s Gospel (20:9) tells us that they did not even understand that Jesus was going to rise again from the dead, so they had gone away to their own homes.

Death. There is no pain like the pain of standing at the graveside, knowing it is over. Your wife. Your husband. Your father. Your mother. Your son or your daughter. Dead.

At those times, we realize how dreadful an enemy death really is, how final the word seems when you attach it to someone you love, how hollow it makes you feel in the pit of your stomach, how the fear of death keeps you up at night, and how its sting seems all powerful. If the story of Jesus ended with the sealed tomb, with a death on the cross, then there would be absolutely no Christianity—no church, no hope, no light, no life, no sense in suffering.

The body was laid in a new tomb, and the stone was seated securely in place. The two Marys, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, watched as the men buried the body in haste, for the Sabbath was quickly approaching. The Jewish authorities warned Pilate that this rabbi, this “deceiver,” had earlier claimed that three days following his death he would rise again.

His grave, therefore, was secured lest the disciples of “the deceiver” steal the body and claim a resurrection had taken place, making matters even worse for the Jewish authorities (see Matthew 27:57-66).

An Earthquake and An Angel (28:1-4)

The National Earthquake Information Center, the world data center for seismology, declares that no scientist can presently predict earthquakes, and, in fact, we probably will never be able to predict earthquakes in the future. While that is true in most cases, the earthquakes that happened on the week of Christ’s Passion had been long predicted by the prophets of old (Isaiah 13:13; Ezekiel 38:19).

Verse 1

“Now after the Sabbath...” The Jewish Sabbath officially began at sundown on Friday evening and ended at sundown on Saturday evening. The ladies, therefore, waited until very early on Sunday morning to go to the tomb. Mark adds to the narrative by explaining that the women wanted to return to more appropriately anoint the body of Jesus, which had been buried in haste given the approaching Sabbath when no such work could be done. The resurrection, therefore, did not happen on “holy time”; it happened the day after. As New Testament scholar Frederick Dale Bruner observes, “Perhaps the resurrection was too grand for old time.” So powerful and central was the resurrection of Jesus that the early church moved the day of sacred celebration to Sunday—resurrection day—rather than observing the traditional Sabbath.

The women making their way to the tomb in Matthew’s account were Mary of Magdala (Magdala is a city on the Sea of Galilee) and Mary the mother of James and Joseph. We know Mary of Magdala well. In the record of all four Gospels, this one woman stood immovably by Jesus, even in and past his death. She is present when he dies (27:56), there when he is buried (27:61), and now again at his graveside at the first possible opportunity. Jesus had earlier delivered her from seven demons, and she would not, therefore, now desert him (Luke 8:2).

Verse 2

“A severe earthquake.” While we experience an enormous resurrection earthquake, no actual description or eyewitness to the resurrection itself exists—not anywhere in the New Testament. The evangelists are quite candid as they never claim to have witnessed the actual resurrection event, only the resurrected Savior. Perhaps they did not want to “touch the ark”—some things are too holy to seize (2 Samuel 6:7). We know of the resurrection not because of eyewitnesses to the event itself, but, rather, because of the effects that follow.

The God who had remained silent on Good Friday, even as Jesus called out to him with the question: “Why, O God?” (Matthew 27:46), is now giving the last word in the resurrection. What God does in the resurrection is not just another extraordinary miracle but, rather, it is the starting of something entirely new—a whole new world, a world where the dead actually rise by the power of God.

This earthquake, we recall, is an aftershock of the previous earthquake which occurred during the crucifixion of the Christ (27:51b): “The earth shook and the rocks were split.” On both occasions,

the seismic seizures speak of the cosmic significance of the events concerning Jesus. Even creation itself was convulsing at both the cross of our Christ and his glorious, victorious resurrection.

The second earthquake, moreover, is associated with an angel who descended from heaven and, having rolled away the stone, sat upon it. Have you ever noticed when angels are around our Lord in Matthew's account? Angelic beings appear at his birth (Matthew 1:20-25), at his temptation (Matthew 4:11), at Gethsemane (Matthew 26:53; cf. Luke 22:43), but never when he is hanging upon the cross, as no angels attended our crucified Christ. At the empty tomb, however, we have the last angel of this Gospel!

Verse 3

“Like lightning.” The lightning-look of the angel was another indication that the cosmos itself had changed. Jesus had just described his ultimate arrival (second coming) in Matthew 24:27, “For just as the lightning comes from the east and flashes even to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be.” For Matthew, the resurrection of Jesus, therefore, may be the beginning of the end.

Verse 4

“Shook for fear.” Matthew sees the irony: the man who is inside and supposedly dead is alive, but the men who are guarding outside, supposedly alive, are dead-like. Matthew's message is clear: Not everyone who seems alive really is; not everyone we think is dead is dead.

An Empty Tomb (28:5-7)

Verse 5

“Do not be afraid.” The angel addressed the ladies, in essence saying, “I do not want you too to become afraid, as did the guards” (the word “you” is emphatic).

The word of the angel at the resurrection of Jesus, “fear not,” is the same as the word of the angel at Jesus' birth, at the beginning, “Fear not” (Luke 1:30; 2:10). In Luke 1, when the angel Gabriel comes to Mary to announce her important role, he says to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” In the very next chapter (Luke 2), when the shepherds are watching over their flocks by night, this angel uses the words “fear” and “joy.” He announces to the shepherds, “Fear not, for I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all people everywhere. For unto you is born...” Joy is here in Jesus; fear has to flee, he is saying.

Both the birth of the Christ and the resurrection of the Messiah represent the ultimate hope for humanity—that Christ has come, been crucified, and been resurrected for both the glory of God and the hope of humanity.

Jesus is said to have “been crucified.” Construction of this Greek verb (a perfect passive participle) means that Jesus will always be the crucified one, as we find in the preaching of Paul (1 Corinthians 1:23; 2:2; Galatians 3:1). Paul described the content of his preaching: “We preach Christ crucified...” (1 Corinthians 1:23). While his resurrection is gloriously victorious, it does not nullify the accomplishments of the cross, but, rather, becomes the culmination of the crucifixion itself.

Verse 6

“He is not here.” When the angel said “He is not here,” he was honoring the bodily resurrection. If Jesus had only been spiritually raised, the angel might have said, “He is now everywhere.” But, instead, the angel said, “He is not present here, but He is going ahead to Galilee” (v. 6-7). Jesus, in his resurrected body, still had a local, actual presence. The bodily resurrection of Jesus is a clear indication that God loves the whole person, body and soul.

“He has risen” is actually in the passive tense and is best translated “He was raised.” Scripture does not speak of Jesus as raising himself, but always as being raised by God.

“Just as He said.” Jesus had constantly told the disciples that he would rise again (12:40; 16:21; 17:9, 23; 20:19; 26:32), but his resurrection message met deaf ears with his disciples.

The women were invited to inspect the tomb themselves: “Come and see (emphasis added) the place where He was lying.” Interestingly enough, the resurrection narrative invites us to look, to see, to witness. Have you ever noticed the heaping up of “visual verbs” in the resurrection story?

- (1) The women go to “look” at the grave (v. 1).
- (2) The reader is told to “look (behold),” a severe earthquake has occurred (v.2).
- (3) The women are “looking” for the body of Jesus, who has been crucified (v. 5).
- (4) The angel invites the women to “see” the empty tomb for themselves: “Come ‘see’ the place where he was lying” (v. 6).
- (5) The disciples are to be told: “...look (behold), He is going into Galilee, there you will ‘see’ Him; look (behold), I have told you” (v. 7).
- (6) And “look (behold),” Jesus met them (v. 9).

The women were encouraged to investigate, “Come and see the place where He was lying.” The angel did not say, “Hey, don’t look in here. Just take my word for it.” The angel asked for inquiry and curiosity: “Come and see.” The angel, therefore, called them to use their eyes and their minds to comprehend that the crucified one had risen.

Though extraordinary in every way, the resurrection does not cause us to suspend our cognitive faculties. On the contrary, it calls us to follow the case to the logical conclusion: he was crucified; his body was placed in the tomb—sealed and secured; but eyewitnesses both inspected the empty tomb and encountered the resurrected Jesus.

Verse 7

“Tell His disciples.” The women were told to “tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead.” We should make note that the first preachers of the empty tomb were women. They were, in fact, the first commissioned witnesses of the resurrection itself. This is quite remarkable, given the fact that the testimony of women was not even received in Jewish courts in the first century.

If Matthew had a contrived story, men would have been chosen as the messengers of the resurrection. Despite all the other variances found in the resurrection accounts in the four Gospels, all four agree on this point: women were the first proclaimers of the empty tomb (see Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-18). We should not be surprised that God chose those who are weak

in the world's eyes (women in the first century) to shame the strong (Jewish authorities and the power of Rome; cf. 1 Corinthians 1:27).

Finally, the women are commanded to tell the eleven to go to Galilee to see Jesus for themselves. Had Jesus not told them earlier, "You will fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, 'I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered.' But after I have been raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee" (Matthew 26:31-32)? The resurrection occurrence very precisely fulfills the prophetic predictions of our Lord.

An Encounter (28:8-10)

Verse 8

"Fear and great joy." A curious mix of emotions filled the air as the women depart the tomb "with fear and great joy." One scholar recalls asking at a pastor's conference: How could the women have had both fear and joy at the same time? Very quickly, a young pastor, Doug Millham, spoke up convincingly and declared, "Fear and joy can co-exist; I know, I just got married!"

Remember, fear and great joy, interestingly enough, were also found side-by-side at the beginning of the Christ story: "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy" (Luke 2:10).

That first Easter, the feelings were mixed – fear and joy. Odd, isn't it? Over 2,000 years later, in the emotional mix of this Easter – in the middle of our persistent pandemic – is, curiously enough, fear and joy.

We wake up fearful and go to bed anxious. We have lost the very rhythm of our lives. The people we see, the places we go, the sights and sounds that fill our senses with sameness, security, and serenity have vanished with the virus. Isolated. Worshiping by airwaves. Schools closed, and shops shuttered. The pandemic has left our once-predictable lives in unpredictable panic.

Verse 9

As they leave with this curious combination of fear and joy, "Jesus met them." Jesus met them and greeted them. We might call this God's "good morning." The Message version of scripture reads thusly, "'Good morning!' He said. They fell to their knees, embraced His feet, and worshiped Him." What a morning when the resurrected God says "Hi!" The word used here for the greeting, *chairete*, was a common Greek street greeting, meaning simply "hi," "hello," or "good morning." After the resurrection we discover that Jesus is still Jesus, and he still cares enough about us to extend his greeting.

The women instinctively grab his feet. The grabbing of Jesus' feet is another sign that he was, indeed, raised bodily from the dead. The women did not want to let go of the Lord for whom they had been looking (cf. John 20:16-18).

Verse 10

The actual first quoted words of the resurrected Lord are, "Fear not." No. He will not let them dwell in both fear and joy. He, likewise, will not let us walk away today from the empty tomb

until we hear the command, “Fear not.” Joy, just joy – no fear – Jesus is alive, and not even death itself can destroy us.

“Go and take word.” After Jesus meets the women, he sends them on a mission. “Go and tell My brothers.” In this word “brothers,” we see the message of forgiveness from the resurrected Christ. Jesus calls the very disciples who forsook him “brothers”. He, thus, has forgiven them and invited them to intimacy once again. Finally, we should notice that the one who sent the women “on mission” to declare the resurrection to the disciples (vs. 8-10) will also send the disciples “on mission” to declare the resurrection to the world: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Conclusion

The women approached the tomb disappointed, but devoted to the memory of their Lord. Though expecting to find a crucified corpse, they encountered a resurrected Christ. The earth quakes; the soldiers shake; and an angel announces the bodily resurrection. The first words of the risen Christ are all we need to hear: “Do not be afraid....” Even as we lose a loved one to death, we have the hope of Easter—Jesus is alive, and we are sure to follow, for he calls us “brothers” (v. 10).