

Called to Believe the Resurrection

Spring Quarter: Discipleship and Mission

Unit 2: Call to Ministry

Sunday school lesson for the week of April 21, 2019

By Dr. Hal Brady

Lesson Scripture: Matthew 4:12-22

Key Verse: Matthew 4:19

Lesson Aims

1. To celebrate the joy and hope of Easter as we proclaim the resurrection of Jesus Christ.
2. Compare and contrast the reactions of those who became aware that Jesus' body was missing.

It has been noted that an online search for the 10 most significant discoveries in history will reveal many lists. Most include such things as penicillin, oxygen, gravity, fingerprints, etc. Eventually, however, death comes to everyone (Hebrews 9:27). That is why the greatest discovery of all time happened on the day we celebrate Easter Sunday.

The great discovery that was made by those who came to Jesus' tomb after his crucifixion was the absence of something: Jesus' body. Never before or since that morning has the absence of something conveyed such an earth-shattering message. Today's lesson introduces us to that message.

Before proceeding, however, we need to be reminded that Jesus' resurrection figures prominently in all four Gospels. While we cannot resolve all of the differences between the resurrection accounts, their variations strengthen the truth that these Gospel writers are independent witnesses and are not attempting to reproduce a concocted deception.

As Bible scholar M. Eugene Boring points out, Jesus' resurrection "is the ultimately decisive event for human history, not merely something spectacular that happened to Jesus." The disciples believed it, and that belief changed their lives and transformed the world. That cannot be denied. We measure the calendar BC, before Christ, and AD, "anno domini," in the year of our Lord.

"The Easter stories," Boring says, "are not to be harmonized, but each is to be interpreted as mediating some dimension of an Easter faith." The Gospel authors did not set out to write a historical account. They were each providing a declaration of faith for the church.

An Amazing Sight

Matthew 28:1-4

The Resurrection accounts we read in Mark and Luke indicate that the women went to the grave hoping to anoint Jesus' body. They took spices in order to do so. In that day, bodies were anointed postmortem primarily to mask the stench of decay. However, Matthew leaves this out of his account. For him, the body had already been anointed with expensive perfume by the woman at Simon's house in Bethany (Matthew 26:6-13).

Now, there are several women named Mary in the New Testament, and it's easy to get them confused. The designation Magdalene is not a last name, but indicates a village she comes from that is located on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

The other Mary is likely "the mother of James and Joseph" (Matthew 27:56). Scholars tell us if we combine Matthew 13:55; 27:56; and Mark 15:40, 47, then this Mary may be the mother of Jesus but this is not certain.

Matthew's account is the only one that mentions an earthquake. But this earthquake is not caused by the slippage of subterranean tectonic plates. Rather, this earthquake is caused by an angel descending from heaven and rolling the stone from the entrance of the tomb.

As you may recall, an earthquake occurred at the moment of Jesus' death (Matthew 27:50, 51). Now one takes place as part of the unfolding drama here. A.T. Robertson, biblical scholar, quotes Jesuit priest Cornelius Lapide as saying, "The earth which trembled with sorrow at the Death of Christ as it were leaped for joy at His Resurrection."

Important to note! This angel did not open the tomb to let Jesus out; he opened the tomb to let the women in!

"His appearance was like lightening, and his clothes were white as snow." Such a description as this is fitting for a being whom the previous verse says has just come "down from heaven!" The brightness of both the angel's "appearance" and "clothes" is reminiscent of how Jesus appeared at his transfiguration (Matthew 17:1,2).

So the elite, heavily armed, highly trained Roman guards stationed at the tomb experience both the sight of an angel of the Lord and the sudden terror of the earthquake. They shake as much as the earth does! The overall shock of what they witness leaves them paralyzed with fear or unconscious. The phrase "become like dead men" does not mean they actually died, because some of them later reported this stunning news to the religious leaders in Jerusalem (Matthew 28:11).

Assuring Words

Matthew 28:5-6

As you know, we live in a scientific age that looks for proof and questions the idea of miracles. The early followers of Jesus lived in a different time. Perhaps it was less difficult for them to accept the idea of the Resurrection. Nevertheless, part of the human condition is our need for hope. Those early Christians believed in the Resurrection, and it did change their lives and their world. Of course, the lessons of Jesus can change one's life, but the story of his resurrection was what drove the rapid growth of the early church.

The angel calms the women (28:5). For the first time the angel speaks to the women: "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified." Then the angel goes on to announce the reason for the empty grave. Jesus is not there. He has been raised from the dead. While other stories will be concocted to try to cover up the truth (Matthew 28:11-15), God's word of revelation through the angel tells the real story – Jesus has indeed been raised from the dead. Thus,

the angel bears testimony to the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecies of his death and resurrection (16:21; 17:23; 20:19), which forcefully verifies Jesus' words about his mission and identity.

Astonishing Appearance

Matthew 28:7-10

The "come and see" of the previous verse gives way to the "go and tell" we see here (v.7). The women had arrived as seekers (Matthew 28:1-5). They then transitioned from seekers to finders (28:6) – but find something much better than expected. Now they must make the transition from finders to tellers. When it comes to knowledge of Jesus there's no such thing as God's being content with those who never progress out of the seeker stage.

Only time will tell whether the disciples will believe the women's testimony. According to the Jewish historian Josephus (AD 37-100), women of that time are not allowed to testify in court. Thus, the affirmation by the angel of the women's role flies in the face of a first-century practice. However, the first witnesses to the evidence of Jesus' resurrection are indeed women.

While the women seek the tomb as soon as enough light allows, the 11 disciples are still quaking in fear underneath tables and behind locked doors. They fear retribution at the hands of the same man who crucified Jesus (John 20:19).

"... and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him! Now I have told you." These phrases repeat and reinforce Jesus' promise in Matthew 26:32 and Mark 14:28 that he is to go before the disciples "into Galilee."

As we remember, Matthew tells us that the angel said, "Don't be afraid" (v.5). He then instructed the women to hurriedly go and tell the disciples what they had discovered. With fear and excitement, they started on their way, but suddenly they encounter Jesus himself. He also told them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me" (v.10).

Neither Mark nor Luke reports this appearance of Jesus. However, we should keep in mind that Matthew's Gospel is a call to mission for the early church. Therefore, this passage serves as a reminder that Jesus calls us as his followers to go and tell. In fact, it has been suggested that today's text makes for a great Easter sermon with this simple outline: (1) Don't be afraid! (2) Believe! (3) Rejoice! (4) Go and tell!

At this juncture, I want to reiterate two key points in the lesson. First, as these women dutifully and excitedly ran to deliver their message, Jesus suddenly appeared to them with the comment, "Rejoice!" The women, understandably overcome with emotion, fell at his feet and worshiped their risen Lord and Savior. They worshiped Him!

Second, Jesus said, "Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me" (v.10). A distinction is noted in Jesus' referring to the disciples as "my brothers." This indicates the special closeness that still exists despite their recent desertion (compare Matthew 26:56; John 20:17). In other words, they are forgiven.

Naturally, these men had planned to return home to Galilee anyway. But now there is reason to hurry back: the promise of seeing Jesus back there.

Arranged Cover-up

Matthew 28:11-15

Terrified of the impact of the news of the Resurrection, the religious leaders financed a cover-up with a sizable tribute paid to the soldiers. The soldiers were to spread the news that the disciples stole Jesus' body.

But isn't this what these religion leaders were afraid of in the first place? That the disciples would indeed steal the body? Ironic to say the least!

Now, the telling of this lie required a large sum of money because if Pilate got word of it, that the disciples had stolen the body, the soldiers who guarded the tomb would have been executed for dereliction of duty. So, with the money, the chief priests had to promise they would personally appease Pilate if the need arose.

The cover-up might have succeeded except for one thing: Jesus was seen alive by too many people in too many places for too long a period of time. As Paul put it, "and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born" (1 Corinthians 15:8).

The late William Sloan Coffin was speaking for a number of us when he said, "I myself believe passionately in the resurrection of Jesus Christ because in my own life I have experienced Christ not as a memory but as a presence."

A lady who regularly attended the church I was serving wrote this note to me: "I am writing you at this Easter time to let you know of the resurrection of one continuing visitor – me."

Conclusion

So why would men who were slow to believe news of a resurrection (like Thomas) end up trying to make it appear as though one had happened if it did not? No one, neither the women nor the disciples, was anticipating that Jesus would arise. Consequently, they were not spending the days following his death planning how they could perpetuate a hoax on the public.

Paul's declaration in 1 Corinthians 15:20 is the one that all followers of Jesus gladly embrace and proclaim: "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep."

"Fake news – no; actual news – absolutely! A joyful Easter to you and yours – Christ is alive!

Action Plan

1. How can we better prepare ourselves to offer evidence for the fact that Christ rose from the dead? Why is it important to do so?
2. Who among your acquaintances is ready to hear the message that Jesus is risen? What will cause them to be receptive?
3. In our recommended response to the Resurrection: Don't be afraid! Believe! Rejoice! Go and share! What does it actually mean to go and share?

Resources for this lesson:

“2018-2019 Standard Lesson NIV Commentary,” Uniform Series “International Bible Lessons for Christian Teaching,” pages 290-296

“The NIV Application Commentary, Matthew” by Michael J. Wilkins, pages 932-946

“Adult Bible Studies, Spring 2019, Discipleship and Mission, Teacher, Uniform Series,” Gary Thompson, pages 69-76

“The Book of Matthew, The Smart Guide to the Bible Series,” by Dewey and Rebecca Bertolini, Larry Richards, pages 327-329

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