

Easter Sunday First Day Dawning

Matthew 28:1-20

In the immediate aftermath of Jesus' resurrection, the antithesis between faith and unbelief are put on full display in the differing reactions of the Roman guards and the women disciples of Jesus who first encountered the empty tomb. Both the guards and the women disciples were exposed to the convincing evidence that Jesus had risen and in both cases it produced fear. But at that point the similarities cease and the antithesis is made clear. For the guards (and for all who oppose Jesus) the fear was all-encompassing. However, for the women disciples who went to Jesus' tomb at dawn on the week's first day, their fear turned to joy and hope.

1. Jesus truly died.

Vs. 1 – “Now after the Sabbath...” – This is a reference to the last day of the week, the day after Jesus was executed on a Roman cross. He had been in an as yet unused tomb since the prior evening. Jesus' crucifixion was carried out by experts. Not only were the Roman executioners convinced of Jesus' death but so too were the Jewish religious authorities, Jesus' disciples, and those who took his body and placed it in a borrowed tomb. Any suggestion that somehow Jesus may have survived his ordeal on the cross is ludicrous beyond words.

- The Apostle's Creed states that Jesus “descended into hell.” There has long been debate on how exactly to interpret those words. Certainly Jesus was not subject to judgment or torment in hell following his death. But hell, as we typically think of it, remains unopened until the final judgment.¹
- Many take the words of the Creed referring to Christ's descent to hell as referring to the fact that Jesus truly died and that, in dying, he experienced the “harrowing of hell.” That is, Jesus' death was filled with all the torment of Divine wrath as he bore the guilt and curse of our sin. And this is what we must understand about the death of Jesus. He died not as a victim of human cruelty (though human cruelty was on display in the most wicked of ways!). He died not merely as an example of faithful suffering (though no one suffered so faithfully as him!). Ultimately, Jesus died to pay the price that Divine justice demanded for the sins of God's people. We call this the doctrine of Penal Substitutionary Atonement.
 - a) Penal – The root word for “penalty.” Jesus' death was a sort of legal action whereby God's justice was satisfied. An actual penalty was paid by Jesus on the cross (Romans 3:25-26).
 - b) Substitutionary – Jesus' death was, quite literally, in our place. He gave himself *for us* (Galatians 2:20).
 - c) Atonement – This refers to what Jesus' death accomplished. Atonement means that enmity has been replaced by peace. In his death, Jesus made peace between God and sinners (Ephesians 2:13).

2. Jesus was truly raised.

Vs. 7 – In 26:32 Jesus told his disciples that, following his resurrection, he would go ahead of them to Galilee. He did exactly that, as we learn later in the chapter and in the other Gospels. In the end Jesus was even more gracious by meeting with his disciples that very evening in Jerusalem.

Vs. 9 – Claspings the feet is an act of homage. Cyrus, the great Persian king, says of his subject kings on one of his clay cylinders, “they brought me their full tribute and kissed my feet.”² This detail of the narrative reminds us again that Matthew is not recording a vision, but a physical encounter between real persons.

Vs. 14 – The guards took the money because they had no choice but to hope that the story would not reach Pilate. For them, the problem of Jesus was a Jewish matter. Soon enough Pilate would be back in Caesarea, his headquarters, when the feast was over. There was a good chance that he wouldn't hear and wouldn't care much if he did. He was irritated with the Jews enough already. If Jesus continued to cause problems for the Jewish authorities it was of no real concern to Pilate so long as the peace was kept. Telling the truth about what they saw would only complicate their circumstances.

- History is full of accounts of people keeping their mouths shut about the truth and spreading stories they knew to be untrue because of the financial or political advantages to be gained. The glorious thing they

¹ For thoughts on 1 Peter 3:19 see this fine article: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/does-1-peter-teach-jesus-preached-hell/>

² Leon Morris, 739

saw and the fabulous thing they knew had happened they did not – as multitudes do not today – think had any bearing on their own lives and circumstances. They were more concerned with their jobs and the money being offered than they were about the possible implications for their souls. People throughout history and to this very day make this same wager.

Vs. 15 – It is ironic that those who predicted deceit on the part of Jesus' disciples instead practiced deceit themselves. The Jewish religious leadership were spinning the facts. This was a classic cover-up that would unravel in the way so many cover-ups tend to do. They thought they were containing the damage. Tomb-robbing is known to have been a problem in the first century, so the story they concocted would have had some plausibility. What all of this does, of course, is to confirm that the tomb was empty. Not even Jesus' enemies denied that the tomb was empty. That fact had already been inconveniently established.

- The question of the empty tomb is which explanation of that fact is plausible? Justin Martyr, in the middle of the second century, mentions that Jews were still telling this story in his time. What that means, of course, is that no one was ever able to produce the body of Jesus or to come up with a more credible explanation for what happened. It is not surprising, after all, that the early church preached Christ's resurrection with such confidence and that large numbers of people believed their report in defiance of the denials of the religious leadership. The sole alternative was to think the apostles thieves and frauds which their radical change and eventual martyrdom proved to be a false charge.
- The resurrection of Jesus is reported as eye witness testimony by the four Gospels. Jesus foretold on many occasions that he would be crucified but then would be raised up from the grave. Jesus' resurrection is taught as fundamental to the entire Gospel message throughout the New Testament. Early Christian preaching among the Jews was characterized in the book of Acts as centering on the crucified and risen Christ. When Paul spoke to the philosophers in Athens he spoke to them of Christ's resurrection from the dead (Acts 17). When Paul presented the Gospel to the Roman governor, Felix, it was Christ's resurrection that he made of central importance. From its inception, the church of Jesus Christ held the resurrection of Jesus as a matter of central importance. Indeed, there would have been no Christian movement of any lasting importance had there not been a significant number of people who witnessed and gave testimony to the risen Jesus.

3. What difference does it make?

a) We have reason for robust hope.

- If the story of Jesus ended on the cross, we would have no hope and we would still be in our sins. Had Jesus remained in the tomb, our faith would be a tragic fantasy. It was the resurrection that vindicated Jesus as the Son of God, the One worthy to bear our sin and shame. The resurrection of Jesus announced that death and sorrow and sin had an expiration date.

b) We must believe.

- The good news of the resurrection must be met with faith. The darkness that hung over the earth for hours as Jesus died on the cross gave way to dawn on that first Christian Sabbath. And nothing would ever be the same again. "...if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved." (Romans 10)

c) We can rest.

Vs. 1 – "Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week..."

- At creation God ordained a pattern of work and rest for his human creatures. The seventh day – the Sabbath – was to be a day of rest, renewal, and worship for mankind. After the man and woman sinned, the calamitous impact was felt on a cosmic scale. The whole world was thrown into decay. Relationships were broken. Work became a drudgery. Even child-bearing, that blessed gift, became painful. But the Sabbath remained. It was a weekly reminder of that eternal Sabbath rest to come at the consummation of the age.
- The resurrection of Jesus became the most visible sign of God's Sabbath promise to his people. Indeed, so central to our hope is Jesus' resurrection that it caused a change in how God's people observe the Sabbath. Rather than six days of labor leading to a day of rest and renewal, the Sabbath would now mark the beginning of the cycle of days so that rest would be the first word, so to speak. Jesus was raised on the dawning of the first day of the week. Our hope was secured on the first day of the week. And so, even though that great eternal Sabbath has yet to arrive, we nevertheless live within the rest that was won by Jesus when he conquered the grave.