

FIRST THOUGHTS

Friday was a horrible day! Jesus, the one His followers believed was the Messiah sent by God to deliver Israel and establish His kingdom, had been arrested. He had been informally questioned before Annas, the patriarch of the high priestly family, along with the high priest Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high council. He was sent to Pilate on a trumped-up political charge and shuffled on to Herod Antipas for interrogation. Eventually, He was sent back to Pilate for sentencing. The death sentence sent Jesus to the cross and to six hours of intense physical and spiritual suffering as the One who “bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Pet. 2:24). After a hasty burial, a great stone sealed the tomb. By Saturday, the Sabbath, all hope seemed to be lost. But Sunday morning made all the difference! As you study this familiar passage, ask God to restore your awe and gratitude for the risen Savior. Challenge your group to remember that this is not just a story told once a year. It is a turning point—in history and in our lives as believers. Whatever we face, Jesus is alive, and He is with us each step of the way. Most of us often remember the details of the moments we received bad news. We probably remember where we were and what we were doing on September 11, 2001. Interestingly, sometimes we don’t remember details when we receive good news. The joy of the news overshadows the specifics of how and when the news was received. This was not the case for the eyewitnesses to Jesus’s resurrection. They could look back on the greatest news of all and remember vividly.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

April 5 is Easter, bringing a glorious end to Passion Week and the start of a new week. A more appropriate name for Easter is Resurrection Sunday, which is how Christians in many places refer to it. Because Easter falls in the middle of this series in Matthew’s Gospel, we have jumped ahead from chapter 18 to chapter 28. Chapter 18 ended Jesus’s extensive ministry in Galilee, while chapter 19 represents the beginning of His journey toward Jerusalem and the cross. By chapter 28 Jesus had not only completed His trip south to Judea, but He also had experienced arrest, trials, crucifixion, and burial. In the coming sessions, we will go back and pick up on Matthew’s specific details of Jesus’s move from Galilee to Judea. We’ll even close with a study of Matthew’s account of Jesus’s crucifixion in chapter 27. But this week, we focus on the power of the empty tomb! The immediate context for Matthew 28 relates to everything that happened after Jesus died on the cross (Matt. 27:33–56). All four Gospels record the story of Joseph of Arimathea going to Pilate and requesting that Jesus’s body be released to him for burial (Matt. 27:57–60; Mark 15:42–46; Luke 23:50–54; John 19:38–42). John added that Nicodemus was also involved in the burial of Jesus’s body (John 19:39–42). All three Synoptic Gospels record that Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus held vigil at both the cross and the tomb, although Luke refers to them as “the women” rather than by their names (Matt. 27:56,61; Mark 15:40,47; Luke 23:49,55). All of those involved in Jesus’s burial had to leave before the job of preparing His body was finished because the Sabbath was set to begin at sunset. However, Sabbath restrictions did not stop Jesus’s religious enemies from going to Pilate “the next day,” an episode only Matthew records (Matt. 27:62–66). The reason for their meeting with the Roman governor involved a request that he place soldiers at the tomb to guard it. They wanted to make it as secure as possible, in case Jesus’s disciples might think about stealing His body and claiming He had risen from the dead. They needn’t have worried. Honestly, it was Jesus’s opponents, not His followers, who took His prediction about rising after three days seriously (27:63). From the Gospel accounts, it appears none of Jesus’s genuine followers had a resurrection on their radars. Instead, they spent their time in hiding, fearing that the Jewish leaders would come after them next. Pilate granted the request and sent soldiers to the tomb. They placed a seal on the stone and stood guard. This action on Saturday prepares us for the next act in the narrative as Matthew 28 opens.

BELIEVE (Matt. 28:1–7)

• **We can trust that Jesus is risen because the tomb was empty.**

(v. 1) **After the Sabbath** was not meant to be understood as immediately after the Sabbath ended on Saturday evening, thus Matthew added **as the first day of the week was dawning**. The two women, **Mary Magdalene and the other Mary**, are identified at Jesus’s crucifixion and burial (Matt. 27:56,61), as well as the empty tomb. Luke recorded that Jesus had cast seven demons out of Mary Magdalene, and she began to follow Him and His disciples (Luke 8:2). The “other Mary” was the mother of James and Joseph (see Matt. 27:56; Mark 15:40,47; 16:1; Luke 24:10) and also was among the women who accompanied Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem. Aside from the crucifixion/resurrection accounts, we have no additional information about her. The women left early that Sunday morning **to view the tomb**, thus continuing their vigil of Matthew 27:61. Mark added that they brought spices to anoint Jesus’s body (Mark 16:1).

(vv. 2-4) This is the second **earthquake** associated with Jesus’s death and resurrection. The first was on Friday afternoon when Jesus gave up His spirit (Matt. 27:51–54). Only Matthew mentioned this one, and he labeled it as **violent**. Matthew made it clear that this was no natural event. Instead, the source was **an angel of the Lord**. The angel, not the earthquake, **rolled back the stone** that had sealed the tomb. To further emphasize God’s work in the matter, he took his place **sitting on it** as he waited for the women to arrive. Matthew compared the angel’s appearance to **lightning**, while his raiment was **white as snow**. These indicate power and purity. When the guards saw the angel they were **shaken**. Fear is the typical reaction to an appearance of an angel. Shaken (seio) shares a linguistic root with “earthquake” in verse 2 (seismos, from which we get our word “seismology”). Like the earth, the soldiers also quaked and became **like dead men**.

(vv. 5-6) The angel encouraged the women to not **be afraid**. Again, fear was a typical response for those who encountered angels. Jesus also used similar wording in Matthew 14:27 and 17:7 (see also 28:10). The angel affirmed that the women had come **looking for Jesus who was crucified**, but he quickly let them know that **he is not here because he has risen** and is alive. **Just as he said** points back to Jesus’s words to the apostles. On numerous occasions, Jesus had said that He would die and that He would be raised from the dead (12:40; 16:21; 17:9,23; 20:19; 26:32). Now, that prediction had come true. As always, Jesus is faithful to His promises. In addition to providing information, the angel provided an invitation: **see the place where he lay**. Some suggest the women arrived at the wrong tomb, either because of the darkness or because of their grief. The angel’s words made it clear that they were at the correct tomb and that Jesus’s resurrection was physical, as well as spiritual.

(v. 7) Information and invitation were followed by instructions. The angel commissioned the women to **tell his disciples** two items: **He has risen and he is going ahead of you to Galilee**. The command to **go quickly** stresses the urgency of their task. Going to Galilee recalls Jesus’s promise of Matthew 26:32.

Much of Jesus's ministry, teaching, and miracles took place in Galilee (Matt. 4:12–19:1). The words did not preclude Jesus from meeting them in other places, but He would spend time with His disciples in Galilee, as verses 16-20 and John 21:1–23 verify.

WORSHIP (Matt. 28:8–10)

• **Our appropriate response to Jesus's resurrection is worship.**

(v. 8) As commanded by the angel, the two Marys departed **quickly from the tomb**. In fact, Matthew wrote that the women ran to fulfill their new task. This is the second use of the word quickly (see v. 7), and it stresses their haste and obedience. Two emotions characterized the women as they left the tomb—**fear and great joy**. To this point, fear has dominated the narrative. In verse 4, the guards succumbed to fear, which says a lot considering the experiences of Roman soldiers. In verse 5 the angel urged the women not to fear. Here in verse 8, they ran from the tomb in fear. Matthew doesn't specify the source of their fear. Perhaps they were afraid that the disciples wouldn't believe the magnificent story of the resurrection and would accuse them of being hysterical women. Luke 24:10–11 points out that the apostles initially thought the women's report was "nonsense." Perhaps, they were still stunned from their angelic encounter. Whatever the cause, they demonstrated obedience to the command and moved forward despite their fear. The second emotion attributed to the women was great joy. Matthew made significant use of the Greek word *meegas* (translated here as "great") across his passion narrative. In Matthew 27:46 Jesus "cried out with a loud (*meegas*) voice." In Matthew 27:60 "a great (*meegas*) stone" sealed the entrance to the tomb. And in Matthew 28:2 he recorded a "violent (*meegas*) earthquake" to mark the angel's arrival at the grave. Now, in 28:8, the women experienced great joy on hearing that Jesus was alive.

(v. 9) While the women were running to the disciples, **Jesus met them**. Matthew alone records this event. These women were the last at the cross (27:56), the last at the burial (27:61), but the first at the tomb (28:1). Now they were the first to see the risen Lord. This is the only appearance in Matthew's Gospel of the risen Lord in Jerusalem. From the angel's message the women would not have expected to see the risen Lord until they were back up in Galilee, so this encounter came suddenly and as a total surprise. Jesus's **Greetings!** was a common way to say "Hello" in first-century Jewish culture (see 26:49). Apparently even while the women were still a little distance from Jesus, they recognized Him. So, when **they came up** to Him they **took hold of his feet, and worshiped him**. These two actions were significant, especially when taken together. For the women to grasp Jesus's feet, they needed to bow before Him. So the words not only emphasize an act of homage, but they also affirm that Jesus was physically present. Despite arguments to the contrary, He was not merely a spirit or hallucination. Second, worshiped him shows they recognized the risen Lord's deity. During the wilderness temptation in Matthew 4:9–10, Jesus had told Satan that only God deserves worship. That Jesus accepted their worship affirmed He is God, just as the Father and the Spirit are God.

(v. 10) Once again the women were told **do not be afraid**. They had received this encouragement earlier from the angel (v. 5), but this time the risen Savior Himself was calming their fears. Jesus's words **leave for Galilee and see me there** repeat the angel's instructions in verse 7, as well as Jesus's own promise in Matthew 26:32. However, here Jesus referred to the disciples as **my brothers**. This is the only time in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus identified the apostles with this intimate relational term (see John 20:17). While Jesus did have biological brothers (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3), He obviously meant the disciples, His spiritual family (Matt. 12:46–50; 23:8; 25:40; see also Ps. 22:22). Galilee was where Jesus spent most of His ministry and where He taught His disciples the most. Neither Jesus nor the angel specified where in that large area of Galilee they would see Him, and neither the women nor the disciples asked for further details about the location.

Key Doctrine: Evangelism and Missions - The Lord Jesus Christ has commanded the preaching of the gospel to all nations. (See Luke 24:46–49; Acts 1:8.)

SHARE (Matt. 28:16–20)

• **Believers are to share the gospel with people of all nations.**

(v. 16) Both Luke (Luke 24:13–53) and John (John 20:19–29) reported other post-resurrection appearances in Jerusalem. But Matthew went directly to the journey of **the eleven disciples** to Galilee. The number eleven provides a subtle reminder of Judas's betrayal. The **mountain** is unidentified, but the disciples knew where to go because **Jesus had directed them** to it. Also, no timing is mentioned for this meeting.

(v. 17) Matthew recorded two responses **when they saw** Jesus. Appropriately, **they worshiped** Jesus. However, a group also **doubted**. The worship response recalls the two Marys in verse 9 and emphasizes Jesus's deity. The fact that some doubted raises two issues. First, readers might wonder who doubted. Were they some of the eleven or were others present? The second difficulty concerns what doubted means. Does it refer to unbelief or to a degree of hesitation and uncertainty? The word carries both meanings. Grammatically, the same Greek word is used in Matthew 14:31 of Peter's hesitation when walking on the water. Thus, it might indicate some were not certain it was Jesus they were seeing and may have hesitated until He came closer to them. They also may have hesitated because they didn't know how to respond to Jesus in this new situation (see Luke 24:38,41; John 20:24–29). Whatever the situation, Jesus did not take any specific steps to alleviate any doubts (contrary to Luke 24:36–43; John 20:26–28).

(vv. 18-20) The concept of **all** dominates the Great Commission. It refers to the **authority** Jesus provides and the **nations** believers are called to reach. Christians are expected to **observe everything** that Jesus commanded and to trust that His presence is **always** with them (literally, "all the days"). Authority includes power and position. The Father **has . . . given** (a divine passive, see Matt. 11:27) Jesus this authority both **in heaven and on earth**. His authority is universal and all encompassing, and He makes that power available to those who follow Him. On that basis disciples are commissioned to **go . . . make disciples of all nations . . . baptizing them . . . teaching them**. Go expands the mission beyond Galilee and Judea. Make disciples is the main verb and thus the emphasis of the commission. What's more, the commission carries a universal focus, fulfilling the promise God made to Abraham (Gen. 12:3; 17:5; 18:18; 22:18). Baptizing and teaching are the means by which disciples are made. Baptizing is the initial step of obedience performed **in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**. The teaching is to ground new believers in their discipleship through Jesus's own teaching. But this is no mere intellectual exercise. It requires obedience to all of Jesus's commands. The commission also emphasizes Jesus's omnipresence. **I am with you** is emphatic and promises that the risen Lord will walk with His people in any situation **to the end of the age**. Jesus's Great Commission was not intended only for the eleven apostles, but for all disciples until He comes back. The resurrection signaled that Jesus's earthly ministry was moving toward an end. But the responsibility of sharing the gospel and growing the kingdom was just getting started. We should be working at that task faithfully today—and every day until He returns.