

“He Has Risen,” Matthew 28:1-20 (Easter Sunday, April 1, 2018)

Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ² And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. ⁵ But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you.” ⁸ So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ And behold, Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.”

¹¹ While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. ¹² And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers ¹³ and said, “Tell people, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ ¹⁴ And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” ¹⁵ So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

PRAY

Since it is Easter Sunday I chose as our text for today the last chapter of the gospel of Matthew, where we read one of the Bible’s accounts of Jesus being raised from the dead. On a day like today I want to be more clear than usual about where I’m going in my sermon. I have two points I hope to make. The first is *did the resurrection happen?* I grew up going to church so I’d always heard and at some level believed in the resurrection, but as I got older part of me was frankly scared that the resurrection of Jesus was a fairy tale that Christians were supposed to believe but shouldn’t really expect to have actually happened. I’d seen many ABC News specials that they used to always show around Easter where the journalist interviews scholars from the Ivy League schools and these very intelligent, very well-spoken men and women act as if it’s common knowledge that the bodily resurrection of Jesus never happened.

And frankly these scholars sounded a lot smarter than the preachers I’d heard growing up in my small town in Mississippi, and it sounded like they knew the Bible a whole lot better.

This bothered me. I wanted to be a Christian, I wanted to believe, but I didn't want to lie to myself to do it. Maybe there are a few people like that here today, wanting to believe but fearing it's a fairy tale. If so I hope the first half of my talk helps you.

In the second half of my talk I'll address *why the resurrection matters*. While the first point will be an argument to your head, asking you to think, in the second point I hope to address the heart, and show you why the resurrection of Jesus means wonderful things for us today.

First, did the resurrection happen? And lots of people in the world and certainly most of the people who are what I'd call the cultural elites – the professors, the writers, the artists, the people in charge in Hollywood – would say, “Of course not – the resurrection of Jesus Christ is just a fairy tale. Every intelligent person knows that and only foolish, deluded people don't.”

I don't think it's unreasonable for them to think that because, after all, dead people don't normally get up and start walking around. It's fair for them to say, “If you're going to convince me of the resurrection of Jesus then show me. You have the burden of proof. Don't just expect me to believe it because you say so or because the Bible tells me so – convince me.”

I'm not saying that I'm capable convincing you beyond a reasonable doubt that Jesus was raised from the dead. I mean, we read in Matthew 28:17 that even among those who saw Jesus after the resurrection “some doubted.” If they didn't all believe then I wouldn't expect everyone to believe today.

But here's what we know: every historian, whether Christian or not, agrees that the first Christians went around saying, “Jesus is raised from the dead.” That cannot be denied. It is a fact. The real question is: why did they go around saying that? Why did they think the resurrection happened, and why should we?

Matthew says it's because on the first Easter Jesus' tomb was empty (that's verses 5-6) and because Jesus appeared to the disciples after his death (that's verses 9-10, and the end of the chapter). My argument (and it's not my argument – Christian apologists have been making it for centuries) is that the empty tomb and the appearances provide the best and indeed the only explanation for why the early church believed that Jesus was raised from the dead.

How do I get there? Think about it like this. If Jesus' tomb was empty on that first Easter morning but he did not appear to the disciples, they wouldn't have said, “Jesus was raised from the dead.” They would have said, “Someone stole his body.” Grave robbing happened all the time in the first century – people looking for jewelry or clothing they could sell would carry off the body and scavenge it.

On the other hand, if Jesus somehow appeared to the disciples but they knew his body was still in the tomb, the disciples would not have said, “Jesus is raised from the dead.” They would have said, “We had a vision” or “We saw his ghost.” There have been thousands of instances of people having visions of loved ones who have just died. Whole books have been written on this. Maybe it's happened to some of you. But when that happens no one says, “Oh, their body has been raised from the dead!”

We even see this in the Bible. In Acts 12, we read where Herod persecuted the early church. The apostle James had already been killed. Peter was in prison awaiting execution. But an angel comes to Peter in prison and says, “Get dressed – I’m busting you out.” Peter thinks he’s having a vision, but he plays along, passes the guards without being seen, walks through opened gates, and when he comes to his senses he’s out on the street and free.

Peter walks to a house where the church is gathered praying for his life. He knocks on the door, and a little servant girl named Rhoda answers. But when she hears Peter’s voice she gets so excited she forgets to open the door. Instead, she runs back and tells the grownups. But what do they say? Do they hear her and say, “Peter is raised from the dead”? No, first they say to her. “You are out of your mind.” But when she kept on they said, “It [must be] his angel!” Acts 12:15. In other words, they think Peter died and Rhoda had a vision of him.

If there had only been an empty tomb, the earliest Christians would have said, “It was grave robbers.” If there had only been appearances of Jesus, they would have said, “It was a ghost.” But since Matthew tells us the disciples saw both Jesus and the empty tomb, *the necessary historical conditions* are met for the early church to say, “Jesus was raised from the dead.”

A skeptic would understandably say, “Yes, I can see how the empty tomb and the appearances *could* cause the early church to say that, but aren’t there other, less fantastical explanations for how this belief got started?” Most people assume, “Of course! There are lots and lots of other possible explanations that don’t involve a resurrection from the dead.”

But when you actually take the time to look at the other explanations, they don’t add up. Back in 2003 N.T. Wright, a scholar who was then the third-highest ranking bishop in the Anglican church, published a magisterial book on the resurrection of Jesus. In it presents a grab bag of these alternate explanations that have been put forward by skeptics over the years and, one by one, refutes them.

The first big alternate explanation is that ancient people were dumb, and that’s how the belief in Jesus’ resurrection got started. Two thousand years ago, the argument goes, people thought the dead got up and walked around all the time, so they had no problem with believing that Jesus was raised from the dead. But now we have modern science, so we know better. We know dead people don’t rise.

But N.T. Wright shows that ancient people *did understand the laws of nature* and they knew that dead people stay dead. They didn’t need Bunsen burners, test tubes, and the periodic table to figure that out. In the Bible when Joseph hears that his fiancé Mary is pregnant he resolves to call off the marriage. Why? Because even though he is an ancient, he understands the laws of nature. Joseph doesn’t say, “Mary, you’re pregnant? Well, what can you do? It happens all the time to virgins.” No. He’s upset precisely *because* he understands how these things work. Ancient people weren’t ignorant. In fact, N.T. Wright shows the people of antiquity were likely to be *more* skeptical of the claims of resurrection than modern people are.

Second alternate explanation: the disciples wanted so desperately to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead that, even though the facts proved that he was still in the tomb, they somehow managed to convince themselves otherwise and went around telling everyone about it. This theory sounds plausible at first, because we've all known people who have talked themselves into believing something that wasn't true – like a guy who is convinced his girlfriend loves him because he wants her to, even though she cheats on him and treats him like dirt.

But the problem with this theory is that when you actually read the Bible you see *no disciple wanted to believe that Jesus would be raised from dead – they wanted to believe he was the Messiah.* The Jews believed their Messiah would kill Romans, not that they would kill him. None of the first disciples ever even dreamed the Messiah would die on the cross for their sins, so there's no way they could have subconsciously desired for him to be raised from the dead.

Third, the "swoon" theory. Jesus didn't die on the cross, he swooned, he passed out. But he woke up in the tomb, somehow got out, and so people started saying, "He's raised from the dead." Answer: Roman soldiers knew how to kill people, and even if Jesus had survived no one would have confused a beaten-up Jesus with someone who had actually overcome death.

Fourth: when the women went to the tomb they met someone else who looked like Jesus, and in the early light of dawn they thought it was him. Answer: they would have figured it out soon enough. *Fifth: the gospel accounts are biased.* Answer: all history is biased. If you wait for unbiased history you'll never be able to learn anything about what happened before you were born. *Sixth: the resurrection accounts in the Bible are full of contradictions.* Answer: no, they are not. The accounts can be reconciled. John Wenham, a British scholar, wrote a whole book called the *Easter Enigma* showing it. And even if it could be shown that the accounts differed, the differences would only involve minor details – they all agree that the tomb was empty and that Jesus appeared to the disciples.

And as N.T. Wright goes on in his book, relentlessly knocking down one alternate explanation after another, it begins to dawn on you: **the only sufficient historical condition for the disciples going around saying, "He has risen" is that the tomb really was empty and the disciples really did see him.** Jesus was raised from the dead. Nothing else explains why Christians forgot where Jesus' tomb was within a generation of the crucifixion. If you go to Jerusalem today and take a tour, they'll show you a tomb and say it was Jesus'. But the fact is we don't know which tomb it was because it didn't matter to the first Christians as *they didn't think Jesus was in it.* Nothing else explains why the first Christians immediately made the first day of the week, Sunday, their special day for meeting together instead of the Sabbath. And nothing else explains why the disciples were willing to die rather than stop preaching, "Jesus is raised from the dead."

As I said earlier, I'm not capable of convincing you beyond a reasonable doubt that the resurrection of Jesus happened. I know it's possible for people to follow the argument I just made right to the end and say, "J.D., I don't have a good explanation for the empty tomb and the appearances, but I choose to continue in my belief that no one, including Jesus, can be raised from the dead." If that's you, fine – that's a reasonable response. But I want to be clear that is your choice to hold that position and *it is not required by the historical evidence.* In fact, all the

evidence points the other way. The best explanation by far for what happened in history is that Jesus of Nazareth thoroughly and completely died on a Roman cross, was buried, and the third day was gloriously and powerfully raised from the dead.

But we can't leave the sermon there with this argument. Lots of preachers do on Easter – I've done it – and it's a mistake. Why? Because, second, we don't just need to know that the resurrection happened. We need to know why it matters!

I know of one minister in New York City who gave one of those kinds of Easter sermons. He set out his arguments convincingly that Jesus' body is no longer in the grave. But after the sermon someone came up to him and said, "OK, the resurrection happened. So 'blanking' what?"

That's a perfectly fair question. It was a profane way to put it (by the way he didn't actually saying "blanking"), but it was the right question. Why does it matter?

If you grew up in church, you might answer, "The resurrection matters because it proves Jesus is the Son of God" or "The resurrection proves there is life after death." That's all true, but that's not what Matthew says.

Instead, we read this: "¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ...'" Matthew 28:18-19a.

These famous verses are part of what is commonly called the Great Commission, and in them Matthew tells us the reason the resurrection matters. If you believe the resurrection happened, then you have a job to do: go and make disciples of all nations. That means to all people – no one is to be left out of this mission because of their race, ethnicity, or any other reason.

I'm not sure what you think about when you hear the phrase "Great Commission," or when you think about what it looks like to "make disciples." But for a lot of us we associate that language with what Christians call "sharing their faith": the process of starting conversations with people in the hope that they will receive Christ as their Lord and Savior. It certainly doesn't mean less than that. But typically we think that's all it means. Once we've convinced someone to follow Jesus, it's over. We've won the argument, they believe like we do about Jesus now, they've signed on the dotted line and we've closed the deal. The Great Commission is over with that person.

But it's not. It's only begun. The Great Commission is not a command only about sharing our faith then moving on, but a command for the people of God ***to dig down deep and really love those around them.***

Let me show you. "¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." Matthew 28:19-20a.

Jesus says there are two parts to making disciples: *first, baptizing*. Do you know what baptism is? It's not a private act. Baptism is not when someone has a spiritual experience and decides on

their own to ratify it by going under the water. Baptism, rather, is when you are welcomed into the church. It's when the church says, "We recognize that you've had the same experience of God's grace and mercy that we have, so we going to baptize you to show you we are coming along side you and welcoming you to our family." This is why we don't do baptisms at summer camp, or on weekend retreats, or off by ourselves in a pond. It's only done when the church is gathered, because it's done under the authority of the church.

By the way, if you are here this morning and you claim to have given your life to Jesus, have you gone to the church and sought baptism? You should. That's what the Bible says you do when you follow Jesus.

The second part of making disciples is teaching them to observe (or obey) all that Jesus has commanded you. The Bible is a big book. It's complicated. There are a lot of principles to absorb and rules for disciples to follow and you can't learn to observe them in one conversation with a Christian. You can't even do it in a six-week Bible study or a twelve-week discipleship class. You can't do it by reading a devotional book or listening to lectures online.

But you were never supposed to learn it that way. When I was in Italy several years ago, I got to meet one of the members of the church in Salerno that we support. This man is a very gifted cook, and he fed us this wonderful meal. And after it was over I went to him and said, "I'd love to learn how to cook like you do. Could you recommend me a cookbook that could show me how?" And he laughed at me and said, "That's not how it works – you just need to come in my kitchen and I'll show you."

It's like that with Christianity. No one learns to obey Jesus all by themselves; they need other Christians. They need to be together not just in classrooms in an education building, but in each other's kitchens, living rooms, and back porches and keep doing it for years and years and years. You've heard the phrase, "It takes a village to raise a child"? The Great Commission means, "It takes the church to make a disciple."

You may say, "Yes, but following rules? That's what it means be a Christian? That's not very inspirational to me, J.D." OK, but listen to what the rules are before you make up your mind. Here's a random sampling: always give to the poor in secret. Never sue a fellow Christian. Never take revenge. Be kind. Always show hospitality. Give away money cheerfully. Don't be anxious. Don't judge another Christian over a matter of conscience. Always forgive.

The most loving thing you could do for another human being is to welcome that person into your life in the name of Jesus and patiently teach them how to live like that, and *that's what the Great Commission is all about.*

In 1 Thessalonians 2:8, the apostle Paul writes to the church at Thessalonica, a church he helped to start: "8 So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us." That verse is a wonderful summary of the Great Commission.

But what does making disciples have to do with the resurrection? This: it's hard to follow Jesus, because it's hard to love others. When you open up your home to the people you're trying to love, the result won't always look like a Christmas card photo in your living room. It will be messy, you will feel used by people, and occasionally you will be outright mistreated. Real love and commitment is always messy and it always costs you.

C.S. Lewis says at one point that to love at all is to be vulnerable, because if you dare to love anything your heart will be hurt and run the risk of being broken. If you want to make sure your heart doesn't get break, you can't give it to anyone – not even a pet.

It's hard to love. ***But the resurrection matters because it means that Jesus has the power to sustain us as we love and will make sure we don't falter.*** That's the end of Matthew 28:20. Jesus says, "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

In saying that Jesus doesn't mean, "I'm going to be the only one standing when the world ends," though it does mean that. He means, "There will be times when you are loving others in my name where you feel like you're at the end of your rope. But the resurrection means no matter how hard it is or how bad it gets, I'm with you not only to the end of the age but to the end of your rope."

Yes, it's hard to follow Jesus and love people into becoming disciples. But the resurrection matters because it means that Jesus Christ really did die on the cross for your sins. That's why on the third day God raised him up. Jesus wasn't dying for his own sins, he died for yours, and the resurrection is proof. It's God's vindication of his work as the full satisfaction for sin. The resurrection matters because it means God loves you. Full stop. Without reservation or condition. In Jesus Christ God loves you and accepts you completely, no matter who you are or what you've done. The resurrection matters because it means Jesus is Lord. And if he is Lord, *he will be with us always* and we will have everything we need to carry out his will.

The apostle Paul sums up 1 Corinthians 15, the most important chapter in the Bible on the resurrection, with verse 58: "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." 1 Corinthians 15:58. The resurrection means that Jesus is Lord and we have work to do. And Christians, our work is literally a labor of love – giving and receiving it. This Easter I invite you to be a part of it. AMEN