

The Truth Many Seem Desperate to Escape Matt. 28:1-15

Intro. I'd like you to find Matt. 28 in your Bible. Believe it or not, the Christmas Season is here again and we need to say "thank you" to the crew who decorated the church last Thursday.

Chap. 28 is Matthew's account of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Now it may seem strange to be talking about the resurrection this close to Christmas. But listen...Christ's birth would have little meaning apart from His resurrection. Besides...I'm determined to finish what we started about 108 Sundays ago.

I've often told the story of the hungry man who went door to door seeking a handout until he came to a door where the homeowner felt pity for him. Since the man appeared strong and healthy, the homeowner thought it might be good for him to do some work in exchange for the assistance he sought. (What a radical idea!) So the homeowner told the man, *"I'll reward you well if you saw some firewood for me. Do you see that pile of wood over there?"* The man turned his head that direction and then said to the homeowner...*"I don't see it."* The homeowner then replied, *"what do you mean you don't see it, I saw you see it."* To that the man said...*"You may have saw me see it but you ain't gonna see me saw it."*

A proverb traced back to 1546 and the English playwright, John Heywood, goes like this. *"There are none so blind as those who will not see."* In other words...an unwillingness to see what can be seen is the worst form of blindness. Heywood's maxim echoes **Jer. 5:21** which says, **'Hear now this, O foolish people, and without understanding; which have eyes, and see not; which have ears, and hear not'**. This willful brand of ignorance finds special application to those who deny the resurrection of Jesus despite **"many convincing proofs."** (**Acts 1:3**)

In our last study we considered all God did authenticate His Son's death on the cross. God made it hard for people to remain in ignorance and unbelief. This was especially true for those who witnessed the supernatural events that took place while Jesus hung on the cross. Many paid no attention or saw these signs as coincidental. But these God-given signs didn't go unheeded by everyone. **27:54** says, **When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely He was the Son of God!"** The soldiers sensed the manifest presence of God. They were convinced the man on the center cross was unlike any man they had ever seen executed. Though most remained indifferent to it all, what these men saw and experienced inspired some degree of faith.

How does human nature respond to facts that are unwanted yet so annoyingly evident? To make this more personal, how have you and I sometimes responded to truth that is inconvenient and maybe painful or costly to embrace? While truth is indestructible, it can be dodged / distorted / and denied. Truth dodgers often refuse consider the facts of the case. For example, consider the question of why the skeletal fossils of whales are found on the slopes of the Andes Mountains and why marine fossils are found atop the highest mountains in the world. Some explanations are hilarious attempts to dismiss the evidence of a worldwide flood. Others dismiss the truth by diluting or distorting it. That's what's happening today with respect to history. History's lessons are dismissed and rewritten to dismiss some inconvenient truth or to support an alternate and supposed "more enlightened" viewpoint.

That's what we find in the passage before us this morning. First, Matthew reports the events that took place on resurrection morning. He then reports the lame attempt by Israel's leaders to fabricate a different story...a story line designed to dismiss the resurrection and its implications. As we'll see, the story they invented makes no sense though many people still believe it.

1. **The Truth Encountered** – vs.1-6- After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earth-quake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.

Matthew's account is simple and straight-forward. It's told from the perspective of the two Mary's who went to the tomb early Sunday morning. While most of the disciples ran for cover, these women remained close to Jesus. They were near the cross when He was crucified. The Lord seems to have rewarded their loyalty and devotion by allowing them to be the first witnesses of the empty tomb and later...the first ones to see the risen Christ. There's a lesson here and it's simply this...special blessings belong to those who remain close to the Savior. To you believe that?

The phrase, **after the Sabbath** is rich in meaning. Jesus didn't destroy the Law, He fulfilled it. He brought an end to the whole system including the Sabbath regulations. As so much of the NT explains, grace and truth had come in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The torn temple curtain signaled free and open access to God and His dwelling place. This free access to God doesn't mean that God lowered His standards or made Himself approachable by becoming less holy than He is. That can't happen. It means Jesus made it possible for sinful people to be justified and made holy even as God is holy. **Heb. 10:9, 10 - Then he said, "Here I am, I have come to do your will." He sets aside the first (the cov. of Law) to establish the second (the cov. of grace). And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.**

The earth quaked when the Law was given and later when God revealed Himself to Elijah. There was an earthquake on Friday when Jesus was crucified. Now on Sunday morning a **violent earthquake** erupted when an angel came to roll away the stone that sealed Christ's tomb. God often rocks the boat and shakes things up to gain our attention. And by the way, the angel didn't roll the stone away to let Jesus out...Jesus had already vacated the tomb. The angel rolled away the stone so witnesses could enter and see the tomb was empty. Then, like a team captain who plants their colors in the middle of a defeated opponent's field...the angel sat on the stone. The Bible doesn't say so, but I wonder if he sat there with his arms folded as if to say, *"Did you really think this stone could keep Jesus in the grave? Are you kidding me?"*

And there's no doubt it's an angel when one shows up reflecting the radiance of God's glory. **v.3** says, **His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow.** Contrary to the deceitful story made up later, I'm thinking these guards were wide-eyed and as awake as they had ever been. These security experts experienced a close encounter with a different kind of being and they became like men subdued by a tazer. Their angelic encounter was so traumatic their bodies shook and were immobilized.

Maybe you've heard me say this before, but I think we tend to underestimate angelic power. I think the angels of heaven are offended by our little effeminate-winged-statues and ornaments. These majestic beings are capable of tremendous super-human power. In the OT, one angel destroyed Sennacherib's army numbering 185,000 men. A Bible lesson taught incorrectly may be partly to blame. The idea that Jacob put up a good fight when he wrestled the angel is a gross exaggeration of what really happened. The angel of the Lord simply allowed Jacob to expend all his energy because that's how Jacob did life and how he related to God. Jacob had exhausted himself conniving and doing things in his own wisdom and strength. He wrestled with God. The wrestling match ended when in agony he finally said, "uncle." And herein lies the lesson. We don't have to wrestle with God to persuade Him to bless us! That's bad theology.

It's a paradox to be sure, but we begin to win in life when we quit fighting and surrender to Him! (After today's vote, I may have only one more Sunday to straighten these things out.)

The angel then said what angels often say to terrified human beings. He said, "**Do not be afraid...**" *"Relax...chill out...I won't hurt you!"* The angel then added, "**for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified.**" The angel knew exactly what these women were up to. He knew all about their loyalty and kind intentions. He knew they'd come with spices to anoint His dead body even though Jesus clearly promised He would rise on the third day. On the way they wondered who might roll away the stone that was too heavy for them to move. The angel knew this. So the angel said, "**He is not here; He has risen, just as He said.**" Against all odds Jesus proved He is a man whose Word can be trusted. He did this conclusively by raising Himself from the dead.

Next the angel said, **Come and see the place where He lay.** When they entered the tomb they saw the linens that had been wound around their Lord. The linens were there in the shape of His body. Now Jesus didn't unwind the linens to escape...He simply vacated the grave cloths. He passed through them and out of the sealed tomb just as He did later when He entered a room without using the door. **Jn. 20:7** says the burial cloth that covered his head lay neatly folded by itself. There was no sign of struggle. The grave cloths weren't in disarray. Like an empty cocoon, he left the linens behind as evidence that He is alive. Now let me ask you...if someone hastily stole the body with an armed guard standing nearby...would they have unwrapped the linens wound around the body? Would they have exposed a decaying corpse or fold the burial cloth that covered his head? I'm thinking "NO."

At birth, Jesus was wrapped in swaddling cloths and placed in a manger because there was no room for His family in the Bethlehem Inn. Now as a man in the prime of life, Jesus was hated, rejected and crucified. He was wrapped in cloths and placed in a tomb outside Jerusalem because there was no room for Him in the hearts of men and women. As Isaiah had prophesied, the swaddling cloths were a sign of His birth. Now 33 years later, the burial cloths were a sign of His endless life.

So the fact of Christ's resurrection was first encountered by two women and later by Peter, John and many others. Later Paul wrote, **He appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all He appeared to me also...I Cor. 15:5-8** Listen... this is evidence that is very hard to escape or ignore. Skeptics who have seriously considered the evidence have been converted. As someone said, *"It takes more faith to be an unbeliever than to take God at His Word."* I believe that!

2. The Truth Proclaimed – vs. 7-10 Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you." So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

The news that Jesus had risen from the dead was so wonderful it couldn't be contained...it had to be shared. Like the end of war or a cure for cancer, the fact that Satan, sin and death were conquered was news to be shouted from the rooftops. The fact of His resurrection was charged with urgency. So the angel said, **Go quickly and tell His disciples.** The Savior and Teacher you loved and followed is not dead...He is alive! **'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.'** What news could be more wonderful than this? Though their dreams had been smothered by despair...their hope was now rekindled and resurrected with Jesus. *"He is alive...He is alive. The angel said we'll actually see Him again in Galilee where we first met Him."*

As the women hurried away from the tomb, their emotions were tangled and all mixed up. They were **afraid yet filled with joy**. Matthew omits many details supplied by the other Gospel writers. But his simple report is down to earth and true to life. Haven't we experienced conflicting emotions like this at one time or another? Haven't we heard news so wonderful and hoped for that seemed too good to be true? We're afraid we haven't heard correctly or perhaps the messenger was misinformed. If someone made up the story, they wouldn't have scripted it this way. But the actors were real and their story is entirely believable. God's Spirit has given us an accurate account of the emotions and actions of people as real as you and me today.

The women wasted no time. They obeyed the angel immediately. They hurried off to tell His disciples. **v.9** says, **Suddenly Jesus met them**. Can we even begin to imagine the wonder of that moment? The greatest most exhilarating experiences we've had in life can't compare with this. *"Look...it's Jesus coming toward us...and He's alive."* Mary, can you believe it? To which the other Mary says, *"I'm trying...believe me, I'm trying!"*

Jesus was never at a loss for words as we are at times. He simply said what He had no doubt said many times before...He said, **"Greetings."** The Greek word is *chairete*. Loosely translated *chairete* means something like *"hello"* or *"good morning."* Now get this...Jesus had just conquered Satan, sin and death...that's all. He had completed the work God had planned for Him. Now with perfect calm, He greeted these devoted women with warm, informal tenderness. He didn't turn from them or rebuke them for their unbelief...instead He greeted them with open arms.

v.9 says, **They came to him, clasped His feet and worshiped Him**. These women were the first of many to gain certainty that Jesus was their Messiah, the Son of God and Lord from Heaven. They instinctively held on to Jesus as if to say, *"we'll never let go of you again."* But they did something more. They **worshipped Him**. They bowed before Him. They did what every human being who has ever lived will do when Jesus returns in power and glory. **Phil. 2:10, 11** says, **that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father**. And here's what I recommend. I recommend that you not wait for that day...I recommend that you bow to Him today. So the truth about the resurrection was encountered it began to be proclaimed. But even before another person heard the Good News, the Adversary was at work.

3. The Truth Distorted – vs. 11-14 - While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, 'You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.'

Notice that **some of the guards** went into the city and reported **everything that happened** to the chief priests. The other Gospels say the priests assembled the whole Sanhedrin. Now this is odd. This Roman security guard was under Pilate's command. But it might have cost them their lives if they had gone to Pilate and told him what had happened. They had failed miserably. They were derelict in the duty assigned to them. The sealed tomb had been opened and the dead man they were to guard was missing. These boys were in hot water! So the path of least resistance led several of them to Israel's feckless leaders whose authority had been subverted by Rome. They told the priests **everything that happened**...the earthquake / the stone rolled away / the sudden appearance of an angel / the experience of being tazed / and the tomb they found empty with the grave cloths still lying there. If anybody is without excuse for not believing in the resurrection it was the soldiers and Israel's leaders.

On hearing the news that the body of Jesus was gone, the chief priests and elders were frantic. The threat level was raised to “condition red.” Their worst nightmare had come to pass. It appeared that Jesus had done exactly what He said He would do. Remember what these leaders said to Pilate? **27:64 - “So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first.”**

Now my investigative skills are limited. I think the only case I successfully solved was the case where Peg and I felt constrained to determine which of my two sons did some carving in their wooden desktop. The letters carved in the wood spelled “MIT.” Now MIT is a fine institution, but we ruled that out since our kids were in elementary school. So my capable assistant and I discerned that MIT could also be “TIM” spelled backwards. Now Tim is our firstborn son. And guess what?...Though he initially denied the deed, Tim was the only one with a mild case of childhood dyslexia who spelled his name backwards. Case closed. I’m reminded of the guilty guy who stood up in the courtroom and said, *“I’ve never seen that man before and besides...what he claims I told him isn’t what I said.”*

But we don’t have to be Sherlock Holmes to see flaws in the plan and story line devised by Israel’s leaders. Handing the soldiers a fistful of money, they said, this is what you’re to say to anybody who asks what happened. Say this...**‘His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.’** The first flaw is the fact that this security detail under Pilate’s command knew better than to fall asleep. Believe it. This security guard may have consisted of as many as a dozen soldiers. It’s doubtful that any of them had a death wish. The military divided the night into 4 shifts to prevent a lapse like the one they were told to confess. So the story the leaders invented forced these soldiers to take the rap and incriminate themselves as unfaithful incompetents. But how could soldiers sleep through a violent earthquake / the sound of that heavy stone being rolled aside / and the commotion caused by bandits hauling off a dead body? And if it did happen that they all fell asleep...how could they possibly know it was the disciples who came and stole Jesus away? I was born at night, but not last night! This story would be laughed out of any court if people weren’t so desperate to deny Christ’s resurrection! But the fact is...those originally confronted by compelling evidence were determined to deny it...and the situation remains the same today. Here’s a quick rundown of theories offered to explain away the literal bodily resurrection of Jesus:

- **The swoon theory** – proposes that Jesus survived crucifixion and didn’t actually die but went into a deep coma. In the cool atmosphere of the tomb He revived and somehow escaped the tomb by unwrapping himself and rolling the massive stone away. The problems with this theory seem too obvious to mention.
- **The no-burial theory** – contends that Jesus was never placed in the tomb and therefore, wouldn’t have been there Sunday morning. But doesn’t it seem reasonable to wonder why a detachment of soldiers was commissioned to guard an empty tomb?
- **The hallucination theory** – suggests that everybody who claimed to have seen Jesus simply experienced a hallucination. For this to be true, it would mean the hallucination kept occurring and on one occasion more than 500 people had the same hallucination at the same time.
- **The telepathy theory** – maintains that there was no actual resurrection but that God sent divine telepathic messages to the disciples which caused them to believe Jesus was alive. This could also be called “the tinfoil hat theory.”
- **The seance theory** – suggests that a powerful spiritist or medium conjured up the image of Jesus by means of occult power. This theory might cause us to wonder how the women held on to the feet of Jesus if he was just an apparition. Then too, how did Thomas put his hand into His Savior’s wounded side and how did a spirit eat breakfast with His disciples.
- **The mistaken identity theory** – is based on the idea that someone successfully impersonated Jesus and duped His closest friends into thinking he was their Lord come back to life.

If this is the case, His “double” would need to have all the marks of scourging and crucifixion as well as the appearance, voice and mannerisms of Jesus.

- Finally, **the theft theory** contends that someone managed to steal the body and hide it. This, by the way, is the only theory that attempts to explain the empty tomb and missing body. Since it was felt the disciples were the only ones who might have a motive for stealing the body, they became the ones accused of the crime. But what was that motive? Really?

Now is it just me, or do these theories lack something...like credibility or believability? Are they the result of scholarly investigation or do they seem more like unbelievers grasping at straws? Along with the large sum of money paid to tell this lie, the guards were promised immunity from the wrath of Pilate. A hopeless situation turned out to be quite profitable for these soldiers. Except for this... these men knew the truth. They saw the angel, felt the earthquake and knew Jesus had been raised from the dead. Because they feared the wrath of Pilate and liked the idea of financial gain, they consented to become the first messengers of the anti-gospel...the lie. And as Jesus said so plainly...**What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? – Mt. 16:26**

4. The Lie Circulated – v. 15 - So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.

Satan is called the deceiver who **leads the whole world astray**. This consummate liar is the CEO of the world’s largest and most effective propaganda machine. Do you doubt that? Show me a public school textbook that supports anything but evolutionary theory. Name a popular sitcom that reflects the biblical view of morality. Tell me about a NatGeo Wild production that supports a young earth and the Genesis account of a 6 literal day special creation? And while you’re at it, explain to me why Christians and Jews and their Bible are so hated and singled out for extermination.

Matthew wrote his gospel in AD 63 about 30 yrs. after the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. In **v.15** He says 30 yrs. later this Anti-gospel was still alive and **widely circulated among the Jews**. But listen...the lie fabricated to deceive and dissuade people from believing in Christ actually has the opposite effect. It reinforces the truth. I mean, think about it...the story they circulated admits the tomb was empty and Jesus was gone. If their story was true, they surely could have found the stolen body and put it on display for everybody to see. That would have put an end to the claims Jesus made. But the fact is...nothing in the historical record suggests they even tried to find His body.

And the idea that His disciples stole the body reveals their complete ignorance of the disciple’s frame of mind when all this happened. The disciples didn’t believe Jesus would be raised from the dead and they had no motive for stealing His body. What arrangement could have been better than to have the Savior they loved honored by being buried in a rich man’s tomb? So let me finish...

Simon Greenleaf was a famous 19th century professor of law at Harvard. Here’s what he wrote in defense of belief in a literal bodily resurrection of Jesus. *“All that Christianity asks of men...is, that they would be consistent with themselves; that they would treat its evidences as they treat the evidence of other things; and that they would try and judge its actors and witnesses, as they deal with their fellow men, when testifying to human affairs and actions, in human tribunals...The result...will be an undoubting conviction of their integrity, ability and truth.”*

As it stands, scholars have called the resurrection of Jesus the best attested fact of history. Yet many who believe the Jesus of history was crucified, choose to ignore or flatly deny His resurrection. But here’s what is completely mind-blowing. To this very day, the unbelieving world seems desperate to escape or deny the one message of hope that can save us. People dodge, distort and dismiss the most wonderful fact of history.

The Bible has an explanation for this. **II Cor. 4:4 - The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.**

While some refuse to make an issue of whether Jesus came to life or not, the Bible says salvation demands faith in the resurrection. **Rom. 10:9 - ...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.** Only a Savior who has power over Satan, sin and death has the life giving power needed to save us. So the record stands and the Church exists because the record is true. Pretending to not see when the evidence is so abundant is the worst form of blindness and God condemns it. The question is, have you trusted Christ? If you have...what difference has His glorious resurrection made in your life?