

Easter Sunday

After Darkness

Matthew 27:45-28:9

Mark Vroegop

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. 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. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 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." So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him (Matt. 28:1-9, ESV).

"A great shadow has departed."

In J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Return of the King*, these are the words that Gandalf proclaims to a confused hobbit named Sam. The conversation takes place after the great battle for the ring of power. Samwise Gamgee is injured, and he hears the voice of Gandalf. He thought Gandalf had fallen into an abyss and died.¹ A beautiful conversation ensues:

"Well, Master Samwise, how do you feel?"

Sam lay back, and stared with open mouth, and for a moment, between bewilderment and great joy, he could not answer. At last he gasped: "Gandalf! I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. Is everything sad going to come untrue? What's happened to the world?"

"A great shadow has departed," said Gandalf. And then the wizard laughed, and the sound was like music, or like water in a parched land; and as Sam listened the thought came to him that he had not heard laughter, the pure sound of merriment, for days without count. It fell upon his ears like the echo of all the joys he had ever known. But he himself burst into tears. Then as a sweet

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https://www.greenfieldreporter.com/2019/09/14/is_everything_sad_going_to_come_untrue/#:~:text=But%20the n%20I%20thought%20I,has%20departed%2C%E2%80%9D%20said%20Gandalf.

rain will pass down a wind of spring and the sun will shine out the clearer, his tears ceased, and his laughter welled up, and laughing he sprang from bed.

“How do I feel?” he cried. “Well, I don’t know how to say it. I feel, I feel” —he waved his arms in the air — “I feel like spring after winter, and sun on the leaves; and like trumpets and harps and all the songs I have ever heard!”²

When the shadow departs, it’s like spring after winter, the sun on the leaves, and like all the songs I’ve ever heard. Wow! That’s a great statement. And this kind of theme—victory after suffering, glory after trial, light after darkness, and goodness after evil is a central theme in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Tolkien even created a word for it: eucatastrophe. It’s when something bad is eclipsed with the unexpected appearance of goodness. And you can imagine that this idea has roots connected to what this Sunday is all about. Tolkien parallels the central message of the Bible: the grave is empty, Jesus is alive. **There’s hope after darkness because Jesus is alive.**

On this Easter Sunday, I’d like to walk together through the narrative that Matthew provides so that we can consider the depth of darkness and the hope of dawn. And then I’d like to draw out some implications of this account of Jesus’s resurrection.

The Depth of Darkness

In order to appreciate the significance of Resurrection Sunday, we need to appreciate the depth of darkness that preceded it. If you’ve ever experienced a surprising moment of hope and deliverance, you probably not only talk about the wonderful outcome but also the hardship.

If you are not a Christian, it might be helpful for you to know that the Bible regularly sets the hope of salvation against the backdrop of the darkness of our need. Redemption requires a need. Salvation is glorious because the death and resurrection of Jesus provides the way for deliverance from sin. The message of the Bible rests on two important truths: (1) we are sinners and (2) Jesus provides atonement through his death.

The scene turns dark. Verse 45 tells us that from the sixth hour to the ninth hour, there was darkness over all the land. There would have been darkness from noon to 3 p.m., which was the brightest part of the day. What is the point here? Some have suggested that it was dark because God was attempting to hide, or cover, the suffering of his Son. However, I think that the exact opposite is true. God was making a public statement about divine judgment.

Darkness equals the foreboding judgment of God, and the approaching death of Jesus is the greatest judgment of God upon sin. The sinless Son of God is about to absorb the fullness of God’s wrath for sin. So, it is no wonder that darkness comes.

² Ibid.

After enduring three hours of this darkness, and at the ninth hour (3 p.m.), Jesus cries out in agony. He voices his lament by crying out in Hebrew, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” Because the word for God (Eli) sounds similar to the word for Elijah, some people think that he is actually crying out for the great prophet (v. 47).

What does it mean that Jesus is “forsaken” by the Father? The words “my God, my God...” come from Psalm 22:1—a lament psalm. Jesus, in the darkest hour of his earthly life, quotes a passage that resonates with his experience. The word “forsaken” can also be translated as abandon, and it means to leave behind or to desert.³ In this moment, Jesus feels the departing presence of the Father. We have to acknowledge a level of mystery here in this statement. Matthew does not write this to make us understand what it felt like but to clearly identify the reality of this separation.

Jesus’s faith is not wavering here. Rather, he is acknowledging the pain of separation from the Father. He is experiencing the real consequences or the effects of sin. Separation is the immediate consequence of sin. Adam and Eve experienced this after they sinned, and they became aware of their nakedness, which created shame (Gen. 3:7).

Jesus experiences the consequences of sin; he absorbs the disfavor or the wrath of God. He embraces the consequences of sin, and that is why Paul says that “he became sin.” He experienced the full consequences of sin which was the terrifying and agonizing separation from the Father.

At the end of the season of darkness, verse 50 says, “Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. Luke 23:46 records that Jesus said, “Father into your hands I commit my spirit!” It is almost unthinkable that the sinless, perfectly righteous Son would not only suffer, but that he would experience the single, most defining, and utterly reprehensible effect of a sin-cursed world: death. After all death is the clearest, horrific emblem of what is wrong with the world, and the Son of God experiences it personally. It is so wrong.

But equally remarkable is the fact that Jesus experienced it willingly. Matthew, in particular, makes it a point to say that Jesus “yielded up his spirit.” And the fact that Matthew records that Jesus did so with a loud voice indicates that he wants us to see Jesus courageously and intentionally charging into death. John Chrysostom (349-407), the Archbishop of Constantinople, said “for this cause He cried with the voice that it might be shown that the act was done by power.”⁴ His death is not a moment of defeat; it is the willing giving of a gift that will bring about a great victory

First, verse 51 tells us that there was an earthquake, rocks were split, and the curtain of the temple “was torn in two, from top to bottom.” The tearing of the veil is particularly important since it divided the room containing the Ark of the Covenant, called the Holy of Holies, from the rest of the temple area. This room and Ark were incredibly significant because they represented the presence of God to the people of Israel.

³ Leon Morris, The Gospel According to Matthew, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 720

⁴ Quoted by Morris, p. 723

At the death of Jesus, tombs were opened; and at the resurrection of Jesus, some saints were resurrected with him. And Matthew puts this here to show the reader the immense change that is taking place in God's activity. The temple curtain has been torn in two, and the dead are coming to life. Jesus's death was a defining moment in God's plan.

Then, there is a confession by the centurion and others who beheld Jesus's death and the subsequent events (v. 54), "Truly this was the Son of God!" These epic events were convincing to those who were formerly his abusers and mockers.

Watching from a distance (v. 55) were a number of women who were a part of Jesus's ministry. They had followed Jesus from Galilee, and they were present at his crucifixion. Three women are listed: Mary Magdalene—a woman whom Jesus had delivered from demon possession (Luke 8:2); Mary, the mother of James and Joseph—either the mother of Jesus or the wife of Clopas (John 19:25); and the mother of James and John—the same mother who had asked about whether her sons could sit at the right and left hand of Jesus (Matt. 20:20-21). These women are, no doubt, grieving the death of Jesus, and they will become featured characters in the resurrection. Matthew inserts them to demonstrate both their faithfulness (where are the other disciples?) and as a context of what is to come.

Finally, we come to the burial of Jesus by Joseph of Arimathea. Matthew wants you to see that Jesus is actually buried and the tomb was secured. This is important because many crucified victims were just left on the cross or thrown into a trash heap.⁵ But Jesus was buried, and a great stone was rolled over the entrance of the tomb. The political leaders even make plans to prevent any claim of his resurrection by "making it as secure as you can." It turned out to be a ridiculous statement.

All of this detail is here to bring to completion the death of Jesus and to set the stage for what will come three days later. In other words, his **death was not the end**. Something is coming after darkness.

The Hope of Dawn

Now, after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week (28:1).

According to 28:1, two women went to the tomb in the early morning on the day after the Sabbath, Sunday (this is why churches now worship on Sunday, the first day of the week). The women were Mary Magdalene, a woman who followed Jesus after he delivered her from demonic possession, and a woman called "the other Mary."⁶ Mark 16 indicates that they went there to finish the burial process.

While the women were on the way, another great earthquake struck. This was similar to the events surrounding Jesus's death (see Matt. 27:51). Matthew connects this cosmic-oriented event with the coming of the angel of Lord. (It is interesting to note here that Matthew ends his Gospel the same way that he began in Matt. 1:20—with angelic activity.) The angel rolled back the stone, and he did this not

⁵ David Turner, Matthew – Baker Exegetical Commentary, (Baker Publishing: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2008), 674

⁶ The mother of James and Salome – Mark 16:1

for the purpose of letting Jesus out; he was already raised. The rolling of the stone was to let the women and others see what had happened.

The angel's appearance is a shocking moment. Verse 3 describes him in other-worldly form: "his appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow" (28:3). And the effect on the guards was dramatic. "For fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men" (28:4). They were probably so overcome with fear that they passed out. Remember the security of the tomb before? Well now the silly wax seal of Rome is broken, and the soldiers are passed out on the ground.

The angel then speaks directly to the women, and what an important, life-altering statement he makes:

"Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 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" (Matt. 28:5-7).

The angel announces in two verses the heart of what is often called the gospel: that Jesus was crucified but he conquered death and is now alive! He was raised from the dead "as he said." In other words, he was not an imposter or a fraud. He really was the Son of God. He really was able to forgive sins. He really was able to draw men to himself. And not only **was** he all of these things; he **is** all of these things. He **is** the Son of God; he is able to forgive sins; he is able to draw men to himself.

Next, verse 8 says that "they departed quickly from the tomb with *fear and great joy...*" That is why I say that their belief was frightening joy—the kind of emotion when you know that something is so important that the news of it will change everything. So, they run to find the disciples to tell them what has taken place.

However, on the way, something else happened. Jesus showed up! And when they saw him, the response was immediate. They fell down, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Can you imagine? You've followed this man for three years. You traveled with him to Jerusalem for the Passover. You watched in horror as he was taken into Pilate's custody, beaten, and crucified. You were there when he breathed his last. And since that event on Golgotha, your whole world has come apart—everything was lost and pointless. The empty tomb is one amazing thing, but to see him, to touch him, and to hear him say "Greetings!" must have been unbelievable. He was everything to these women. He was dead. Now he's alive. It's no wonder that they fell down in worship.

Our passage closes with Jesus's simple instructions: "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me" (28:10). According to the other Gospel accounts, we know that they went and found the disciples and told them the amazing news. And what amazing news it was! The fact that Jesus was alive changed everything. There was hope after darkness.

Why the Resurrection is Good News

Why is the resurrection of Jesus so important? Why does it change everything? Let me give you four reasons why:

1. The resurrection showed that Jesus's words are trustworthy.

Jesus said that he would be lifted up so that he could draw men to himself (John 3:14). He said that he would rise again after three days (Matt. 12:40). And he also said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). The empty tomb shows us that his words are worthy of our trust. Jesus can be believed.

2. The resurrection proved that Jesus's death had the approval of a holy God.

The underlying message of the Bible is that God is in the process of redeeming a world that has been marred by sin. And the only way to atone for sin is death. Jesus's death was unique in that he gave his life as payment for our sins. Since he was sinless and undeserving of death, his sacrifice can be applied to those who receive him by faith. But this only works if God approves. It only works if his sacrifice is acceptable—he really was sinless—and if his death was sufficient. The resurrection shows that God was pleased. And now grace is available through Christ.

3. The resurrection demonstrates that Jesus's sacrifice on the cross defeated sin.

Sin, the desire to be autonomous, is what is wrong with our world, and it is what caused death to be a part of our world. Death is the God-given consequence of sin; it is the wages of sin (Rom. 6:23). So, when Jesus Christ conquers death, it is a clear sign that sin has been defeated. The resurrection shows us that sin has lost its power and a way of forgiveness is now offered—"...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved" (Rom. 10:9-10).

4. The resurrection promises eternal life for the believer since death was conquered.

The empty tomb is a symbol of hope for those who put their faith in Jesus. To put our faith in Jesus means that we come to the awareness of our sin, that we need forgiveness, that we cannot self-atone, and we confess our sin, asking Christ to be our Lord and Savior. We come to him by faith, place all our eternal hopes in him. Listen to what 1 John 5:11-13 says:

And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ frees those who receive him to be forgiven of their sins now and to know that nothing—not even death—can separate them from the love of God. The effect of this is life-changing. This amazing grace transforms every aspect of a person's life. It makes you really, truly free!

There's hope after darkness because Jesus is alive.

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