

ALIVE!

Matthew 27:62-28:10

Mark Vroegop

62 Next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate 63 and said, "Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.' 64 Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last fraud will be worse than the first." 65 Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can." 66 So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

28 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."

I think that it is safe to say that Resurrection Sunday or Easter, as it is commonly called, is the most important holiday that the Christian Church celebrates. Other holidays – like Christmas – may have more sentimental value, but Easter Sunday has by far the most theological value. In other words, what happened on that Sunday morning distinguishes Christianity from all other religions. It changed everything, and rightly so.

Jesus of Nazareth claimed to be the Son of God who was bringing a message direct from heaven about how to be reconciled to God through the forgiveness of sins. Jesus was even named with this in mind. Matthew 1:21 states it unequivocally – "You shall call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins." So his healings, his teachings, and his confrontations with the religious rulers were all meant to show people that he was the Messiah. But none of that mattered if he, like every other self-proclaimed prophet, could be stopped by simply killing him. Jesus would enter the not-so-sacred halls of failed "Saviors" who promised that they would be victorious – only to be finally defeated.

But a resurrection from the dead would change everything. It would demonstrate that Jesus was, in fact, who he claimed to be: the Son of God. It would mean that he would be

unstoppable – after all what do you do with someone who has conquered death? The resurrection of Jesus Christ proved to be the single and most important moment in the history of Christianity because it proved that Jesus was right; he really was the Son of God; he really did make a once-for-all payment for sins; and reconciliation with a holy God is really possible. That is what Easter is all about.

Today I want to look at two different responses to Jesus in light of his resurrection and then draw some conclusions as to why the resurrection of Jesus is so important to the church and for each of us personally

Fearful, Self-Protective Unbelief

Our text picks up the story of Jesus's life after he has been crucified, removed from the cross, and buried. According to Matthew 27:57-60 a wealthy man named Joseph of Arimathea requested permission from Pilate to take the body of Jesus and to bury him in his own new tomb. After he set the body of Jesus in the tomb, he rolled a large stone over the entrance.

On Saturday – the Sabbath – the religious leaders have an important meeting with Pilate. Verse 62 tells us that this meeting included the chief priests and Pharisees, two religious groups that were not friendly toward one another. Ironically, their chief disagreement was over whether or not the dead were eventually raised to life – the issue of the resurrection. However, politics – even religious politics – makes for strange bedfellows.

The religious leaders come to Pilate because they have a request. They have heard about Jesus's claim that he would rise again on the third day. Verses 63-64 record what they say:

"Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.' 64 Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last fraud will be worse than the first."

Notice three very important and instructive words regarding what is going on in their hearts: imposter, fraud and secure. Each word tells an important story:

Imposter - the word means someone who causes others to wander away or to mislead people; it means to be a deceiver or a corrupter. Wander from what? From them and their religious beliefs! They are concerned that even in death Jesus will still be a problem.

Fraud - To call his life and teaching a fraud is to say that it is completely wrong and leads people the wrong direction. The word is closely connected to the word for imposter. Jesus is more than a fake; from their vantage point, he is teaching them things that lead people away.

Secure – they want the personal security of knowing that Jesus will not be even suspected of rising from the dead. They know the implications of that kind of event so they take every precaution that they possibly can. The words “secure” is used three times in just two verses.

65 Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can." 66 So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard (Matt 27:65-66).

Therefore, they took soldiers and posted them outside the tomb to guarantee that no one would attempt to steal the body. They also secured the tomb by sealing it with some kind of official Roman marker that made it a crime against Rome to violate this grave.

Notice that the religious rulers have now used everything in their power to stop Jesus. They had harassed him while he was alive, threatened him, tried to discredit him, and when that didn't work, they killed him. And even after he was crucified, they are still working to stop him. Notice that their unbelief has caused them to be afraid and self-protective.

Fearful, self-protective unbelief is all too common when it comes to Jesus. It is what many people still do. Romans 1:18 tells us that human beings naturally suppress the truth about who God is in unrighteousness. Do you know what that means? It means that we look around in creation, and we know that there must be a God that exists; even when we look inside ourselves, we know that this internal sense of right and wrong (like moral gravity) had to come from somewhere; it means that when we feel strong emotions like love or behold something really lovely, and we know that we are worshippers. We know all of this.

However, we suppress **that** truth by pretending as if God doesn't exist, by pretending as if he hasn't determined what is right and wrong, pretending as if we are not really religious by doing things that we know are wrong and destructive. And when the volume of guilt gets high, we drown it out by more and more wrong choices, bad relationships, and shallow thrills, trying to not listen to the nagging voice in our head that says, “maybe the Bible is right.”

We like, the religious rulers in Jesus's day, are afraid and self-protective. We'd rather call him a phony or his entire religious system a bunch of hypocrites, but underneath the real issue is that we are scared. We are afraid that if the Bible is true, if God really is holy, if we really are sinners in need of forgiveness, and if the only way to receive that forgiveness is by admitting that we're sinners and need to trust in Jesus, then everything would change. Jesus would take over; we'd become different – radically different people. And the real tragedy is the fact that we don't see this change – becoming new person – as something incredibly hopeful. Instead we view it as threatening and invasive.

It is eternally tragic that people choose to view Jesus through this lens. In fact, it caused the most religious people in Israel to blindly kill their own Messiah. That is what fearful, self-protection does: it blinds us to the hope that is right in front of us– a message we refuse to

hear even though we know that it has to be true. Our fearful, self-protection leads us to unbelief.

Frightening, Joyful Belief

The second response to the resurrection of Jesus is radically different. Instead of fearful, self-protective unbelief we find frightening, joyful belief. What's the difference? First, let's review the details of what happened.

According to 28:1, two women went to the tomb in the early morning on the day after the Sabbath – Sunday (this 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."¹ Mark 16 indicates that they went there to finish the burial process.

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

The angel's appearance is a shocking moment. Verse three 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 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. 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" (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

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

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.

It is no wonder that 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 worshipped 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 is alive changed everything.

The Good News of the Resurrection

Some of us might wonder why? Why is the resurrection of Jesus so important? Why does it change everything? Let me give you a number of 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. 10 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 your Lord and Savior. You come to him by faith, place all your eternal hopes in him. Listen to what 1 John 5:11-13 says:

11 And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12 Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. 13 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!

Over the years many people have tried to communicate the stories of the Bible, not only by talking about it, but by showing it through film. Many of us probably saw Mel Gibson's 2004 film *The Passion*. In 1927, Cecil B. DeMille produced a silent film called "The King of Kings" which, according the Wall Street Journal, was seen by over 800 million people by 1959. Since it was a silent film, it was used by missionaries all over world as the Jesus film has been used by Campus Crusade since 1981.

In DeMille's autobiography he tells a story about the impact of the film. But there is more to this story if you listen carefully. Embedded in this account is indomitable power of knowing that through Christ you've conquered death. It transforms you and those around you:

The most powerful story related by DeMille about the influence of "The King of Kings" involved a Polish man named William E. Wallner. Living in Danzig (today Gdansk), Wallner saw "The King of Kings" in 1928. Greatly moved, he decided to devote his life to Christian ministry.

By 1939, Wallner was leading a Lutheran parish in Prague. Shortly after Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia, a doctor in Wallner's parish was sent to a Nazi concentration camp. Wallner shared with DeMille how the doctor, a Jewish convert to Christianity, encouraged his fellow prisoners "to die bravely, with faith in their hearts." As a result, the doctor became a target of Gestapo officers.

Although struck with an iron rod until one of his arms had to be amputated, the doctor would not be quieted. Finally, as DeMille's autobiography recounts, "one Gestapo officer beat the doctor's head against a stone wall until blood was streaming down his face." Holding a mirror before the doctor, the Gestapo officer sneered: "Take a look at yourself. Now you look like your Jewish Christ."

Lifting his remaining hand up, the doctor exclaimed, "Lord [Jesus], never in my life have I received such honor—to resemble You." Those would be his last words on Earth.

Distraught by the doctor's proclamation, the Gestapo officer sought out Wallner that night. "Could Pastor Wallner help him, free him from the terrible burden of his guilt?" After praying with him, Wallner advised, "Perhaps God let you kill that good man to bring you to the foot of the Cross, where you can help others." The Gestapo officer returned to the concentration camp. And through the aid of Wallner and the Czech underground, he worked to free many Jews over the years that followed.

On July 30, 1957, Wallner met with DeMille and spoke about the impact "The King of Kings" had on his life and all who came in contact with him. Wallner ended his account to DeMille by declaring: "If it were not for 'The King of Kings,' I would not be a Lutheran pastor, and 350 Jewish children would have died in the ditches."²

But it wasn't just a film that produced this amazing moment. It was the real King of Kings – Jesus of Nazareth – who frees people from the bondage of their sin so that they can live radically free lives.

If it were not for the risen King of Kings, there would be no forgiveness, no hope, no eternal life. But – Hallelujah! He is risen! He is risen indeed. And that changed everything.

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² http://online.wsj.com/article_email/SB10001424052748703916004576270452682016860-IMyQjAxMTAxMDIwMTEyNDEyWj.html