

THE EMPTY TOMB, THE LIE AND THE CHARGE**MATTHEW 28:1-20**

While driving to church on Easter Sunday. Peggy Key told her children the Easter story. "This is the day we celebrate Jesus coming back to life," she explained. Right away, her 3-year-old son, Kevin, piped up from the back seat, "Will He be in church today?" Good question, Kevin.... The answer might not be as obvious as we hope or think. Yes, by faith we know that the risen Lord Jesus is here today. But He desires to be here in the fullest sense possible and that only happens when our hearts are full of worship and surrender before Him.

Today we conclude a series of message we've called "Pictures of the Passion." That word "passion" can refer to one amazing, remarkable week in the life of Jesus when He suffered, died on the cross and rose again. It's arguably the most important week in all of human history. For followers of Jesus, it is the most significant period of time for us personally. In the last three chapters of his Gospel account, Matthew – one of Jesus' twelve disciples – records the major events of this one week time period. So, over these last several weeks, we've looked at three pictures, images or events in Matthew 26, 27 and 28 so that we could be drawn in again to this incredible week and reflect on its impact on the world and upon each of us. The first picture in this final message is of...

THE EMPTY TOMB (v. 1-10)

Here are three great truths from this passage. First, the resurrection of Jesus is a fact worth believing. It is absolutely central to the Christian faith. If you took away the stories of Jesus' birth, you lose two chapters in both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. But if you took away the resurrection of Jesus, you lose the entire New Testament. Perhaps the apostle Paul put it best when he said, "And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins. In that case, all who have died believing in Christ are lost! And if our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world." (1 Cor. 15:17-19 NLT)

Of course, there are many skeptics when it comes to the claim that Jesus bodily, physically and literally rose again from the dead. One of the most common is to suggest that people back in the first century were not scientifically enlightened as we are today; therefore, they were gullible, superstitious and eager to believe in magical, supernatural things like a resurrection. But scholars who study that day and time tell us that every day people 2,000 years ago were actually less inclined to believe in resurrection than people today. They believed that death was all powerful. Nobody believed in a literal, bodily, physical resurrection. Greco-Roman culture, in fact, thought that anything of the spirit was good and anything material was evil. Therefore, salvation was all about being liberated from your physical body. Resurrection of your physical body – what happened to Jesus – was not only thought to be impossible, it was completely undesirable.

Now Jewish people believed in resurrection, but only at the end of time and history. Furthermore, no Jew believed that the Messiah would die on a cross; therefore, no Jew believed that the Messiah would rise from the dead. The Christian belief in resurrection was absolutely new and unprecedented in history springing up just after the death of Jesus. There was no gradual evolution of thinking over decades or centuries of time that resulted in a belief in resurrection. Those first Christians proclaimed something they never would have come up with on their own and which they knew would be resisted by both Jews and Gentiles.

Second, the resurrection of Jesus provides a message worth sharing. The women came to the tomb on that first Easter, to be sure, but after their encounter with the angel and then the risen Jesus Himself, they were sent out from the tomb. They came to the tomb in sadness and grief; they went out from the tomb with a joyous message to share. Likewise, we aren't people who trudge up to Jesus' tomb once a year on Easter Sunday, read the inscription on the tomb stone and shed a few, sad tears. We don't come to the tomb of Jesus on Easter Day at all. Jesus isn't in any tomb! Instead we come from the tomb, so to speak, with an announcement. Jesus is alive! He's alive in Heaven. He's alive in the world. Easter is a message to be both lived out and proclaimed.

Thirdly, the resurrection of Jesus gives you a hope worth rejoicing in. The passage says, "The women ran quickly from the tomb. They were very frightened but also filled with great joy, and they rushed to give the disciples the angel's message." (Mt. 28:8 NLT) Once you've met the risen Jesus, joy is the inevitable result. The ultimate power of sin and death has been defeated. Hope for this life and eternity is restored. If the resurrection is true it gives you every reason to not only tell others about Jesus, but also to work for justice, feed the hungry and clothe the naked. If there is no living Savior who is going to set everything right one day, then why care about the needs of others. What difference will it make in the end? I like how New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright puts it, "The message of the resurrection is that this world matters!... If Jesus Christ is truly risen from the dead, Christianity becomes good news for the whole world – news which warms our hearts precisely because it isn't just about warming hearts." The second picture of the passion today is that of...

THE LIE (v. 11-15)

Here we learn that the Roman soldiers who had been charged with guarding the tomb of Jesus reported Jesus' missing body right away to the Jewish leaders. The leaders' response underlines a fact that is still true today. Some people simply cannot afford for the resurrection to be true! If Jesus actually rose from the dead, it would change everything about their lives. Their entire view of the world, of their own lives and how to live life would have had to change dramatically. So, the Jewish leaders concocted a lie and bribed the Roman soldiers to circulate that Jesus' disciples had stolen Jesus' body while they had accidentally fallen asleep. It was an effective lie for awhile – still being widely

circulated in and believed in Jewish communities some forty years after the resurrection which was about the time Matthew wrote his Gospel.

When I read these verses, two truths come to my mind. First, God's truth always prevails in the end. Of course, many people don't believe in the resurrection of Jesus, but hardly anyone believes today that His disciples stole Jesus' body. It doesn't hold up! But this raises a larger issue. Most people think that when it comes to Jesus' resurrection, the burden of proof is on believers to provide sufficient evidence that it happened. That's not completely true. There's also a burden of proof on non-believers. It's not enough to simply believe Jesus did not rise from the dead. You must also then come up with an explanation for the fact that Jesus' dead body was never produced, that over 500 people gave eyewitness accounts of seeing the risen Jesus, and that almost all of the earliest leaders of the Christian faith died as martyrs for something they knew wasn't true if Jesus didn't rise from the dead. If you dismiss the resurrection of Jesus, you have to provide a plausible account for how all these things happened. "It just can't be true, Pastor; therefore, it isn't." That's just not good enough!

It's important that both the evidence of the empty tomb as well as the evidence of eyewitnesses to the risen Jesus is presented. If you only talk about the tomb being empty, but don't bring in the actual sightings of Jesus, no one would have concluded that a resurrection had occurred. Instead, everyone would have just assumed Jesus' body was indeed stolen. But if someone only talked about eyewitnesses, but Jesus' tomb was not empty – in other words, His dead body was still in there – then, of course, the claim to a resurrection would be absurd. People had visions and hallucinations of departed loved ones back then and there just like today, but no one called it a resurrection. Neither piece of evidence by itself is sufficient, but when you put them together, they provide a complete and coherent explanation for the rise of the early Christian faith.

A brilliant British philosopher by the name of A. N. Wilson had become an atheist as well as a harsh, cynical critic of Christianity and any faith in God whatsoever. But on the Saturday before Easter in 2009, he wrote a shocking piece for London's prestigious newspaper, *The Daily Mail*, in which he shared his experience of participating in a Palm Sunday service. "When I took part in the procession last Sunday and heard the Gospel being chanted, I assented to it with complete simplicity. My own return to faith has surprised no one more than myself. Why did I return to it? ... My belief has come about in large measure because of the lives and examples of people I have known—not the famous, not saints, but friends and relations who have lived, and faced death, in the light of the Resurrection story, or in the quiet acceptance that they have a future after they die.... The Resurrection, which proclaims that matter and spirit are mysteriously conjoined, is the ultimate key to who we are."

Once you regard all the evidence and explain all the phenomena, the best explanation is that it happened. The best historical explanation of the rise of the

Christian faith and its spread over 2,000 years is that Jesus, having been thoroughly dead and buried, was actually raised to life on the third day in a physical body that had been renewed and transformed. The fact of the resurrection is the only possible explanation for the beliefs that grew up so quickly among Jesus' followers. If you just don't want to believe in the resurrection, OK. But don't argue against it on the basis of science, reason or logic. All you've really done is just to make a personal choice not to believe something that is believable and is the best explanation of what happened. God's truth always prevails in the end. The truth about Jesus and His resurrection continues to prevail over any and all lies that try to explain it away.

I see a second great truth here. God's purposes and plans always prevail in the end. It's almost comical to observe all the attempts by these Jewish leaders to squelch this resurrection stuff about Jesus. We shouldn't be surprised by their plan to use bribery to silence the truth about Jesus' empty tomb. They were the ones who wanted the tomb of Jesus secured, sealed and guarded by Roman soldiers. They were also the ones who used treachery to arrest Jesus, illegality to try Jesus and slander to charge Him before Pilate, the Roman governor. No puny human schemes and strategies were going to frustrate God. Whether it's the details of your everyday life or the greatest events in human history like the resurrection of Jesus, what the Bible says is true, "You can make many plans, but the Lord's purpose will prevail." (Prov. 19:21 NLT)

John Chancellor was a news anchor for NBC who retired after 43 years of broadcasting. His life never looked rosier the day he retired, but shortly thereafter his doctor told him he had stomach cancer. John Chancellor became bitter about his fate and the end of his dreams for retirement. Shortly before he died, he was reported to have said, "If you want to make God laugh, tell Him your plans." Now, let's take a moment to consider a third and final picture today...

THE CHARGE (v. 16-20)

Let me suggest a one sentence summary of these verses: "The greatest power has been focused on the accomplishment of the greatest task accompanied by the greatest promise." Now, let's break down that sentence into three parts. The first part says, "The greatest power has been focused...." Jesus says right here, "...I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth." (Mt. 28:19 NLT) Matthew, of the four Gospel writers, was interested in stressing Jesus' kingship. He showed that Jesus was a direct descendant of King David by giving us a genealogy in Matthew 1. He's the only one who told us about the wise men who came seeking one who has been born king of the Jews. He reminded us that Jesus was officially crucified for claiming to be the king of the Jews. But after the resurrection and because of the resurrection, Jesus reveals Himself as the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Nothing was now outside the power of the One who had conquered death.

But all this power and authority had a laser-like focus ““The greatest power has been focused on the accomplishment of the greatest task...” Your mission as an individual follower of Jesus and the mission of this local church is spelled out right here comprehensively, deliberately and intentionally. You’ll notice that four verbs shape the structure of what Jesus says: “go, make disciples, baptizing and teaching.” Only one verb is in the imperative mood or, in other words, is a command: make disciples. A disciple is not just someone who believes in Jesus, His death or His resurrection, but someone who is being continually transformed by Jesus in every area of his or her life.

How do you make disciples? Well, first, you go. You begin to pray for people who don’t follow Jesus, you build authentic relationships with them and you look for opportunities to share the good news about Jesus with them. Some of the people you share that good news about Jesus with will start following Jesus. They will publicly identify with Jesus. That’s the place of baptism – something that we had the joy of witnessing this morning. Those who are baptized need to be taught to obey all of Jesus’ commands. That’s the place of teaching. It ends up being a circular process – go, baptize, teach... go, baptize, teach... go, baptize, teach - with the result being that disciples are made. If you go, you will eventually have someone to baptize. If you never go, you will never baptize. If you baptize, you will have someone to teach. If you have no one to baptize, there will be no one to teach. If you teach someone to follow all of Jesus’ commands, he or she eventually go out. But if you don’t teach, the going will stop.

Easter is more than singing songs about a risen Savior. Easter is more than seeing people baptized. Easter is more than listening to a choir sing or hearing a pastor preach. Easter is more than enjoying a day off with your family. Easter is a message to be proclaimed and lived out every day in front of others. Twice in these verses we hear it. ““And now, go quickly and tell.... Don’t be afraid! Go tell....” (Mt. 28:7,10 NLT) Go, tell! That is a word each of us needs to hear today. If you don’t go to the members of your own family and tell them about Jesus, who will? If you don’t go to your neighbors and tell them about Jesus, who will? If you don’t go to the people you work with or go to school with and tell them about Jesus, who will? If we, as a church, don’t go to the lost people of Northland and tell them about Jesus, who will?

That brings us to the third part of our summary sentence: “The greatest power has been focused on the accomplishment of the greatest task accompanied by the greatest promise.” It was staggering for those first followers of Jesus to be challenged and sent out to conquer the known world for Jesus. But they found ultimate comfort in Jesus’ promise. It was and is the promise of His actual presence when you take up this greatest of all tasks. ““And be sure of this:””, said the risen Lord Jesus: ““I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”” (Mt. 28:20 NLT) We like to quote that verse in a general sort of way and I’m quite certain that Jesus is present with us in a general sort of way. But if I understand the context here correctly, Jesus promises His presence in a very special, unique

way to those who are actively engaged in accomplishing the greatest task – that of intentionally and lovingly pointing people to Jesus with our lips and with our lives on Easter Day and on every other day.

Later in his life, former Secretary of State James Baker became a truly committed follower of Jesus Christ. Baker had a strong Episcopalian background, but he never really paid much attention to the full significance of Jesus Christ. Then his first wife came down with cancer, and he began to think about death, eternity and God. After her death, he eventually remarried. His second wife, Susan, came to know Jesus personally. She began to pray for her husband. Other friends began to pray for him as well. And then one day Baker understood. All his life he had thought he had to earn the love of God. He said, "I realized I could never earn the love of God. God loved me before I was even formed in my mother's womb. God loved me when Christ died on the cross." James Baker bowed the knee to Jesus and opened his heart to the Savior.

There was an immediate result. As Secretary of State, he was dealing with the Foreign Secretary of the then Soviet Union, Eduard Shevardnadze. Baker liked Shevardnadze. As soon as he became a believer, the first thing that crossed Jim Baker's mind was "I've got to win Shevardnadze to Jesus Christ." Baker has a ranch in Wyoming, and after a diplomatic event in 1989, he invited Shevardnadze to his ranch. At dinner he presented his guest with a pair of Western cowboy boots. Then Shevardnadze presented Baker with a surprising gift: an enameled picture of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. Then Shevardnadze said to Baker, "You see, Mr. Secretary, even we Communists are changing our minds about spiritual things." Later when the two went fishing, Baker began to share his faith. It wasn't long before Eduard Shevardnadze became a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. In diplomatic circles, you're not supposed to meddle in personal religion. But when you became a follower of King Jesus and you're filled with His love, you can't help but share with other people the most important message of all. Jesus is risen! That changes everything!

We've been closing our messages during this series with the picture of the passion: the cross. I chose to use his specific image of the cross with the sun behind it because the sun reminds me of the empty tomb and what we celebrate today: the resurrection of Jesus. If Jesus rose from the dead, my friends, - and He did - it changes everything! You know, it's not enough to just believe Jesus rose from the dead. Have you entrusted yourself to Jesus as your Savior? Is He truly your Lord – your 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year Boss? Are you being continually transformed so that more and more you resemble the character of Jesus? Are you sharing the message with people in your circle of influence? Easter demands all of that and so much more. Jesus is risen! And all God's people said together, "He is risen indeed!"