April 8/9, 2023

Easter 2023

Here and Now Series

Matthew 28:1-10

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Nearly 2000 years ago, thousands of miles from where we sit right now, outside the walls of a relatively unimportant city, at least in the world's eyes, two events took place that, when we see them together, they stand as the most important events in the history of the world. Simply put, had the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ never occurred, the world that would exist would be one that would be absolutely unrecognizable to us. Cultures have risen and fallen, all shaped around Him and these events that occurred on this very weekend nearly 2000 years ago. And so, because of that, Christians all around the globe on this day, on this weekend, gather together to celebrate, gather together to worship, gather together to remember—and so *we* gather to remember. But this morning, I want to challenge us to not merely allow this to be a remembrance of what occurred in the past, but to allow this to be a celebration of an ongoing reality. See, the glorious reality for us is that what occurred there and then, if we come to know and understand and believe it, will drastically change the way we live here and now.

That's what we want to talk about this morning. In order to do that, we're going to look at Matthew's Gospel. So, I'd ask you to open your Bibles to Matthew, Chapter 28. Matthew, of course, was one of Jesus' disciples and was with Him throughout His ministry, and this is his unique perspective on these incredible events that shaped the course of human history. So, Matthew 28, beginning in verse 1:

> **Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first *day* of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave.** (*NASB, Matthew 28:1)

From the get-go here, as we dive into this passage, we need to acknowledge something. See, we stand a long way away, a number of years away of course, from this very moment. But also, we have the benefit of hindsight. We know what occurred. And so if you are like me, every year you might go and buy a calendar in December, or early January if you're a little bit late to the game. And as you open up that calendar, you can turn to April, and you can see the date of Easter. We knew, coming into today, April 9 was going to be Easter in 2023. For those of you who are planners, I can tell you that next year, March 31 is the day, now less than a year to prepare. Okay, if you couldn't get reservations today, maybe you can put them on the books for next year. We plan for this day and, rightly so, it's a celebration. We have family come in, or we maybe buy a new outfit. I see a number of men that normally wouldn't wear pastels, are wearing pink or light blue. Last night I talked to someone and apologized. I said, "I'm sorry if you felt like I called you out." He had pink on, but he said, "It's not pink. It's coral." Okay…it's coral. *(laughter)* So we prepare for this day.

But these two women, Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James, the other Mary, couldn't prepare for this moment, could they? No, as they woke up on Sunday morning, they woke up in a

totally different place from where we sit today. And as they made their way to that tomb, I have no doubt that their minds were filled with sadness and sorrow and confusion. I'm sure they thought to themselves, “How did it end up here? Our time with Jesus—these three years—how is this how the story ends? How did this happen?” And so on that Sunday morning, they awoke and they left wherever they were renting a room in Jerusalem, and they made their way to His tomb, the place where Jesus' body was laid just a few days before. At 5:30am or 6am in the morning, I'm sure it was a surreal walk, like a waking nightmare. Struggle filled their mind. Of course we can't quite understand what that must have been like for them. Can you imagine what Friday afternoon and all-day Saturday, how long all-day Saturday must have felt, and now Sunday morning? I bet they barely slept. We have a hard time understanding that.

But this morning, I think maybe the best we could do is just to think about our own lives for a second. I know a number of stories in this room, and I know there are a number of situations that are incredibly difficult. I am quite confident that every single person in this room has something happening in their life that is difficult, that is a struggle, that is a trial, something causing sadness. And so often it seems like what we do when we come to church, especially on Easter weekend, is we think, “Okay, I need to set all of that aside now because this is a day to be happy. This is a day for joy.” It seems like what we do with our emotions and with our circumstances in life, is the same thing we do with our normal clothes, right? On Easter we put those away and we put on the nice ones—kids wearing khakis for the first time—cause mom and dad said so. But let's not do that this morning.

Let's not set aside the way that we come in, the sadness or the sorrow possibly that we walk in with. Let's allow that situation, those circumstances, to transport us into a little bit of the moment these two women found themselves in, because they were certainly caught up in the midst of great struggle. Jesus' disciples were filled with struggle at this moment. What was their struggle? Well, the person they had placed all of their hope in for the past three years, was brutally murdered. Their hopes were brutally murdered. I have no doubt that as they approached that grave on Sunday morning, their minds were filled with traumatic images of what had occurred on Friday.

This morning we celebrate the resurrection, but in this moment, of course, we want to step into what they were walking through. So, I hope that on Friday, you had an opportunity to reflect on the significance of the cross. Maybe you came to our remembrance, or maybe you just took a moment in the middle of your day, but you thought about the cross—and that's a good thing to do. We can't think too lightly about the cross. It seems that sometime our treatments of the cross become, over time, somewhat sanitized. You know, we wear it as jewelry as some people do. There's nothing wrong with that.

But we have to remember the meaning of the cross. See, the cross, simply put, was the most horrific form of execution imaginable. Scholars agree that of all the ways to put someone to death, that there was no way more heinous, more horrendous, than crucifixion. That's exactly why the Romans chose it and used it so effectively. They knew that it wasn't just death. It was an embarrassing, horrible, horrendous, shaming death. There's nothing like the cross in terms of the amount of shame it would induce. It was shameful to die on a cross, and in a world that lived on honor and shame, there was nothing more shameful than the way that Jesus died. It was intended not just to kill someone, but it was intended to publicly make a display of them, as if to say, “If you go up against

Rome, you won't just be killed, you will be demolished. You will be brought low; you will be lower than the animals!" That's what the cross was.

One scholar described crucifixion this way. Her words were so good, I thought I just need to read them as they are. She says: *Crucifixion, as a means of execution in the Roman Empire, had as its expressed purpose the elimination of victims from consideration as members of the human race. It cannot be said too strongly. That was its function. It was meant to indicate to all who might be toying with subversive ideas, that crucified persons were not in the same species as either the executioners or the spectators. We're, therefore, not only expendable, but also deserving of ritualized extermination." **

Jesus was exterminated, murdered. If you're like me, maybe you start to ask the question, "Why? Why, of all the ways He had to die, even acknowledging that he had to die, why did it have to be so brutal? Why did it have to be such a horrendous death?" The answer to that question doesn't sit very well on modern ears, but the answer is because the cross highlights the reality of sin. See, sin is such a horrendous thing. It is such a gruesome evil that the cross highlights just how horrific it is. One commentator had this to say, "No other mode of execution would have been commensurate with, would have been equal with the extremity of humanity's condition under sin." We sometimes think of sin is kind of an "Oops". "Aww, oops, I made a mistake." No, sin is rebellion…sin is rebellion! And when we start to consider what it is for humanity to rebel against its Creator, we start to comprehend what an affront that is to God. We understand that sin is horrific, and it had to be dealt with, but why did it have to be crucifixion? That's why! Because sin is horrible, and sin had to be dealt with.

Now, the next question you might find yourself asking is, "Yes, but isn't that on us? We're the ones who sin, not Jesus. Why did He have to die? And the answer, of course, is a sobering reality that is glorious in its truth. "Because God loves you." That famous verse that you see at every football game on Sunday, plastered up on some piece of cardboard or on something behind the end zone: John 3:16. "*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him may not perish, but live eternally…have eternal life."* The cross was necessary. It was horrific, but necessary, and love was its motivation.

My children, this past week, asked me, "Why do we call it Good Friday?" That's a good question. See, we know it is good because of what the cross means. We know that the cross means that, in our place, Jesus took our spot. He paid the penalty that we couldn't pay.

But we have to remember, these women didn't know that did they? No, they didn't know that, so, we're getting a little bit ahead of ourselves. As these women approached the grave, in this moment, Good Friday was not good. They were filled with sadness, filled with sorrow, filled with traumatic visions of Friday, and the horrific death of their Lord. And so they approached the place where He was laid on Friday afternoon, and we get to verse 2:

> **And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. And his appearance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. The guards shook for fear of him and became like dead men.** (Vs. 2-4)

I should really, I don't want to startle you, but I should yell, **"Behold**," because when Matthew includes that word, he intends to get our attention, "Look! Pay attention! Don't miss it!" Often in Scripture, that word indicates something that shouldn't be missed. But the author is saying you can't miss this point. Now, of course, as we read the description of what occurred, it's hard to imagine anyone missing an earthquake, a lightning-like angel, white as snow, Matthew says. And then the stone was rolled away, the stone that was in front of the tomb, the stone that was so heavy that multiple strong men had to place it there. And then it was sealed. Now, rolled away and, in what I think is just a bit of humor, the angel is sitting atop the stone. I almost imagine him kind of looking there with a smirk, kind of like, "Hey, look what I just did."

So these two Mary's, these women who had been with Jesus and had their minds blown by Him and what God had done with Him throughout His life, were now sitting at a moment where you have to think that the sorrow and the sadness they entered with, began maybe to recede to the background just a little bit. And in its place is an expectant curiosity. What was about to happen with angels here; what is about to happen? What is going to go down? We don't know a lot about Mary, the mother of James; we know a bit more about Mary Magdalene. I'd love to have the time to tell her story this morning because it's amazing. But that is going to be a story that we tell next week. So I'd invite you to join us then.

We do know these two Mary's were devout disciples of Jesus. They followed Him diligently. They were with Him for the entirety of that moment at the cross. They stayed all the way to the end. Then they went to the grave where He was placed in the tomb, and now here on Sunday morning, they were the first ones out the door, the first ones to come to the grave. And you have to imagine that, in this moment, because of all they had experienced, you can imagine that they might start to think, "We've been with Jesus. We've seen what He does. Maybe it's about to happen again." You have to think that hope began to flicker in their very hearts. And as I said a moment ago, it's hard to imagine anyone missing this moment. But the truth is, that ever since that day, up to this very moment, people have been missing this moment, haven't they? The reality of the empty tomb seems so stark to us. It seems like, "How could you possibly deny the reality of what this means?" But people have been doing it for centuries, refusing to believe the facts, refusing to look at the evidence.

And in fact, here in verse four, we meet the first two people that refuse to face the facts of the empty tomb. We meet these two soldiers, two soldiers stationed to guard the tomb of Jesus. Two soldiers who witnessed the rolled-back stone, but yet refused to behold the reality of the empty tomb. In what again—and I think it's just a touch of tragically humorous language—Matthew describes them as *shaking from fear*. The earth shook, and now these soldiers shook. And then he says, **they became like dead men.** The two men positioned, stationed to guard a dead man, to guard a corpse, became like corpses themselves. And what's so tragic about them is, we know that in the days to come, knowing that the tomb was empty, knowing the stone had been rolled back, experiencing the reality of that moment, we know that they refuse to believe it. And instead, they partnered together with the Roman authorities, and with the Jewish authorities, and they took money to foster a lie. Despite the fact that the tomb was empty, despite the fact that Jesus went on to appear to over 500 disciples, despite those facts, they continued to foster a lie. And in so doing, they missed a moment to have their very lives transformed. They passed up on belief. But what about these women? What about the angel? What would he say? Verse 5:

> **The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying."** (Vs. 5-6)

Just moments ago, minds filled with trauma, bodies filled with sorrow, they approached the grave, all the pain of Friday fresh in their minds. And now, in a moment, with this new news, all of that begins to be transformed into joy. The moment that they thought was the end was not the end. The pain that they thought would never go away, didn't have to be the defining thing in their life. What they thought was insurmountable, was not insurmountable. What they thought was over and complete, their life with Jesus maybe had just begun! The news: the One who was crucified, the One who was viciously murdered, lives! **He has risen!** He faced the full force of death and sin on the cross. He faced the shame of the cross, but none of it could hold Him. He burst forth from the grave! He endured shame, but now He stands risen…victorious…vindicated…new…glorified! Incredible news! And then the angel says, **Come see, see where He was lying.** Examine the evidence.

I love the gentleness of that moment. I also love that the angel says, "**Come."** It reminds me of Jesus. It seems like so often throughout Jesus' ministry, He would offer that very kind of offer. He would say, "Come, Come to Me. Come follow Me. Come near." My favorite phrase of His is in Matthew 11:28, where He says to people just like you and me, ***"Come to Me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest."*** The gentle authority of Jesus, and now in this moment, these two women are told, **"Come, see."** Can you just picture what that would be like for them, gingerly moving forward, drawing near to the angel who is probably rather terrifying, peeking into the tomb where they laid their Lord just two days ago? And then seeing on that stone slab all the emptiness, and the emptiness spoke volumes. Everything is different. Everything has changed. And then in that moment, the angel breaks the silence. Verse 7:

> **"Go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going ahead of you into Galilee, there you will see Him; behold, I have told you." And they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples.** (Vs. 7-8)

The angel said, **"Come, see**," and then quickly said, **"Go, go quickly!"** These women arrived in sorrow, the shadow of their Lord's death. But now, in this moment, everything is transformed. Everything changed as they encountered the glorious reality of the empty tomb. Right in the midst of their sorrow, right in the midst of their sadness, these women's lives were transformed, and with the knowledge of the empty tomb, they were ignited on mission! *"Now go proclaim, go tell the disciples precisely what has happened."*

People like to say things all the time, like, "This changes everything!" Well, *this* did change everything. Isn't it amazing what this says about who God is? Right in the midst of the sorrow and the sadness, He shows up. He comes in right where these women were, and surprises them, shocks them with astounding news! Jesus' resurrection came in the midst of heartache. It seems that's what God loves to do, doesn't it? He loves to step in and surprise us, right when we least expected it. These two women did not have Easter dresses on, right? They weren't ready; it didn't matter. Their eyes were probably puffy from crying for about thirty-six straight hours. It didn't matter. **"Come, see."** "Behold, here is good news right in the moment, right in the rawness of where you

are…Good news!" It seems that our God is less concerned than we are about whether or not everything is prim and proper, and all set up perfectly. He loves to step in right into the messiness, right into the messiness of our very lives. It seems so often we are the kind of people who think, "You know, I need to get everything lined up just right. I need to put stuff in place." Then once everything is in place, then I'll go to God, and I can give Him something that is worthy of Him. But that is not the way God thinks. No, God steps right into the mess. He upends expectations over and over again. Precisely what people would expect—all the propriety, all the properness—He just upends all of that. And in fact, that's precisely what He did—in commissioning these two women. We need to understand that in this day and age, unfortunately, and I'm glad we've come a long way since then, but in this day and age, the witness of women was not considered to be reliable. So, what does it say about God when He says, "I am sending you—these two women—filled with grief, grief transformed into joy, now set on mission. 'Go tell, proclaim!'" These two women became unlikely missionaries, commissioned by God, given the word through His angel, but the scene is not yet complete. Verse 9:

> **And behold, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshipped Him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and take word to My brethren to leave for Galilee, and there they will see Me."** (Vs. 9-10)

I love the gentleness of Jesus in this moment. The text suggests He just gave a normal everyday greeting. "Hello. Hey there." I was thinking about that, and I guess, I thought that makes sense. I suppose, how do you not shock someone to death, when you come up and surprise them with your very presence? And so He did it gently. He greeted them, met them on the way, the two Mary's. But then, of course they did what is the only thing to do when you come face to face with the risen Jesus. They bowed down, and they worshipped Him…they worshipped Him. They glorified Him. They lifted Him up. They magnified Him!

Face to face with Jesus, and then as so often happens, their worship gave birth to mission. They were set on fire because of their encounter. Right in that moment, God stepped into the mess. The empty tomb is an astounding fact of history. I believe it's a fact; it's a reality that every single person that lives has to come to grips with: what do we do with the empty tomb? What do we do with the fact that despite all the efforts by the Roman authorities and by the Jewish authorities to cover it up, to make sure the resurrection of Jesus became what people believe was a myth; despite all of that, the movement of Jesus has marched forward for 2000 years—a revolution of Jesus transforming lives.

What do we do with the empty tomb? We have to remember this morning, we don't just worship a fact. We don't just worship a reality of history. We don't bow down and praise a proposition, even though it is true. No! We praise a Person; we worship a Person, and seeing the reality of the empty tomb means that He is alive, here and now. What happened there and then means that today He is here…here! And now He longs to meet us here and now. We worship One who is alive and reigning here and now.

And so we ask ourselves, "What would it look like to meet Him afresh here and now, on this Easter Sunday, 2023, to worship Him, to be ignited on mission for Him? What do we do with the reality of the empty tomb? It's still empty, which means He still reigns. He still reigns, and Jesus has been changing lives over and over again for 2000 years. And the way He does it, is so patient. He does

it one commitment, one belief at a time. Someone acknowledges Him, believes in Him, and His Holy Spirit enters and begins to transform them into His very likeness. And that is the way of His revolution. That's the way of Jesus. He's been doing it for 2000 years, all based on what happened there and then. And it's our reality here and now. There and then, by the very power of God, Jesus burst forth from the grave, so that here and now we can step into resurrection life with Him. He is the One that lives and reigns. The One who always offers the call to, **"*Come*,"** is still here and even now He says, "***Come, follow Me."*** The One, who throughout His ministry, proclaimed the availability of the goodness of the kingdom of God to anyone who, by belief, would place their faith in Him, His offer still stands. The One who refused, like the culture, to shame the downtrodden—the ill, the sick, the orphan, the widow, the prostitute—the One who refused to shame any of them, the One who turned all that the world thought was horrible and said, "No, even they can be blessed if they come and follow Me. That One still offers the call to, "Come and follow." In His blood, there is forgiveness of sins. In his resurrection, there is newness of life. All He asks is that we come, that we trust in Him, that we believe in Him and, in believing, we might step into newness of life, here and now. Will you pray with me?

Our Father, we praise Your name, that by your gracious love, You sent Your Son into the world to do for us that which we could never do for ourselves. We are astounded by that. Lord Jesus, we worship You today. You are the risen King. You are the risen Lord, and we thank You for Your obedience, even to death. And we praise You that You are now seated at the right hand of the Father, reigning on high, and we submit our lives to You. Lord, help us. Help us this Easter day, to meet You here and now, right where we are, that we might be changed. We pray these things in the name of Jesus, Amen.

_____* *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* by Fleming Rutledge, February 9, 2015, by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI.

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