



**Sermon Notes: Cameron Webber,
Easter Sunday - "Do Not be Afraid"**

31 March 2024

Readings: Matthew 27:62-28:15, Job 19:23-27, 1John 4:16b-18

Pre-Introduction

We are rapidly nearing the end of our series – “Famous Last Words” – looking at the final chapters of Matthew. We’ve had some long readings the last few weeks, with the big blocks of teaching that Matthew records for us leading up to the events we are celebrating this weekend.

And then we get to today - Jesus risen from the dead! And Matthew reports hardly any words of the Risen Christ. Notwithstanding the final, final words of Jesus in the Great Commission which occur some 40 days later and that we consider next week, Matthew only records for us 20 odd words of the resurrected Jesus as we have heard.

After the initial, ‘Greetings,’ the next words the risen Jesus says are ‘Do not be afraid.’ So, let’s pray as we consider those words together.

Prayer

Risen Lord Jesus, We thank you that the tomb is empty! As the angel said to the women, ‘He is not here; he has risen.’ We thank you that because of that we can declare, ‘You are here, because you are risen!’ You said ‘surely I am with you always’ and we thank you that you are present with us by your Holy Spirit.

Lord Jesus, this Resurrection day may we ‘not be afraid’ but give us the sure and certain hope of life with you forever and to live now in the light of that reality.

Amen

Introduction

One Easter morning, a woman was on her way to church when her car broke down. Not wanting to be late for the service, she ordered an Uber to pick her up. The car arrived, and she jumped in the back.

Halfway through the ride, she asked the driver a question, but the driver didn’t respond, so she leaned forward and tapped the driver on the arm. The driver let out a loud scream, swerved into the other lane, almost hit another car, slammed on the brakes, and skidded off the road.

The woman and driver sat in silence for a minute from the shock of what just happened. Finally, she said apologetically, ‘I’m so sorry. I had no idea that tapping your shoulder would alarm you like that.’

‘You didn’t do anything wrong. It’s just that it’s my first day driving an Uber. I’ve been a driver for the past 25 years, but I’ve been driving a hearse!’

He wasn’t used to a passenger speaking to him or touching him. Perhaps she should have said, ‘Fear not, don’t be afraid, remember, you’ve changed jobs!’

It was a bit like that on Easter morning (just a little bit!). The disciples and followers of Jesus should have remembered what he had said.

1. The Resurrection was Foretold

Don't be afraid, because the resurrection was foretold.

Jesus had foretold his death and resurrection. Matthew reports four occasions on which this had happened, but the disciples didn't get it. Maybe Jesus should have said... 'I hate to say ... "I told you so!", but I told you so...'

And it wasn't just what Jesus himself had said. As I noted this morning at the blowhole dawn service, they should have understood from the Scriptures; from the Old Testament – the Law, the Prophets, the Psalms, even Job, as we have heard read; that Jesus must rise from the dead. (John 20:9)

But surprised they were. Despite the words of the prophets, despite the words of Jesus himself to them, they just were not ready, because they hadn't grasped what he was saying.

We mustn't be too harsh on them though. We have the benefit of hindsight, and these things can still be hard to get our heads around.

So we too, need to hear the words of Jesus, 'Don't be afraid!' The resurrection was foretold.

2. The Resurrection is Real

And don't be afraid, because this resurrection is not some made up fairy tale. **Don't be afraid** - the resurrection is real.

And if we look just at the detail that Matthew gives us in what we have read then we see plenty to give us confidence that the resurrection is real as we see Matthew countering one theory in particular - the theory that Jesus didn't rise, rather his body was stolen by the disciples to make it look like he had risen.

Matthew tells us of the posting of the guard at the end of chapter 27. The Jewish leaders couldn't take military action without the Romans sanctioning it, so they had gone to Pilate wanting the tomb to be made secure.

They certainly don't believe Jesus' foretelling, they are merely afraid of fraud being committed now that Jesus body had been handed over to his followers. (The usual practice was to leave the bodies of those crucified to rot on the cross, though in some cases the body could be released.)

Pilate lets the chief priests have a guard of soldiers at their disposal. It seems Pilate senses the chief priests, who were afraid of Jesus while he was alive, are still afraid. But he grants them their request.

The guard might have stopped the disciples had they come to steal the body, but they weren't about to stop 'the irresistible triumph of the resurrection!' (Don Carson) 'Death could not hold him down for he is risen' and early that first Easter morn: There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. (Matthew 28:2)

And the Roman guard who were supposed to keep things under control were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. (Matthew 28:4)

The earthquake and the rolling back of the stone had nothing to do with letting Jesus out. Rather - the stone rolled back, the seal broken, the soldiers made helpless - not to let the risen Messiah escape, but to let the first witnesses in.

And as those women then head on their way with instructions from Jesus, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. (Matthew 28:11) The rest remain, probably to await being officially relieved, but they might as well have gone with them - there's nothing, there is no one to guard.

What would the reaction of the chief priests be? "Oops, we made a mistake, he really must be the Son of God"?? After all, when Jesus was on the cross we read: The chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. "He saved others but he can't save himself! He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" (Matthew 27:41-43)

Their pious words 'we will believe' were empty and they are more interested in expediency than truth, so: They 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.'" (Matthew 28:12-14)

But the story they concoct shows how desperate they are for an explanation. If the guards were asleep, how could they know of the alleged theft? If even one had woken up to see this, surely the alarm would have been sounded. It's unlikely that the timid and fearful disciples could have plucked up the courage to open the tomb with Roman guards there.

If the chief priests had had one scrap of evidence pointing to the disciples guilt they would have used it to prosecute them. And the large sum of money for the guards was only part of how far they were prepared to go. "If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble" (Matthew 28:14) which would have involved more bribery because it's hard to believe that guards who admitted falling asleep on the job would have lasted very long without the right people being paid off.

The guards falling asleep; the disciples stealing body - the story doesn't stack up under even the smallest spotlight, but that didn't stop it being widely circulated, and still doing the rounds when Matthew writes his gospel. (Matthew 28:15) But had those hearing it paused to think, they would have realised that it would take more faith to believe that explanation, than to believe Jesus rose from the dead.

So don't be afraid, the resurrection was foretold, the resurrection is real, and **don't be afraid**, the resurrection shows us that Jesus' sacrifice is sufficient

3. The Resurrection Shows Jesus' Sacrifice is Sufficient

Jesus dies, as the sacrificial lamb in our place. In the Old Testament, a lamb was sacrificed to pay for the sin of the people. It showed sin is serious, that death is the punishment, but God in his grace forgives the sin of the people as the lamb takes their place.

But as we read in the book of Hebrews (in the New Testament) an animal substitute is really not quite sufficient. A person has to pay for the sin of people. The Old Covenant system allowed for a lamb without blemish to pay the price, but where will a truly perfect person be found to pay for humanity's sin? So God himself does it – he enters his creation, becoming

fully human and dies in our place paying the price for our sin as ‘the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.’ (John 1:29)

And it’s in his resurrection that Jesus is vindicated; his sacrifice is shown to be sufficient and acceptable to God for our sin.

So central is the resurrection that without it the cross has no eternal significance. As Paul says to the Corinthians: ‘If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.’ (1 Corinthians 15:14, 17)

So don’t be afraid because Jesus’ resurrection, shows his sacrifice was sufficient for all our sin and as we accept by faith, as we rely not on any so-called goodness of our own, but trust in Jesus, relying on his perfect life then we are declared to be righteous in him. And as we rely on his death for us, then the price has been paid, our sin can be forgiven and we are restored to a right relationship with the God who made us.

Which gives us confidence for the future, so we need **not be afraid**, because the resurrection of Jesus assures us of our own.

4. The Resurrection of Jesus Assures Us of Our Own

As Paul writes to the church in Corinth in that great resurrection chapter (1 Corinthians 15):

‘Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.’ (1 Corinthians 15:20-23)

Jesus is returning again, and though we don’t know when (as we saw the other week), do not be afraid. Or as Jesus puts it in John 14...

‘Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.’ (John 14:1-3)

Conclusion

Read all four gospel accounts of the resurrection, and you find people coming and going in all directions, and the gospel writers give us different angles, different perspectives, different nuances on what had really caught Jesus’ followers on the hop, but the resurrection is what they proclaimed. Read the book of Acts and see the focus on the resurrection of Jesus.

There is no other explanation for the empty tomb than a resurrection.

- The Jews didn’t steal His body.
- The Romans didn’t steal His body.
- The Apostles didn’t steal His body.
- The women didn’t steal His body.
- His enemies had no reason to steal His body and fabricate a resurrection.
- His friends didn’t even believe in a resurrection, and nor would they steal his body, fabricate a false resurrection and then go out and die as martyrs for a what they knew was a lie. The angel gave the only possible explanation: He is not here because he has risen.

The resurrection, as one theologian (C.H. Dodd) puts it, is not a belief that grew up within the church; it is the belief around which the church itself grew up, and the 'given' upon which its faith is based; without it there is no church.

At the very least, from a logical, historical analysis the fact that Jesus is risen can't be written off. Yes, faith will come into play in accepting it, but it is not blind.

If someone says that they are going to die at the hands of the leaders of the people and the occupying force and rise again and that's what happens, then I'd be taking notice of what he said, because it substantiates all his claims.

So **don't be afraid**, the resurrection was foretold, the resurrection is real, the resurrection shows us that Jesus' sacrifice is sufficient and his resurrection assures us of our own. So in this life – with all its ups and downs – we need not be afraid.

If you want to find out more about this, there are many people here who can help you. Talk to Steve or me if you are interested in a structured discussion based around Mark's account – we are happy to work through 'Christianity Explored' with you.

And for those of us who have accepted, we have the assurance of this day. As Paul writes to the church in Corinth:

'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:55, 57)

So what do we do?

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:58)

Amen