

## Enduring Might

Matthew 28:1-10

*Resurrection of the Lord/23<sup>rd</sup> March 2008*

*Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!* For almost two-thousand years now, the church of Jesus Christ has gathered on the first day of the week, on the day *after* the Jewish Sabbath, to worship the Risen Christ. Every Sunday is our day of resurrection because of what happened on that first Easter. But we need to ask, what exactly happened on that morning?

If you align all four gospel accounts in the New Testament and compare them, you'll see their stories don't all agree. They're not consistent. And yet when the New Testament was compiled, the early church preferred to offer *four* official accounts instead of one. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John each have a different angle, a different perspective; each offering a different sermon, as it were, for their respective communities. What they all have in common is the belief that something happened that morning, something real, something unlike they had never seen before, which, they believed, had changed their lives and the world.

The Presbyterian writer, Frederick Buechner, observed that if you look at these witnesses, there is “no story about the Resurrection in the New Testament,” that is, how it actually happened. “Except in the most fragmentary way, it is not described at all. There is no poetry about it. Instead it is simply proclaimed as fact. CHRIST IS RISEN! [However] unless something very real indeed took place on that strange, confusing morning, there would be no New Testament, no Church, no Christianity.”<sup>1</sup> That's how they tell the story. It's simply proclaimed as *fact*. There's no desire on their part to explain it, to rationalize it, no desire to prove or defend how it was so. There's no verifiable proof, no tangible evidence given in the text. There's little to go on here. It's not what we would expect. We would think that such an amazing event would be told with sufficient detail, anticipating the naysayers. This is something sensational. Imagine what Hollywood could do to this story today – through computer animation and special effects – making every image vivid and memorable. The problem is, Hollywood doesn't have much of a screenplay to work with here. A director could do something with Matthew's telling of the story – an earth-shattering quake, an angel whose face shone like lighting with a robe as white as snow, a massive stone rolled away. But even still, Matthew exercises “great restraint.” There is no verbal portrayal of the risen Messiah. In other words, “the mystery must not be trivialized by idle words.”<sup>2</sup> Matthew is not writing to explain, or to prove, or even verify to those who disbelieve.

We need to remember that this is a faith story, “intended not for unbelievers, but for believers.”<sup>3</sup> The Gospels weren't written to defend the truth of Christianity to skeptics or atheists. They weren't written to defend against atheists, such as our contemporaries Christopher

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life: Daily Meditations with Frederick Buechner* (HarperOne, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Douglas R. Hare, *Mark, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Hare, *Mark*.

Hitchens or Richard Dawkins, who want to remove religion from our lives.<sup>4</sup> The Gospels were written more like sermons to a community of believers – to a *church* – that already believes or struggles to hold to that belief, but has experienced nevertheless the presence of the resurrected Jesus. They were written with us in mind – to strengthen us when we grow tired and to raise us up when we fall, to remind us that the one who loved us all the way to hell and back, who came to cast out all fear is abiding with us, his resurrected presence can be found in our lives.

What matters most is knowing that Jesus lives. What matters most is letting Jesus live *in* us. What matters most is letting Jesus live *through* us. In other words, don't be like the soldiers assigned cemetery detail, maybe the unluckiest assignment in military history. Pilate commissioned a guard of soldiers – *Roman* soldiers, not Temple police – to “make it as secure as you can” (Matthew 27:65). The grave was probably made secure by rolling a massive stone slab down an incline, in a groove, locking it in firmly in place at the bottom – *immovable*. They took every precaution to make sure that Jesus stayed in the grave. But all the might of the Roman Empire was not strong enough to resist an earthquake demonstrating divine power, a dazzling angel representing divine power sitting down on the stone now moved, almost in a divine mocking, sitting there saying to the soldiers, “*So, what did you think of that?*” Unable to resist the joke at their expense, Matthew says the soldiers shook with fear “and became like dead men” (Matthew 28:4). They were supposed to make sure he stayed dead, “but when their charge turns out to have become suddenly very much alive, it is *they* who become candidates for the grave.”<sup>5</sup>

When we try to keep him dead, when we deny that he's alive, when we keep him in the tomb, living as though he were not alive, we, too, become candidates for the grave. When we resist the testimony of the Gospels by appealing to reason or being skeptics about everything, I wonder if there's a part of us that dies or remains dead. When we say, in order to make Christianity, indeed Easter, more palpable to a skeptical, questioning, so-called “sophisticated” age as ours, that he really didn't die, but only appeared to be dead, or when we say that he didn't actually, physically come back to life again, that it's just a story to teach us a religious sentiment (as if Easter is only about the affirmation that there's life after death, as if anyone who believes in life after death is a Christian – the Jews believed that before Easter morning, that's not what today is not), when we throw out arguments like these, I wonder if something within us dies or remains dead.<sup>6</sup> Or when we say resurrection is just a metaphor or a symbol, a poetic or literary way to say that Christ's spirit lingers on in the community of believers, he's alive through our memory, I wonder if a part of us keeps Jesus in the tomb or in resisting the reality of his resurrection that we become candidates for the grave – not literally, of course, but in the sense that something dies in us or remains dead in us or, to say it positively, I wonder if this approach actually prevents us from really coming alive. I need more than memory. I don't want to count on memory. We don't have good memories; I don't have a good memory. We need something else.

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<sup>4</sup> Leaders of the “new” atheism movement: Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (Twelve Books, 2007); Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Mariner Books, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1997), 322-323.

<sup>6</sup> N. T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (HarperOne, 2008), 5-6, 12.

There's more than myth and metaphor going on here. What we see is the revolutionary power of God's love if only we will open ourselves to it. In novelist Graham Greene's (1904-1991) masterpiece, *The Power and the Glory*, set in Mexico in the late 1930s during what Greene called "the fiercest persecution of religion anywhere since the reign of Elizabeth [I],"<sup>7</sup> there's a gripping conversation between the atheist lieutenant and the last, surviving priest, Green's famous character of the "whiskey priest." The lieutenant mocks the priest's understanding that "God is love." The priest replied that God's love is not the romantic, rosy kind of love, full of warm feelings. "We wouldn't recognize that love," the priest says. "It might even look like hate. It would be enough to scare us – God's love. It set fire to a bush in the desert, didn't it, and smashed open graves and set the dead walking in the dark. Oh, a man like me would run a mile away if he felt that love around."<sup>8</sup> And yet it's precisely that love – even if felt for only a second – that is enough to turn the world upset down – and maybe that's why, if we're honest, taking resurrection literally scares us so, *because if it is then we need to realize that the power and might of God that raised Jesus from the grave is now unleashed in the world and alive in every one of us. That's what we really celebrate this morning!*

As one theologian has put it, "the wonderful news of Easter is that Jesus is alive, and the terrible news of Easter is also that Jesus is alive."<sup>9</sup> It's terrible, in the sense that if this is true – as Matthew says it is – then everything in the world is now different. To quote REM, "It's the end of the world as we know it (and I feel fine)."<sup>10</sup> But there's also trepidation because now we have to decide whether or not we're going to live as if Jesus is alive. To confess that Jesus is alive is to say that [God's] righteousness, and faithfulness, God's mercy and forgiveness, God's peace and love cannot be dismissed with a cross or a sword. That's why the two Mary's run for dear life with both fear *and* great joy. This is what it means to be a disciple of the Risen One, then and now.

As Christians, we are not simply being asked to believe that resurrection took place, but to *enter* into the power of it, to enter the reality of it, and become open to the new life Jesus wants to live through us. Did you notice in Matthew's account that the stone was not moved away for Jesus, but for the women; not so that Jesus could come out (because he was *already* raised), but so that the women could see in and go in, "Come, see the place where he lay."<sup>11</sup> *They are pulled into resurrection.* And only when they left with fear and joy because Jesus was *not* there, did they encounter him – on the road of their lives – falling down and taking hold of his feet. They touched him – not symbol, not myth, not metaphor, something, someone real, as real as you and me and says to you and to me: *Do not be afraid.* Do not be afraid. No matter what you're dealing with, Jesus' still says to us. Do not be afraid. You will see me again.

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<sup>7</sup> John Updike's introduction to Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), ix.

<sup>8</sup> Greene, 200. First published in 1940.

<sup>9</sup> Long, 323.

<sup>10</sup> From the rock band R. E. M.'s 1988 album, "Document."

<sup>11</sup> Insight of Max Lucado, *He Still Moves Stones* (Thomas Nelson, 1999).

Live from and within this new reality. This is no fantasy or escape from reality. This is really real. That's what the text calls us to do. It's what John Updike urges us to do in his profound poem, "Seven Stanzas at Easter." This is what he says:

*Make no mistake; if He rose at all  
it was as His body;  
if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the molecules  
    reknit, the amino acids rekindle,  
the Church will fall.*

*It was not as the flowers,  
each soft Spring recurrent;  
it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled  
    eyes of the eleven apostles;  
it was as His Flesh: ours.*

*The same hinged thumbs and toes,  
the same valved heart  
that – pierced – died, withered, paused, and then  
    regathered out of enduring Might  
new strength to enclose.*

*Let us not mock God with metaphor,  
analogy, sidestepping transcendence;  
making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the  
    faded credulity of earlier ages;  
let us walk through the door.<sup>12</sup>*

Let us walk through the door, let us walk into the empty tomb and live from this reality, the power of God through Christ at work in us and the church, regathered through the enduring might of God's inexorable, unwavering love over time right through to today, which is determined to overcome everything, every force, every other lesser power that seeks to keep him – and us, along with him – in the grave. The enduring might of God brought Jesus to life and the enduring might of God has brought us to life and will bring us to life in him. Christ *is* risen. He is risen *indeed*. Alleluia!

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<sup>12</sup> John Updike, "Seven Stanzas at Easter." The entire poem may be found at [www.edow.org/spirituality/updike.html](http://www.edow.org/spirituality/updike.html).