

## *Fear Overcome!!*

Easter Weekend – March 26/27, 2005

### Sermon Background Study

“For God did not give us a spirit of fear,  
but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” (2 Timothy 1:7)

*Matthew 28:1-10 (NRSV)*

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. <sup>2</sup>And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. <sup>3</sup>His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. <sup>4</sup>For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. <sup>5</sup>But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. <sup>6</sup>He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. <sup>7</sup>Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” <sup>8</sup>So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. <sup>9</sup>Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. <sup>10</sup>Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

*Christ the Lord is risen today. The blinding brilliance  
of Easter banishes our fears, for we are God's Easter  
people, filled with a spirit of power and of love.  
Alleluia!!*

Throughout Lent, we have talked about and reflected upon our fears. Many of us have trouble counting all our fears, much less naming them. Surely, being fearful and anxious is just part of the human condition. Or is it? Can our fears truly be overcome?

*Fears – everywhere and nowhere*

Fear plays a prominent role in Matthew's resurrection narrative. When two of Jesus' followers, both women, arrive at the tomb early on Sunday morning, an angel appears during an earthquake. The guards placed at the tomb by the Jewish authorities are scared nearly to death. Indeed, they are so petrified by fear that they become like corpses! In keeping with the standard practice of angels in the Bible, this angel of the Lord tells the women, “Do not be afraid.” Neither woman takes the angel's words to heart, for when they leave the tomb to find the other disciples, they leave filled with both terror and great joy. When they run into Jesus (which is pretty much how I picture it), Jesus tells them, “Do not be afraid.”

In the space of ten brief verses, Matthew has *four* specific references to fear – but there is not another single reference to fear in the rest of his gospel. In fact, in all four gospel accounts, the only reference to fear after the discovery of the empty tomb is in Luke, when Jesus appears to the disciples huddled in an upstairs room on Sunday. Perhaps the other disciples needed their own “empty tomb” fright before they were ready to move on. In any event, despite the remarkable occurrences that lie ahead, the confusion and fear that marked the disciples before Jesus' resurrection are gone, replaced by confidence and joy.

#### God's Vindication of Jesus

It would be a mistake to see Jesus' resurrection as merely the greatest of all miracles. The resurrection of Jesus was much more than a demonstration of God's power. The resurrection was God's vindication of Jesus.

On Friday afternoon, Jesus hung upon a Roman cross, a failed Messiah condemned as a traitor to Rome. Abandoned by all but a few, Jesus had cried out to God just before his death, “Why have you forsaken me?” To all appearances, Jesus' life and ministry had met an ignoble end. He was despised and rejected and the world “held him of no account” (Isaiah 53:3).

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, to vindicate someone is to demonstrate that the person is “free of blame, criticism, or doubt.” Jesus' crucifixion seemed to dash all hope that this man had been Israel's Messiah. As far as the Jews were concerned, there could simply be no such thing as a crucified Messiah.

However, Jesus' resurrection, this defeat of death, was a mind-blowing demonstration that the crucifixion was not all it had seemed. Rather than marking Jesus' failure, the cross was actually the place of God's victory over sin and death. Jesus had not been found guilty in God's law court, he had been found innocent! And, because Jesus stands before God in our place, we too are vindicated, standing before God as forgiven, blameless people.

The disciples became resurrection people, on-earth-as-it-is-in-heaven people. They became the first colonists of a new human race, building a new world. It may be hard to grasp in the midst of day-to-day “realities,” but we too are God’s resurrection people. Two thousand years ago, the world was remade by the faith of Jesus Christ and it is being remade still. Jesus’ resurrection is the proof that this is so.

#### The Basics of Jesus’ Burial and Resurrection

The Jews of Jesus’ day practiced a two-stage burial. When a person died, family members would wrap the body in cloth and place it on a ledge in a cave or a man-made family tomb. Perhaps a year later, when the body had decomposed, the family would return to the tomb and place the loved one’s bones in a box. The bone box, called an ossuary, would then be stored in a crypt along with the bone boxes of other family members.

Jesus was crucified and died on Friday afternoon. Because Jews could not touch a dead body on the Sabbath, which began at sundown on Friday, Mary and the others had to move quickly. Jesus’ body was taken down from the cross, quickly wrapped in some linen, and then carried to an unused tomb that belonged to Joseph of Arimethea. Like most such tombs, a round stone was used to block to the entrance. The stone would keep animals out but still enable the family to come and go as they tended to the bodies and bones. There, Jesus’ wrapped body was laid on a stone slab. The women planned to return at dawn on Sunday, after resting on the Sabbath, to finish preparing Jesus’ body for the year or more it would lie in the tomb.

At dawn on Sunday, the women returned to the tomb in which they had laid Jesus’ body. There, they discovered that the stone had been rolled away and the tomb emptied! As we’d expect, the women were fearful and perplexed. They would naturally assume that Jesus’ body had been taken. After all, they knew, as do we, that the dead stay dead, that death is a one-way street. Surely, if Jesus’ body was gone then someone had taken it.

But instead, an angel tells the women, “He is not here, for he has been raised.” Jesus had passed through death to life-after-death and through that to ‘life after life-after-death’ – to resurrection. We need to be clear about this. Jesus’ followers would not go on to claim that Jesus had been resuscitated; i.e., merely restored to a mortal life. Jesus had brought Lazarus back to life (John 11), but Lazarus had still gone on to die at some point. Lazarus had been resuscitated by Jesus, but not resurrected. The words simply don’t mean the same thing.

Having been visited by the risen Jesus in the weeks after his resurrection, his followers would proclaim that in Jesus, God had begun the great resurrection of all people. Twenty-five years later, Paul would call Jesus the “first-fruits” of this great resurrection. Jesus was first and one day, upon his return, we shall all be resurrected too.

A world remade. How do we begin to understand this? Right here: Jesus lives. He is a figure of history, but like none other. When we take a class on Napoleon, we are talking about a dead guy. Important yes, but still dead. When we gather to talk about Jesus, we are gathering to talk about someone who lives, who participates in our discussion, who can open himself up to us, someone whom we can completely trust with all our hopes, dreams, secrets, messes – and fears. We come to meet the living Jesus.

People often want to talk about the evidence for the resurrection: the empty tomb, the guards, the witnesses, and so on. But I think that somewhat misses the point. The bigger question is this: how do we account for the Christians? What transformed this small, uneducated band of followers into a force that would reshape the world? Frankly, unless these men and women truly encountered the risen Christ, there is no explanation for the emergence of the Christian faith. Thousands of men and women would be martyred in the decades after Jesus’ resurrection. When faced with their own torture and death, they would maintain their allegiance to a crucified Galilean Jew.

Why? How? Because God did not give them “a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline” (2 Tim 1:7). They encountered the risen Christ and were transformed. We too encounter the living Jesus and we too are transformed.

I doubt that I will ever be confronted by the fear that must have gripped Ashley Smith when Brian Nichols stuck a gun in her side at 2am. She knew him. She knew what he had already done. Yet, something remarkable happened over the next seven hours. I’ve read commentators who commend her for her good negotiating skills. I think that misses it entirely. Early on, she asked if she could read to him, grabbing her Bible and her copy of *The Purpose-Driven Life*. They read and they talked. Their encounter was not about skills, but about the power of God to transform. Nichols told Ashley Smith that she was an angel sent from God. Who are we to argue? What an incredible Easter story this is. We can’t really understand it, but only behold it.

*Christ the Lord is risen today. Indeed.*

## Daily Bible Readings

(more on Jesus' resurrection and our own)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Mark 16 Mark's account of the empty tomb. The shorter ending may be authentic; the longer is not. How would you interpret Mark if he ended his Gospel at verse 8?</p>	<p>Day 2 Luke 24 Luke's account of the resurrection. The two disciples' encounter with Jesus on the road to Emmaus is the centerpiece of this narrative.</p>
<p>Day 3 John 20 &amp; 21 John's full account. John 21 is an epilogue appended to the Gospel.</p>	<p>Day 4 1 Corinthians 15 Paul's great chapter on the resurrection. It was written about 20 years after the resurrection, at least a decade before any of the Gospels.</p>
<p>Day 5 Romans 6:1-11 Dying and rising with the Messiah. Those who are "in the Messiah" are to walk as resurrected people, in the newness of life – for, in a very real sense, we <i>are</i> resurrected people.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

## Sermon Notes

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### **Spring Bible Academy begins tomorrow!! It is NOT too late to register. To learn more and to register, simply go to [www.standrewccl.org](http://www.standrewccl.org)**

Classes include *Get a Life: Debunking the Six Myths in the Quest for Contentment* (with Rev. Self), *First Place: Bringing Balance to the Physical, Emotional, Spiritual and Mental* (with Rev. Self), *Christianity and Other Religions* (with Eric Roberson), *Acts: A New Spirit and a New World* (with Scott Engle), *Genesis: In the Beginning, God* (with Frankey Commer), *The Gospel of John – Part 2* (with Monty Moore), and *The Spirit-Filled Life* (with Scott Engle).

Here are a few comments from people who attended the just-completed winter session:

- “The class stimulated much thought and discussion around the dinner table! Great stuff.”
- “This class is just what I needed. It has helped me to deepen my faith and to understand Jesus better.”
- “I highly recommend these classes as I’ve learned more from them than I have anywhere else. I often recommend the classes to my friends and family.”
- “This class makes me feel like I really belong to St. Andrew. This is such a great group and my week gets off to such a great start. I feel warm and refreshed every time we meet.”

Please note that there is a typo in the Bible Academy brochure. Scott Engle’s Tuesday evening class, *Acts: A New Spirit and a New World*, is not a class for night-owls! We will gather at 6:45 pm. Class will be from 7:00 to 8:30.

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Christians, all Christians, are resurrection people. But what do we really mean by this? What does the phrase “resurrection people” mean to you? It certainly means much more than simply believing in Jesus’ resurrection. In a letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul wrote that those “who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death . . . that our old self was crucified with him . . . [that we are to] consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” As resurrection people, we have been transformed and made new: “just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in the newness of life” (all the quotes are from Romans 6:1-11).

On the timeline of human history, *the* climactic moment against which all else is measured is Jesus’ death and resurrection. It is upon the cross that the kingdom of sin did its worst and the kingdom of grace its best. This is what the resurrection shows us. It is Christ’s raising that enables us to see the cross for what it was. Yes, there is still much to fear in this world and, yes, we will all die unless Jesus returns first. But these fears do not define us. It is not fear that is the truest reality, but grace. Perhaps all the trials that Ashley Smith had endured (her husband died four years before) enabled her to see this, to take seriously her own baptism, knowing that she had already been crucified with Christ. Perhaps Brian Nichols saw in her a woman who had decided to live in the kingdom of grace and righteousness rather than the kingdom of sin and death. Perhaps he decided that he wanted to live there too.