

He Has Gone Before Us

Matthew 28:1-20

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We turn together to this morning's passage, Matthew 28:1-20. We come to this passage this morning as it declares the appearance of Jesus to his disciples. What Jesus does is he, in many ways, continues to affirm that he is the one who has gone before us. This is a Biblical theme from beginning to end, as the Lord—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—remind God's people, and he would remind us again this morning: he has gone before us. Hear now God's Word, Matthew 28:1-20.

Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you." So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."

While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers and said, "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." [ESV]

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

By your Holy Spirit, open our eyes, our minds, our hearts to the wonderful treasure in your Word. We ask you, Lord Jesus, to make your presence known among us by the movement and

power of your spirit enabling us to rejoice—not just contemplate, but rejoice—that you have gone before us. And that the fact that you have gives us such wonderful privilege. Help us to rejoice in that, receive it, and walk in it. Help the teacher. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The job of a soldier and that of an army is to go into battle and to do so on behalf of the country in which they serve. Their goal is to go in and to do that which they have been commanded to do. And when they go into battle, they do so by going before and in the name of the people that they represent. And when they experience victory, they are not the only ones who experience the victory, though they are the ones who did the work. But all those they represent experience that victory.

In 2017, there were two films around the very central battle of Dunkirk, World War II. And even though I knew the end of the story, I found myself asking, "Yeah, but how did they actually do this? I can't believe." It was one moment. All it would have taken is one decision, and that would have changed everything. But because of their victory and the successive victories, we are able to do this in freedom, even though we were not on those battlefields. This is what it means to have someone to go before us. And for us to be able to experience, to be united to, to enjoy all the benefits of that victory.

This is what we rejoice in today, is that we proclaim Jesus Christ, who has gone before us. And in this passage, specifically in verse 7, he says, "Tell the disciples that he is risen from the dead; and behold, he is going before you." This is a biblical, deep biblical theme from beginning to end—God reminding all the way from Adam and Eve, to Israel, all the way to the new covenant, and now Jesus to his disciples, and then to the church, and proclaimed over and over again through the proclamation of the gospel that God is the one who goes before us. He is also with us. These are important truths that we can and are invited to look at more astutely this morning as we look at this passage. And my desire and my hope is that you leave here today encouraged, but also strengthened—that the one who has gone before us gives you something today to experience that can be applied in every part of your life. So let's look at this together. He's gone before us in his death. He's gone before us in resurrection. And he is with us until the end.

First, before us in death. Now, of course, the specific passage is work on the narrative that has gone before it. Though it doesn't refer specifically to his crucifixion on the cross, it is the fact that he was in the grave and now he is not that is the culmination of the story, the narrative, of the cross. But this is a biblical theme and a reality that is played over and over again. And the gospels declare as Jesus has said, and the New Testament declares over and over again: for all have sinned. All humanity has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But God in his grace and mercy did not leave us there.

Now, sure, we could go and die. And in fact, we do die. But our death doesn't change the status of anyone else. It doesn't change them internally. It doesn't make them new people. We grieve. We remember. We rejoice. We're left grieving and are alone, perhaps. But it doesn't change our identity. It doesn't change who we are as people. So we needed someone to satisfy this great problem. That if all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, how will God deal with this reality? The God who is a just God doesn't just simply turn a blind eye to sin, but rather looks it squarely in the face and says, "It must be paid for." And so the incarnation which we celebrate at Christmas—and it is wonderful and full of rejoicing—the incarnation really finds its true fulfillment, its ultimate extent, here.

Because to merely be born a child is one thing. But to be born the Son of God, who is both fully God and fully man, righteous and without sin, to proclaim to a watching people who were his enemies—and even those who were his family and friends rejected him for this reason—he said, "I have come to die in your place as a sin offering, to satisfy God's righteous judgment. You cannot

do this. I must do this. Where I am going, you cannot go.” Why? Because Christ is holy and righteous and pure. He had to go before us. And in doing so, as we’ve been looking at all the way from—well, most weeks, obviously—but from Palm Sunday all the way to Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and to this morning—it is the proclamation that Christ had to die in our place. And in doing so, we are able to receive that payment in full. In going before us, his death is our death. His payment for sin is the payment for our sin. His victory is ours.

And so here’s the question, boiling it down to the real rub of life. And for those who are here this morning who don’t believe—because I only attended church on Easter Sundays, so I know, and I didn’t believe. And perhaps you’re here this morning. My question to you is this, if you do not believe: why wouldn’t we want to believe? Imagine it for just a moment. To give the benefit of the doubt to the Bible. And if we’re using our minds and our reason, we look at the world and we say, “It is broken. And it’s not just broken because of everything out there. I know what’s in my own heart.” And God knows it. And because he knows it, instead of leaving me in it, he paid for it with his son. Why would we not want to believe that God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son to die, that whoever will believe in his name shall have eternal life? Why wouldn’t we want to believe that?

I know what my answer was. And maybe it’s not yours. My answer was: that means I have to give up my pride. That means if Christ has actually gone before me as fully God and fully man and died in my place, that means he’s not just worthy of worship; he must be worshipped. And I remember, I liked worshipping myself. And in reality, I still do. I need the Savior. And why wouldn’t we want to believe? Someone who actually knows us, really knows us, says, “I know. But through him, you are forgiven.” This is for us.

Not only that—he also goes before us in resurrection. So he is not here, verse 6, “for he has risen as he said. Come and see where he lay.” So if he’s gone before us in resurrection, what is the reason for the resurrection? Well, it is twofold. One, it is the demonstration of God’s power and the fulfillment of his promise. Because he is powerful, he said, the Father said, that “I will not leave my son there.” Paul declares this in Acts when he says:

And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm,
“‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you.’

And as for the fact that he raised him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he has spoken in this way,

“‘I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David.’ [Acts 13:32-34, ESV]

God delighted in raising his son from the dead, because God promised it.

Also, it was a demonstration not only of God’s power and promise; it was a demonstration of the Holy Spirit’s power and presence. For in Romans, we learn that it is the Holy Spirit that raised Christ from the dead. But not just the work and demonstration of the power and the Spirit—it is also the demonstration and power of Jesus himself. As he taught, he said, “It is not on anyone else’s authority that I lay down my life. Rather, it is by my authority that I lay down my life, and by my authority I take it up again.” That is, the resurrection and the reason for it is to demonstrate God’s power in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

But it isn’t just to demonstrate God’s power. The reason is also to vindicate who Jesus is. Because Jesus died as one who is innocent and took on our sin. He died on a cross good for a criminal, and yet he was innocent. Jesus had to be vindicated, because he was reviled, he was scoffed at, and he took it. As a lamb before his shearers is silent, Christ did not utter a word but

gave himself over to the sacrifice and to the scorn of the cross. And yet, God would not allow his son to merely remain as one who was scorned, or the shame of its stain to remain. But he was vindicated in raising him from the dead, and Jesus Christ being victorious over death and sin. He's victorious over death and the sin that required it.

So those are the reasons: to demonstrate God's power, and to vindicate Jesus. But what about its reality? How do we wrap our minds around the reality of what Jesus has done here? One of my favorite writers on the resurrection is Dr. N. T. Wright. And he says the question is the following: the historicity of the resurrection is available and invites everyone to come and to look at it and to do justice of the historicity of this event. But even if we were to establish all the perfect facts of the history of the resurrection, that doesn't mean that suddenly you're going to believe in the resurrection. The reality is this—if it is true and we believe that history demonstrates its truth, then what are we to do? The reality is this: there are two dueling worldviews. The one worldview simply says, "This is all there is. The materiality that you and I are experiencing at this very moment and all the greatest joys and the greatest sorrows? This is it. There is nothing else." And that one worldview looks at the historicity of Jesus and ignores it and simply wants to put faith and privatize it and say it's just a matter of emotion.

But then the other worldview says, "No, actually not." The reality of the historicity of the resurrection is there. And the historicity of the resurrection demonstrates that there is a God who is there. And this God is the one who has created all things. And this is the God who says in the middle of history through raising his son, the end of the story is not death and mere materiality, but there is new life, and there is eternal life.

And so N.T. Wright asks this question: "Who, after all, was it who didn't want the dead to be raised?" I mean, really. For just a brief moment, in the middle of a worship service, why would any of us not want to say "the dead are raised"? Is there someone that you love who has passed away? Would you not want them to be raised? Let me ask you, if it is—for the sake of argument, if there is more than this, and there truly is an eternity where we can experience all the singular beauty and complexity and joy that is life forever in perfection, without brokenness and sin and death—isn't that, for just the sake of argument, a pretty good thing? I mean, just look around you. Look in your own life. It doesn't take much to scratch the surface and say, "Yeah, I want something more." I do. Don't you?

So Wright summarizes by saying, well, "The reality is that there are social and intellectual and cultural tyrants and bullies who want to keep Jesus in the grave, because it's to their benefit that we keep him there." You see, the one worldview that wants to say we're mere materiality and there's nothing else is the same group of ideas that wants to keep us enslaved. To what? To its markets, to its ideas, to its monetary policy, to its definition of success and failure. In other words, by keeping Jesus in the grave, we need them. It's the Caesars and dictators and tyrants, both intellectual and political, who want to keep Jesus in the grave, because they get to remain king. They get to have the power.

But the reality is, as Wright says—and this is the point where believing in the resurrection of Jesus suddenly ceases to be a matter of inquiring about historical events in the first century, and becomes a matter of rediscovering hope in the 21st century. Hope in what you get when you suddenly realize there is a different worldview, and there is a different possibility for life—a worldview in which the rich, the powerful, and the unscrupulous do not, after all, have the last word. The last word is not death, but new life is. And if new life is through Jesus who has gone before us in resurrection, he, then, is the king. And what king he is. He does not lord it over us. He is not capricious. He is not faithless. He is not judgmental. He is full of truth. He is full of grace. He is full of mercy. And he is humble as a servant, though he is the victorious king. He does not take from us to make himself greater; he takes all that is his and gives it away. His life is given to us

through the resurrection. Now that is a king, that is a leader, that we need more of. This is what is on offer in Easter: Jesus has gone before us.

But there is a final, and it is this: he is with us until the end. Pause. I forgot to tell you. By the way, the passage, Matthew? Do you notice what it says? They tried to pay off the soldiers to tell the story that his disciples stole him from the grave. Today, in the intellectual castles of the world, they're still taught this truth. It's not just among the Jews. It's well into the Gentile world. See, these are the dictators. But it ain't true. And it tells us, though they wanted to do this, and this beautiful verse: "And when they saw him, they worshipped him. But some doubted." Oh, man, do I need that phrase. Why? Because they're standing there looking at him, and yet they doubted. Doubting Thomas? I don't think he was the only one. Because it does say "they." Some doubted. I need that.

Why? Because look what Jesus does with doubt. He doesn't point his finger. He simply says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." He meets us in our doubt. Because he is with us until the end of the age. The passage says this. He says, after telling them, "This is what you are to do. You are to go proclaiming my name and what I have done, baptizing and making disciples." Not converts, disciples. What does it mean to follow Jesus? And "baptizing in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them what it means to follow in my ways." But he says, "And behold, I am always with you until the end of the age." This idea that Jesus, who has gone before us in death and before us in resurrection, says again and repeats the cycle: "Guess what? I've gone before you in resurrection, victorious over sin and death, and I'm still going before you, and I will be with you."

What are the privileges, then, of Easter? First, the privilege most certainly is this: that what has happened to Christ has happened to us. The apostle Paul says this in the Book of Ephesians when he says these words:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God. [Ephesians 2:4-8, ESV]

That means for all those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, as he was raised from the dead, we, too, are raised. And we are given new minds, new wills, and new ways of life. And the Spirit who is at work in Christ is the same Spirit that Christ gave to us the church, and the same Spirit which raised him from the dead is the same Spirit which empowers us to walk in new obedience. No longer ought the Christian to say, "I am a slave to sin." Because you are not. You have been freed from the slavery of sin. Because slavery to sin means death. But Jesus who was raised to life—so is the one who believe in him. We now have a new will by the Spirit to say "no" to sin and "yes" to godliness. Yes, we still sin. It is still present. But it's not the thing that defines us; Christ is, who is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. That privileged position, because he has gone before us, we receive the interest. We receive the benefit. This is one of the privileges.

The second privilege is his presence. Jesus said, "I will not leave you or forsake you. I will not leave you as orphans." And so as his ascension took place, the coming of the Holy Spirit came. And the Holy Spirit is with all those who believe. Therefore, the Christian can say, "The Lord is with me." We are not alone. Our darkest moments, his presence is deeper still. Our greatest

moments, he is the one who gives. The Spirit is the one who is with us. And he says, "I will be with you until the end of the age."

"But so what"? one might ask. The third privilege is his provision. And that provision is the provision of security. What do I mean by security? I was brought to this reflection and this truth looking at Jesus' proclamation that he would be with us until the end of the age. I was brought to this reflection by Mark Jones in his book regarding who Christ is, *On Knowing Christ*. And he brought me to this reflection by looking at an old hymn. This hymn is called "A Debtor to Mercy Alone." And he quotes it, a couple verses, this way. This is the hymn. He says:

My name from the palms of His hands
Eternity will not erase;
Impressed on His heart it remains
In marks of indelible grace.
Yes, I to the end shall endure,
As sure as the earnest is given
More happy, but not more secure,
The glorified spirits in heaven.

The saints who have gone before us who are now with the Lord—they are indeed more happy. They see the Lord face to face. Their pain and brokenness and sin is done, and they are now in perfect presence enjoying perfect fellowship with the Lord. Indeed, they are more happy. But they are not more secure than we are at this very moment. For the ones who claim Christ as Savior, Jesus has completed the work. He has satisfied the payment for sin. He has gone before us on the cross and been raised from death to life, victorious over sin and death, and is now seated on the right hand of God the Father. That means we can experience the security that comes by resurrection today. Today.

And what that means is, our circumstances feel real and they are real. We don't always know sometimes where our next meals are going to come from, how the Lord is going to provide for the next year, how our children are going to turn out, whether I will keep this contract that I've been on for several months, hoping I won't lose it again. Our circumstances often scream at us, *insecurity, insecurity, insecurity*. We might be persecuted, left alone. We might lose our freedoms. America may cease to exist as it is thirty years from now. Who knows? But this is the reality: absolutely nothing can take or separate us from the love of God the Father in Christ Jesus. Nothing. Retirement benefits? Life insurance? The stock market? Our houses? Our educations? They're all good. But they are not what secures us. And so this insecurity is real, and I feel it just as you do. And yet, we must whisper back at it again, *He is risen*. He is risen indeed.

My favorite gospel singer who is presently alive is a woman by the name of Yolanda Adams. If you've never heard Yolanda Adams, Google search her. But do me a favor. Google search this: Yolanda Adams Victory life on Jimmy Fallon. It was a song that she'd done a number of years ago. And I remember watching Fallon. He was still fairly new as a host to the Tonight Show. And I remember, I think it was a Thursday night. It was just an odd place. And I saw that Yolanda Adams was going to be one. I'm like, "I am staying up for that." And so I'm like, "Wow, that's kind of interesting. I don't know how that happened. But great, let's see what happens." Well, she came on and she sang this song, "Victory." And as a believer I say to those of you who believe, go and watch that. I watch it and listen to it once a month. I need this. Because I am reminded that in the face of the world, she is proclaiming Jesus as Lord. And I had not seen a standing ovation like this on that show before. I mean, she brought the house down. But it's the words that I come back to, month after month. And it really does speak of security. And here they are. She says:

Truly I've been through the storm and rain
I know everything about heartache and pain
But God carried me through it all
Without his protection I would surely fall
I've been broke, without a dime to my name
But all my bills got paid
Because I called on Jesus' name
You can't tell me that God isn't real
'Cause I've got the victory
And that's why I'm still here

I'm not worried about material things I don't have
I'm just blessed 'cause I know that my savior's there
Because I know that my blessing is on the way
I can't see it right now but I stand by faith
I've fought many, many battles in his name
I've held up the blood-stained banner
And proclaimed that Jesus is the truth and the light
Believe me when I say he will make it right
I've got the victory
I've got the victory
Sing it with me
I've got the victory

Heartache and pain, brokenness and insecurity, is real to every one of us. It is not a free pass to skip over all those things. But to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ who has gone before us in his death, in his resurrection, and is with us until the end of the age—we can shout or we can whisper or we can sing with Yolanda Adams: victory, victory, victory. Christ Jesus, he is risen. He is risen indeed. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you this morning for your Word. Now encourage and strengthen us. I ask that you would help us to again rejoice that the victory is sure, because Christ has gone before us—not in an emotionalism or in a triumphalism, but in the mere fact that Christ has been raised from the dead, and he has promised that he will return again. His invitation to us is to believe on him, to have eternal life, to experience new life beginning today. Father, for those who do not know you, I pray that the Holy Spirit would awaken them to a new worldview, a new way of life that is open to them this very day, that the forgiveness of sins and a whole new world can be open to them. Draw them, I pray. And for those who rejoice in you, who trust in your name, Father, remind them that this day they are as secure as all the saints who have gone before us. Because absolutely no one now can claim victory over us, for Christ who is our Savior is our victory. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.