

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor
Swift Creek Baptist Church (swiftcreekbaptistchurch.com)
18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834
Sunday, April 4, 2021

Matthew 28:1-17 (read vv.1-10) “The Resurrection: Fantastic Fact”

Intro. A little boy was in the classroom and the teacher gave this assignment, “Write an essay on the world’s greatest living man.” Some wrote about the president. Others wrote about members of Congress. Some wrote about people in the entertainment world. Some wrote about a sports hero. Some wrote about great scientists. But one little boy wrote an essay about Jesus Christ. When the teacher received the paper, she said, “Son, that’s a nice paper, but you misunderstood the assignment. I said the world’s greatest *living* man.” He said, “But teacher, He is alive. He is alive.”¹

Yes, Christians believe that even though Jesus of Nazareth died a cruel death on a cross, He rose bodily from the grave and is alive today! That Jesus Christ rose from the dead is not an allegory, or a myth. Nor is it symbolic of some mystical reality. Instead, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is literal reality. Our faith is that those very limbs that lay stiff and cold in death became warm with life again. A real man has really risen from a real death into a real and endless life. And listen to the opinion of author Josh McDowell, “The resurrection of Jesus Christ is either the most wicked, vicious, heartless hoax ever foisted upon the minds of men, or it is the most fantastic fact of history.”

Which of those alternatives is true? To help you decide, we will examine Matthew’s account of what happened shortly after Jesus rose from the dead. First, I will ask you to consider the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. Then, we will see if there is a plausible alternative to the resurrection story. Then, I will ask you to reach a verdict on the question, “Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?” First of all, I want to ask you to:

I. CONSIDER THE EVIDENCES OF HIS RESURRECTION

I believe the key to Matthew’s purpose in chapter 28 is the last of v.15, “...this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day.” Matthew is referring to the story that the disciples stole the body and lied about the resurrection. At the time Matthew wrote his gospel, which was about 30 years after Jesus died, most Jews did not believe that the resurrection took place. So Matthew’s purpose is to confront unbelief. He does so by presenting strong evidence. Let’s look at it. First,

A. His Resurrection Was Confirmed by the Angel - In vv. 2-3 we read, “And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it. His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow.” As you compare other gospel accounts, this actually took place *before* the arrival of the woman (cf. Mk. 16:1-4; Lk. 24:1-2; Jn. 20:1). Matthew’s gospel presents Jesus as the king. His account of the resurrection story focuses on what is fitting for a victorious king. Matthew tells of the spectacular and sensational events surrounding His resurrection. There is a fanfare in the account given in Matthew. Both the earthquake (Exodus/Rev.) and the radiance of the angel are manifestations of the presence of God.

¹ Told by Dr. Adrian Rogers in his sermon on I Cor. 15:12-20.

Notice how the angel presented evidences of the resurrection. In the last of v.2 we read that the angel, “rolled back the stone from the door.” Why did the angel roll the stone away? It was not to allow Jesus to exit, for we know from other gospel accounts that the resurrection body of Jesus could transport itself right through walls. The fact is, Jesus had already risen and left the tomb, perhaps an hour or more before this dramatic event. Instead, the angel had rolled away the stone to show to all that the tomb was empty. Added to this evidence is the testimony of the angel. In v.6 the angel said, “He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay.” We should be able to believe one of God’s angels! Thus, the angel confirmed that the tomb was empty, for all to see. The stone was rolled away to permit the entrance of the “witnesses of the Resurrection.”

By the way, the Jewish custom of burial in that day was not to dig a hole and bury the body. No, the body would be placed on a shelf in cave-like tomb to decompose. Then, they would gather the bones and place them in a bone box as a lasting memorial. That custom was perfect for a resurrection on the third day, and for granting access to see the evidence of it.

B. His Resurrection Was Confirmed by the Soldiers – Look back to 27:62-66, and let’s see the background to what happened. It is interesting that the Jewish leaders were so desperate to eliminate Jesus and His doctrine, that they evidently broke the Sabbath (v.62²) to secure a guard from Pilate. They seemed to be more aware than the disciples that Jesus predicted that He would rise from the dead (v.63). So to keep anyone from stealing the body and claiming a resurrection, they asked Pilate for a Roman guard (v.64). Pilate agreed. The religious leaders were determined to keep that body in the tomb.

Notice what they did. First, they rolled a great, round stone, like a cartwheel, to cover the entrance to the tomb. It rolled in a groove cut for that purpose. Then, they sealed it, and by Roman authority, it could not be broken. If a person broke a Roman seal, they could face harsh punishment. Then, they set a special guard to make sure the body would not be disturbed. So they made it as secure as they could. But their plans turned against them. Without realizing it, the Jewish leaders and the Roman government joined forces to provide more proof that the resurrection of Jesus really took place. The sovereign God was really in control of the whole situation.

Then in v.11, we see the admission of the guard. After the earthquake and after the stone was rolled away, it says, “...behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened.” And since they reported “all the things that had happened,” they must have reported the earthquake, the appearance of the angel, the stone rolled away and that the body of Jesus was gone!

So the evidence so far is compelling for the fact of the empty tomb. There are many famous tombs. The pyramids of Egypt are famous because they contained the mummified bodies of ancient Egyptian kings. Mohammed’s tomb is noted for the stone coffin and the bones it contains. Westminster Abbey in London is renowned because the bodies of English kings, queens, and nobles rest in it. Arlington Cemetery near Washington, D.C., is revered as the honored resting place of many Americans who gave their lives or served their country. My grandfather’s brother is buried there. But the Garden Tomb of Jesus is famous because it is empty!³

C. His Resurrection Was Predicted by Christ – In v.6 we see that the angel said He is risen “as he said.” The angel reminds them of the promise of Jesus. The gospel accounts give us many

² “The next day” began at sundown, so they either went to Pilate on Sabbath evening, or the next morning.

³ Don Emmitte, *Pulpit Helps*, 4/04, p. 10.

examples of these predictions, such as Jn. 2:19. Early in His ministry He said, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” Then in Mt. 12:38-40 we read that the Jews demanded a sign to prove He is the Messiah. Jesus said in vv. 39-40, “...no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” Then, in Mt. 16:21 we see the first clear prediction of His resurrection. “From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things ... and be killed, and be raised the third day.” From the gospel accounts we know of at least 3 other predictions that He gave (Mt. 17:23; Mt. 20:19; Mt. 26:32).⁴

Application: Who else, but the Son of God, could predict His resurrection from death?

Now the empty tomb alone would be inadequate proof that Jesus had risen. So did anyone actually see Him alive from the dead? Indeed, we have the evidence of eyewitnesses that actually saw Him, and even touched Him.

D. His Resurrection Was Affirmed by the Women – In v.1 we are told that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary⁵ came early in the morning to see the tomb. In v.7 the angel who was still there said to the woman, “Go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and indeed He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him. Behold, I have told you.” So they obeyed the angel. V.8 says, “So they went out quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to bring His disciples word.” Then, notice what happened! They did not have to wait until they went to Galilee to see Him. It says in v.9 that “...as they went to tell His disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, ‘Rejoice!’⁶ So they came and held Him by the feet and worshiped Him.” The testimony of at least 2 women was that Jesus Himself appeared to them. And it was not just an appearance. They “held Him by the feet.” That word “held” (*krateo*) is a strong word. The grabbed hold of Him, seizing His feet (cf. 1 Jn. 1:1b). Then, they could go to the disciples with even more certain proof that Jesus had risen from the dead, for they actually felt His body. What they saw was not a ghost or apparition. By the way, based on Mark’s gospel, a third woman came to the tomb as well, Salome (sal-o’-may) the mother of James and John (15:40; 16:1). According to the Old Testament (Deut. 17:6; 19:15), two witnesses was enough, but three was even better!

E. Jesus Appeared to 500 witnesses in Galilee – The angel said in v.7 that Jesus would appear to the disciples in Galilee. In v.10 Jesus Himself said He would appear to the disciples in Galilee. Then, beginning in v.16 we see that Jesus did in fact appear to His disciples in Galilee. There they saw Him and worshipped Him (vv.16-17). It was most likely at this appearing that “He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once,” as stated by the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 15:6). In light of all of this evidence, I believe that you must agree with the Hebrew Christian scholar Alfred Edersheim that the resurrection of Christ “may unhesitatingly be pronounced” the “best established event in history.”

Many give mental assent to the truth of the resurrection. But the attitude of many is, “So what?” Let me tell you why the resurrection is important. If Jesus did indeed rise from the dead, then His atoning death was accepted by God. But if He did not rise, then His death was hardly different in effect than that of the 2 thieves who were crucified with Him. If Jesus did indeed rise

⁴ In 27:63 we see that even His enemies remembered that Jesus promised to rise from the dead.

⁵ The other Mary (1) was Mary the mother of James the Less (27:56; Mk. 15:40; 16:1).

⁶ The word *chairō* was commonly used in greetings because greetings are typically joyful, so here it can be translated, “Greetings” or “Hail!” (26:49; Luke 1:28; James 1:1b).

from the dead, then there is hope for forgiveness of sin, and eternal life. Furthermore, if Jesus did indeed rise from the dead, then He is the Son of God. In fact, Romans 1:4 says that He was “declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead.” And if Jesus did indeed rise from the dead, then we must worship Him, as did the women (v.9) and the other disciples (v.17). I’m glad you are doing that today!

Now let’s suppose that you acknowledge that you have what you consider honest doubts about the resurrection, in spite of the evidence I have presented so far. After all, we see in v.17 that even some of the disciples doubted that Jesus could have risen from the dead! Or what if some who are listening to me have downright unbelief about the resurrection. You think it’s just a religious myth. I ask you then, not only to consider the evidence of His resurrection, but also answer this question:

II. IS THERE A PLAUSIBLE ALTERNATIVE TO HIS RESURRECTION?

You cannot honestly deny the resurrection without giving a plausible alternative to the empty tomb. Matthew reports what may be considered the best alternative story. Beginning in v.11, the scene turns to the rulers of Israel. V.11 says that the chief priests heard from the soldiers “all the things that had happened.” The leaders of Israel heard eyewitness accounts of the earthquake, the stone rolled away, the angel and the fact that the body of Jesus was missing. What did they do? V.12 says that they “assembled with the elders and consulted together.” They called a meeting of the Sanhedrin, the same group that condemned Jesus to death. They discussed the issue and made a decision. And what was their decision? Did they decide that they had made a terrible mistake, and that Jesus must be the Messiah after all? No! In vv. 12-14 we see what they decided, “they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, saying, ‘Tell them, His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.’ And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will appease him and make you secure.”

Now, is that a plausible explanation for the empty tomb? In case you are inclined to believe it, let me point out several problems with the fanciful story that the disciples stole the body of Jesus: 1) If they were asleep, how did they know what happened? How did they know the disciples stole the body? Furthermore, even if they were asleep, how could such an operation as forcing back a heavy stone, and exhuming a corpse, have been carried on without waking them? Even to say they were sleeping is incredible, since sleeping while on guard duty was punishable by death (Acts 12:19; cf. Acts 16:27). That is why we read in v.14, “And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will appease him and make you secure.” 2) John tells us that the grave clothes were still there (Jn. 20:5), seemingly mostly undisturbed. If the body was stolen, surely they would have taken the body *and* the grave clothes which were wrapped around the body. Actually, the grave clothes were wrapped with wet ointment applied to each layer, so that the grave clothes probably became like a hardened shell. This could explain John’s belief in the resurrection (Jn. 20:8) just from seeing the grave clothes (Jn. 20:5-7). That is what they found in the tomb. If the disciples stole the body, surely the grave clothes would have been taken as well. 3) Finally, for the body of Jesus to have been stolen, that would be the witness of the disciples was one big lie. Is that even credible? By the time Matthew wrote v.15, James, and perhaps some others, had already died martyr deaths. It is incomprehensible that the disciples would have been willing to suffer and even die if they knew they had stolen the body and were preaching a hoax. I can believe in a resurrection a whole lot easier than that kind of a story! After all, people lie when they think it is in their self-interest, but not holding to a lie would result in their death!

[Leave out the rest of II?] Friend, if you cannot come up with a credible alternative to the evidence for the resurrection, and if you persist in unbelief, then you are left with unbelief that will blind you and harden your heart. In fact, look at what happened to 3 groups of people who did not believe the resurrection of Jesus:

A. The Leaders of Israel – They had the truth staring them in the face, more so than most people. Yet, instead of admitting they were wrong, and acknowledging the truth, the religious leaders fabricated a lie (v.13). They had to come up with some explanation for the empty tomb. So they claimed His disciples stole the body! This was the first century alibi to explain away the resurrection of Christ.

Just as they told a big lie to protect their coveted religious and political power, even so politicians today conspire to tell lies to protect their political power, or accomplish some political objective.

B. The Soldiers - In v.15 we see the decision of the soldiers, “So they took the money and did as they were instructed.” They decided to accept the bribe rather than seek the truth about Jesus, and accept Him as Savior. They repeated the lie told to them. The soldiers who conspired together with them sold their souls instead of believing the truth and repenting of their sins. Many today are selling out, choosing sin over submitting to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

C. The People of Israel - Finally, we see the unbelief of the people of Israel. The soldiers took the money, and reported the lie, and the last of v.15 says, “...this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day.” Because Jesus was not the kind of Messiah they wanted, many in Israel willingly swallowed the story of the soldiers. They thereby showed that they were made of the same stuff as they who fabricated the story.

Now I want to close with one other question?

III. WHAT WILL YOUR DECISION BE?

You really have only 2 alternatives: genuine faith in the risen Lord Jesus Christ, or unbelief. We have seen that it is really a choice. God did not force the leaders of Israel, or the soldiers, or the Jews to believe. Nor will He force you to believe. So what will you choose? Well, the first option is:

A. Unbelief – Will you embrace unbelief like the leaders of Israel, or the soldiers, or many of the Jews? There are many today who prefer to believe the doubts of the agnostics, the denials of the atheists, or the lies of some cult teacher, or some other religion. Islam denies the resurrection. Have you joined them in unbelief?

Let's be honest regarding the real reason for unbelief. As I have demonstrated, it is not lack of evidence. It is not due to finding a better alternative to explaining the evidence. I believe the real reason for unbelief is an unwillingness to turn from sin. It is an unwillingness to surrender to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. You see, if Jesus did indeed rise from the dead, then He is Lord! Peter said in Acts 2:36, “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” Have you surrendered your life to the risen Lord? True faith involves yielding to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Why does the church gather for worship on Sunday, instead of the Jewish Sabbath? It is because we believe in the resurrection. Do

you regularly gather to worship the risen Christ on Sunday? If you have not surrendered your life to Christ, can you say you *truly believe* in His resurrection? Ah, I believe Lordship is the crux of the issue of belief.

Oh, dear friend, let me warn you that the response of unbelief is full of tragic significance. I have presented to you 3 groups of people who had strong evidence for the resurrection of Christ, and yet rejected it. And when we reject the truth, we open ourselves up to believing foolish ideas. We also tend to become hardened in unbelief. Just as Jesus predicted in Luke 16:31, “If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.” They were confronted with strong evidence that Jesus was alive, and yet how did they respond? They simply refused to believe. They had the truth and hated it. They even seem incapable of belief. This is called “judicial blindness.” Blindness to the truth is in itself a judgment from God.⁷

In light of all that I have shared with you, I believe that unbelief is a poor choice. So I appeal to you, instead of unbelief, choose instead:

B. A Surrendered Faith in Christ – The devoted women believed. The apostles believed, and most died for their faith. Down through the centuries millions have believed. On this very day as many as 1 billion are gathering in churches to confess faith in the risen Christ. Christians still are experiencing the power of the resurrection in their own lives. In Eph. 1:19-20 Paul says he wants us to know, “...what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead....” You can experience the life-changing, resurrection power of Jesus Christ!

Conclusion: At the University of Chicago Divinity School, they used to have what was called “Baptist Day” each year. It was a day when all the Baptists in the area were invited to the school because they wanted the Baptist dollars to keep coming in. On this day each one was to bring a lunch to be eaten outdoors in a grassy picnic area. Every “Baptist Day” the school would invite one of the greatest minds to lecture in the theological education center after lunch.

One year they invited Dr. Paul Tillich. You may be surprised to hear that on *Baptist Day*, Dr. Tillich spoke for two and one-half hours trying to prove that the resurrection of Jesus was false! He quoted scholar after scholar and book after book. He concluded that since there was no such thing as the historical resurrection, the religious tradition of the church was groundless, emotional mumbo-jumbo. He then asked if there were any questions.

After about 30 seconds, an old, African-American preacher with a head of short, woolly white hair stood up in the back of the auditorium. “Docta Tillich, I got one question,” he said as all eyes turned toward him. He reached into his sack lunch, pulled out an apple, and began eating it. “Docta Tillich ... CRUNCH, MUNCH...my question is a simple question...CRUNCH, CRUNCH...Now, I ain’t never read them books you read... CRUNCH, MUNCH... I don’t know nothin’ about Niebuhr and Heidegger.” ...CRUNCH, MUNCH. “All I wanna know is: This apple I am eating—is it bitter or sweet?” Dr. Tillich paused for a moment and answered in exemplary scholarly fashion: “I cannot possibly answer that question, for I haven’t tasted your apple.” The white-haired preacher dropped the core of his apple into his crumpled paper bag, looked up at Dr. Tillich and said calmly, “Neither have you tasted my Jesus.” The 1,000 plus in attendance could not contain themselves. The auditorium erupted with applause and cheers. Dr. Tillich thanked his

⁷ 2 Th. 2:10-12 says, “...They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth....”

audience and promptly left the platform.⁸

Psalm 34:8 says, “Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good; Blessed is the man who trusts in Him!” Once you experience the power of the resurrection of Jesus in your own life, you will become even more convinced that Jesus is alive! It was not a myth that changed my life, but the risen Lord Jesus. So take a step of faith and then you will know for yourself that Jesus is alive!

Again, what will *your* decision be? Will you join those who prefer to believe the lie? Or will you be one of us who believe that God raised Jesus from the dead as King of kings and Lord of lords. Will you trust in Him for salvation, and give your life over to Him as Lord? Isn't that what you want to do deep inside your heart? I can think of no better day to make that decision than on Easter Sunday. Why not do it today! Surrender to His Lordship in trust and faith, and confess Him as Savior.

Most in my audience today have made the decision to believe in Jesus as the Risen Lord and Savior. I have equipped you with evidence that you can share with others, perhaps this very day to explain what Easter Sunday is really about. Will you be a gospel witness of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, just like the women and other disciples?

Sources: William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series*; Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2021; Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture, Vol 7-Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House), 350-359, & Vol. 9-Luke, 318-322; J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Charles H. Spurgeon, *12 Sermons on the Resurrection*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968), 81-83; Jerry Vines, *Great Events in the Life of Christ* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1979); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Loyal: Matthew* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1980). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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⁸ As I told the story, I munched on an apple. This made the story more effective.