

What Really Happened on Easter?

Matthew 28:1-10

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Today is Easter. Perhaps you noticed? To one degree or another, it is celebrated all over the world. For all the hoopla, I wonder how many people actually realize what it's all about. Like the real story. How many know what actually happened? I've had adults tell me they grew up in America and had no idea about the backstory to Easter. It's an even smaller number who actually know what it means. Today my approach is simple. I want to simply tell the story of what really happened on the first Easter. Then, we'll explore what it means for us.

Let me just put your minds at ease about something. Yes, my goal is to convince you to believe. So relax, there's nothing hidden here. A guy that was there when it all happened wrote his account and added this, *"These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."* (John 20:31) I'm just doing in this message what John did in his gospel. Telling the story so *"that by believing you may have life in his name."*

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We are going to take up the story from another disciple who witnessed these things—Matthew. Right there is something that might surprise some; the resurrection is told in Scripture by eyewitnesses. The accounts are given by the actual eyewitness or told by people closely associated with eyewitnesses. The resurrection of Jesus is not an idea or a fanciful religious vision. Real people say it really happened. One proof that they really believed it happened is that most of them died defending it and the claims of Jesus in general.

Matthew sets the stage for what happened on Easter Sunday morning by making it clear that a resurrection was the last thing on the minds or in the expectations of the disciples. This was in spite of Jesus predicting what would happen to him. *"From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."* (Matthew 16:21)

The disciples never discerned what he was talking about. This played out in the story on Thursday night in the Garden of Gethsemane when Judas and the Roman soldiers came to arrest Jesus. If the disciples were on top of it, they might have thought, *Here they come, just like he said. He is about to be killed but don't worry, on the third day he will rise again. Steady, everyone. Steady.*

Instead, they ran like schoolgirls. Every one of them. Part of their challenge with understanding Jesus' predictions was their belief structure in first century Judaism. They believed in resurrection; just not now. There was a final resurrection at the end of time, for everybody. When it was all done. Jesus' predicting his own personal resurrection, separate from final resurrection, in the very near future, was out of their paradigm of understanding. Are we so different? When was the last funeral you went to, where you looked at the casket and thought, *Maybe he'll get up?*

So what really happened? The essentials begin on Friday. Jesus was framed with trumped up charges of sedition against Rome. Even the Roman governor Pilate knew the charge was ridiculous and washed his hands of it—literally. But for political expediency he approved of Jesus' crucifixion anyway. So Jesus was beaten, flogged, and taken just outside the city wall to a hill called Golgotha. He was stripped of his clothes. Nailed to a cross. And lifted to hang on those nails and that cross until he died.

The Romans crucified thousands of people and were terrifyingly good at it. But Jesus' crucifixion was the most exceptional of all them. His life was unique; supernatural, miraculous, confounding. His compassion was radical. He cared for the poor. He loved sinners. He befriended the marginalized in society. The whole shape of his life was so completely beyond the norm that all the religious establishment could think to do was kill him. He was just that different—almost like he was from another world. He was. He was God incarnate. God in the flesh.

What they didn't realize was that their murderous plans perfectly fulfilled why he had come to this world in the first place. The Bible explains Jesus' mission in 1 Timothy 1:15, "*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.*" He came to save us by dying the death our sins deserved and bearing the guilt our sins entail.

Let's get back to what happened. He died on the cross on Friday. He was buried by 6:00 Friday night by a few of his followers including some key women like Mary Magdalene and others. The scene at the end of chapter 27 is very dark. The miracle-working rabbi is dead. Pilate has secured the grave with a seal and soldiers. Jesus' disciples are in hiding. Jesus' body is in the tomb. Friday night passes. Saturday morning, afternoon, and evening pass.

"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." (Matthew 28:1) All four gospels start Easter the same. A group of women go to Jesus' tomb very early Sunday morning. Matthew lists two women by name: the famous Mary Magdalene is one. She was a very devoted follower of Jesus and personally assisted in his burial in this very tomb. Then there is the other Mary. I wonder if she minds that title. The other Mary. The lesser-known Mary. She had also assisted in his burial (27:61). Why did they come to the grave? Another gospel says to complete the embalming process. I think it was more than that as anyone who has lost a loved one can attest. Going to the graveside gives a sense of closeness; of ongoing relationship. They are still grieving. They want to be close to him, even if it's only his grave.

These women were part of the team that buried Jesus on Friday. Did they know where they were going? One of the theories that seeks to explain away the resurrection is that they simply went to the wrong tomb. That's very unlikely that both would have done so AND impossible that all the disciples and Romans and Pharisees and thousands of curious Jews would also go to the wrong tomb. After the resurrection the whole matter could easily be debunked by simply bringing Jesus' corpse out for all to see. They didn't because they couldn't. The women were at the right tomb.

As they were nearing 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."* (Matthew 28:2-3) God uses earthquakes to announce big events. He did it when Jesus died on the cross. He does it again here. God also makes announcements by sending angels. An angel told Mary that she, the virgin, was going to give birth to a son. The sky filled with angels singing and announcing that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

Here an angel comes, removes the stone in front of the tomb and sits on it. His appearance is like lightning and very white snow. His appearance was so stunning that the toughest guys of the day, Roman soldiers...look what happened. *"And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men."* (Verse 4)

It is not the earthquake or the angel that is most astounding. It is the news the angel shares. *"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.'"* (Verses 5-7)

I'd imagine it took a minute for this to sink in. *What? Did you say he's risen? Like, from the dead?* One of the arguments for the reliability of the resurrection is that it was so completely unexpected and outside the belief system of Judaism. This represented not just shocking news but it was out of their whole belief paradigm. The angel, knowing this was hard to believe, did something to assist.

There was a large stone rolled over the entrance to the grave. That's how they did it back then. The angel easily gets it out of the way. He says, *"Come, see the place where he lay."* The very place you placed him Friday. Sometimes it's mistakenly thought that the angel removed the stone so Jesus could get out. It had nothing to do with that. The stone was removed so that everyone could get in and see. *"He is not here, for he has risen."*

"Go quickly and tell his disciples." Here we have the first missionaries with the greatest news possible. Off they go about to have the single greatest moment in their lives.

"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!'" (Verses 8-9)

If you are Jesus, just conquering sin and death, having celebrated that victory in heaven itself, now back in your resurrected and glorified body, meeting for the first time two of your most devoted followers, what do you say? The word here according to all the scholars is just what the English sounds like, *"Greetings!"* Another paraphrase says, *"Good morning!"* I don't know why, but that just gets me a bit. It's like meeting your neighbor on a morning walk. *Hey. How are you?* Apparently Jesus didn't feel the need to spike the football or do a victory dance.

"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.'" (Verses 9-10) Why did Jesus appear to the women on their way to tell the disciples? No doubt for joy and love but also to verify the empty tomb and the words of the angels. If there had merely been an empty tomb and some supposed angelic visit, this story would have quickly fizzled. It could be easily explained by mere wishful thinking or even intoxication. But Jesus' physical, touchable appearance eliminates other possible explanations and only allows one, *he was resurrected*. We have seen him. Touched him. Spoken to him. He is alive!

The story from here is one of bewilderment and astonishment. The women get to the disciples and tell them. Peter and John rush to the tomb, find it empty, and leave in wonder. Two of the disciples were walking on a road when Jesus walks alongside them, explains to them that the Messiah had to suffer and die, then revealed that he was Jesus and disappeared. They run back to the rest of the disciples saying, we have seen him! Just then, according to Luke, Jesus appears to all of them in the upper room.

"And he said to them, 'Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate before them." (Luke 24:38–40)

His hands showed the scars. His feet showed the scars. The scars said it all. He really was the same Jesus that hung dead on the cross. But now he is very much alive! I'd like to talk about what the resurrection means by talking about what it doesn't mean.

What the Resurrection Doesn't Mean

Jesus was a fraud

If Jesus was a fraud and all his miracles were magic tricks and his claims to be the Son of God delusional, where would we find Jesus today? Right where all the other liars, frauds, and charlatans are—dead in their graves with the rest of humanity. Many people claim many things; even claim to be God. Which one do you listen to? My money's on the one that says he will rise from the dead, is crucified and certified dead by the best of the Roman army, and then three days later rises from the dead.

If Jesus really was risen from the dead, it separates him from every other religious figure in history. You can visit all their graves. There might be a Carnival cruise or vacation packages that include visiting the graves of the founders of Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. All of them are still there.

Jesus stands uniquely in history with a birth announced by prophecy and angels. He was a man whose life was marked by power and miracles who also claimed to be the single and only Savior of men. *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* (John 14:6) How could we possibly know if that statement is true? How do we know Jesus isn't a fraud? It is a claim so radical and exclusive. God validated the life and teachings of Jesus by raising him back to life. That's how we know.

God hates sinners

I have learned some things about love. I got married about three years ago. I have an almost 2-year-old daughter and another one on the way. In God's plan I became a parent a little later in life. I wondered in my single days about the whole parental love thing. It's a huge commitment to be a parent. It takes time. Energy. Money. Lots of money. Why would any rational person make such a commitment?

Now I know. The love that I have for my daughter is different but as intense a love as I have for anybody or anything. That love is put to the test all the time because parental love has to be put into action. Caring for her in this or that. We've had a scary run to the hospital emergency room. We're saving for college. It boggles the mind all the ways parents put love into action.

Can a child miss that a parent is making these sacrifices because of love? It happens all the time, especially with teenagers. "No, you're not allowed to tattoo the name of your boyfriend of two weeks because we love you." "You hate me!" Can we mistake love for hate? Can a sinner hear that God judges sin and assume that means God hates them? Can

a sinner hear that God sent his son to die and assume God to be a hate mongerer? Can this whole thing be misunderstood?

The cross and the resurrection are God putting divine love for sinners into action. The extraordinary lengths, which to us are miraculous, show the extent of God's love for us. He loves us in our sin and our guilt. He loves us when we hate him. He loves us in our rebellion against him.

Romans 5:8 says, "*God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*" He is just like a parent who goes on loving while a son or daughter screams accusations. God loves us in our sin and Jesus died for our sin. The resurrection doesn't say God hates us. It stands in history as the defining moment of divine love for you.

We all go to hell

Here is the wonderful reality and offer of God. Hell is where God's justice and holiness requires sinners to spend eternity. Hell is absence from God and love and beauty and everything else good. Hell is real. So is eternity. We are made for eternity and all humans will either be with God or be without God. One is heaven. The other is hell.

The resurrection doesn't mean we all go to hell. Instead it means there is real forgiveness of our sins made possible by Jesus' death on the cross. There is real eternal life granted to all who believe. It means God has provided a path to heaven, glory, beauty, and eternity with this God who loves us and will for all eternity. Which will it be for you?

This is a joke! Not if Jesus was resurrected. God doesn't love me! Not if Jesus was resurrected. I'm destined for hell! Not if you believe in Jesus as the risen Savior of the world. Eternal life is offered to all who believe. That's what the angel said. That's why the stone was rolled away. That's why Jesus appeared to Mary and the other Mary and the disciples. That's why he held out his hands and scars –to convince and assure them and us of what the angel said, "He is not here, for he has risen!" (Matthew 28:6)

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