

## Responding to the Resurrection Matthew 27:62-28:15

It's more than a bit ironic, isn't it? Jesus had told His disciples quite clearly, on at least three occasions, that He would rise from the dead on the third day after His crucifixion. But they seem to have forgotten what He said. And so as chapter 28 begins and Easter morning dawns, the women come to the tomb, not because they expect to receive the joyful news of Jesus' resurrection but, as other gospel writers tell us, only to finish preparing His body for burial. The announcement of the angel takes them completely by surprise.

So, isn't it ironic that Jesus' enemies remember what He said, even better than His disciples did? At the end of chapter 27, the chief priests and the Pharisees proclaim to Pilate Jesus' prophecy that He would rise from the dead. Now, it's not as though they believe Jesus' words. They simply want to remove any possibility that anyone else would believe Him. That's why they want the Roman guards sent to the tomb – to prevent anyone from ever believing that Jesus rose from the dead.

Matthew is the only one of the gospel writers to mention these Roman guards. And if we compare all the accounts of the events of Easter morning, it becomes clear that they were the only ones who witnessed the angel of the Lord descending from Heaven, shining like lightning. They were the ones who felt the earthquake and who saw the angel roll back the stone from the entrance to the tomb.

Maybe that's the sort of thing you would like to happen to you. Maybe you think that if you could just see something miraculous like that, maybe if you could just have some sort of overwhelming religious experience, then you would believe in God.

But the guards' reaction to all these amazing events is probably what any of us would do if we saw things like that – they shook with fear and passed out. This is, in fact, the sort of reaction people had throughout the Old Testament whenever they came into contact either with God or with His angels.

Yes, ever since Adam's fall it is the only sort of reaction that makes sense for us sinful human beings to have in the presence of holiness. For God's purity only serves to accentuate our wickedness, and His power is thus a reminder of the punishment that our guilt deserves.

But the reaction of the guards also reminds us that simply encountering God's holiness, simply having an experience of God's power has never been sufficient to bring people closer to God. For after Adam sinned, what did he do when God came to see him in the Garden of Eden?

He ran away from God and hid. When God came to visit His people on the top of Mt. Sinai, when they felt the earthquake and saw the fire and when God's people heard His law in all its perfection, what did they do? They trembled and stood afar off.

And maybe that's where you are today. Maybe the only thing you have ever heard about God is about His anger and wrath against sinners, about the hellfire and brimstone He holds in store for those who continue in rebellion against Him. All that is true – God is a God of unimaginable power and holiness, but it's only part of the story. The fear of the Lord, after all, is only the beginning of wisdom. It wasn't enough to bring the Roman guards close to God. It only made them pass out.

And because the guards were unconscious for a time, they probably didn't hear the words that the angel spoke to the women. But when they finally came to their senses, there's one thing that none of them could deny – the tomb where Jesus' body had been placed was in fact empty.

And it is the empty tomb that makes Christianity stand apart among the worlds' religions. After all, Confucius is buried in his home town of Qufu in China. The Buddha was cremated, and his ashes are scattered in various shrines. The Mosque of the Prophet in Medina houses the tomb of Mohammed. Joseph Smith, founder of Mormonism, is buried in Nauvoo, Illinois. The devotees of all these religions make no attempt to deny that their founders are long since dead.

But Christians claim something entirely different. We claim that, according to Jesus' own predictions, He rose from the dead on the third day after His death. This historical fact is the foundation on which the entire Christian faith rests. As Paul clearly says in I Corinthians 15, if Christ is not risen, our preaching is empty and our faith is also empty. If Christ is not risen, then all the prophets and apostles are false witnesses, and no one should believe anything they have said.

But if Christ is in fact risen from dead, then everything they have said, indeed everything Jesus said about Himself must be true. If Christ is risen, then He is the Suffering Servant Who takes away the sin of His people, dying to pay the penalty all our sins deserve. If Christ is risen, then He is the glorious Son of David, the Anointed One Who holds all power and authority even now. If Christ is risen, then He is the Divine Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, the One through Whom and for Whose glory all things have been created. If Christ is risen, then He is coming again establish His reign on Earth as it is in Heaven. If Christ is risen, then one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that He is Lord.

But isn't it strange – the Roman guards had incontrovertible proof that Jesus Christ was in fact risen from the dead – they felt the earthquake and saw the angel roll back the stone from the

tomb. And they told all these things to the religious leaders of the day. But their only response to these clear truths was to conspire together to spread a lie. Oh, they couldn't deny that the tomb was empty, but they decided to tell people that Jesus' disciples had come in the night and had stolen His body.

Now, on the face of it, this is simply preposterous. At the time of Jesus' death His disciples were too afraid to admit that they even knew Him. Why, on the third day after His crucifixion would they suddenly have had the courage to approach a group of Roman soldiers guarding the tomb? How could they have broken the seal and rolled the stone away from the tomb without attracting the attention of those guards? And how could they have hoped to hide Jesus' body in the midst of a crowded city like Jerusalem, especially during the Passover festival when people from all over the world were simply everywhere?

No, the lie spread by the religious leaders and the Roman guards doesn't make any sense. But it does show the extent to which people will go to deny the plain truth about Jesus. Even today, even in the face of such overwhelming evidence that Jesus did in fact rise from the dead, many so-called educated people continue to deny the resurrection of Christ. Some say that Jesus didn't really die on the cross – as if Roman soldiers didn't know perfectly well how to kill people and to make sure that they were in fact dead. Some say that when Jesus' disciples claimed they had seen Him alive after His death that they were simply hallucinating – as if that group of women who came to the tomb could somehow all have the same hallucination at once, and that they could take hold of the feet of a phantom.

And none of the doubters, none of the skeptics can explain how Jesus' cowardly disciples were suddenly transformed into the most courageous of messengers, travelling all over the world spreading the good news of Jesus Christ, all of them choosing to suffer and even to die rather than to deny the fact of His resurrection. No, it's much easier to believe that Jesus did in fact rise from the dead than to believe any of the lies the skeptics have concocted over the years.

But there's one thing about their story that should give us pause – just knowing that Jesus had risen from the dead didn't draw any of those guards or those religious leaders closer to Jesus. Just knowing the things that Jesus taught wasn't enough either – remember, the religious leaders remembered Jesus' predictions of His resurrection as well. It doesn't matter how straight your facts are, or how correct your opinions about Jesus may be – just knowing the right things about Jesus isn't enough.

So what is it that really makes the difference? If overwhelming religious experience isn't enough, if the fear of God isn't enough and if knowing the truth about Jesus isn't enough, what is it that transforms peoples' lives? When the women came to the tomb that morning, what was it that transformed their grief into joy?

For think about it: they didn't even see as much as the guards saw. They didn't feel the earthquake or see the stone rolled away. They didn't even see the angel in all his glory. By the time they showed up, he had toned down his appearance to the extent that Mark and Luke simply report on how dazzlingly white his robe was. All they really saw was the empty tomb.

And they knew the same things the religious leaders knew. Notice that the angel simply repeats things that Jesus had already told them – that He had risen as He had said He would, and that He would meet His disciples in Galilee, just as He had said on the night of the Last Supper.

So, what was the difference? If it wasn't some overwhelming experience and if it wasn't correct teaching, what was it that made them want to tell the truth about Jesus instead of spreading lies?

In the first place, the women didn't just know what Jesus said – they believed His Word. For when the angel reminded them of what Jesus said, they didn't doubt it. That's why they ran to tell His disciples, not just that the tomb was empty, but that Jesus had risen from the dead.

But why did they believe what the angel said? Because of their relationship with Christ. Remember, the religious leaders hated Jesus, and wanted nothing to do with Him. Even though they had seen Jesus do miracles with their own eyes, and even though they heard the guards' eyewitness testimony that Jesus did in fact rise from the dead, they refused to believe it. They chose not to believe it.

In contrast, these women loved Jesus. And so when they heard the angel's words, they ran from the tomb with fear, yes, but also with great joy. They believed that Jesus is alive because their knowledge about the empty tomb was combined with their love for Jesus.

Oh, but there was one other difference, wasn't there? For verse 9 tells us that Jesus chose to reveal Himself to the women as alive from the dead. The reason they could bow down before Him and worship Him, the reason they took hold of His feet was because Jesus appeared to them and spoke to them.

The same thing is true of Jesus today. It's not knowing things about Jesus that makes you a Christian. It's not having a supernatural experience of some kind that makes you a Christian. The reason anyone believes the words of Jesus, the reason anyone follows Jesus is because

Jesus first reveals Himself to us, giving us new hearts that long to respond to Him not with fear but with faith, not with rebellion, but with obedience.

For that's how these women responded to Jesus, isn't it? Because of their relationship with Christ they believed His Word. They went and did what He said, telling the disciples the good news that Christ is risen.

And that's what we are called to do as well, not just to know the good news but to believe it, to believe that Jesus is the only Savior of the World, worthy of all our trust, to believe that Jesus is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, worthy of all our obedience and all our praise. We are called to believe that this is good news, that Jesus is the only One Who can give life true meaning, the only One Who can transform our sorrow into joy.

But just as the women did, we are also called to put our faith into action, to spread the good news. And how can we do anything else? For if Christ is truly risen, if Christ truly reigns, if Christ is truly coming again, then how can we possibly keep silent? And why should we want to?