

Reactions to the Resurrection Matthew 28:1-15

What more proof could you possibly want? An earthquake, which had to have been felt throughout the city of Jerusalem. An angel of God, clad in white garments and shining like lightning, descending from heaven and rolling the stone away from Jesus' tomb. Such Hollywood special effects experienced in real life proved to be so overwhelming that the soldiers guarding the tomb passed out from sheer terror.

And notice that the chief priests and elders, the ones who had stationed those guards at the tomb, didn't seem to question such a frankly unbelievable story. They didn't accuse the soldiers of lying to cover up their failure to keep the tomb secure, in the way that a student might insist that he really had done his homework, only to have the dog eat it. No, the religious leaders seem to have taken the soldiers' outlandish tale at face value. In short, they seem to have accepted the fact that some sort of supernatural event had occurred on Easter morning. They may even have been willing to entertain the possibility that Jesus really had walked out of His tomb.

So, why didn't the religious leaders take the next logical step and believe everything else Jesus had said about Himself? After all, they had remembered his promise to rise from the dead after three days – that's why they had insisted on sealing His tomb and surrounding it with guards. They had been trying to prevent Jesus' disciples from stealing His body and making up a lie that He had kept that promise. So, given all the evidence pointing to His resurrection, why didn't the chief priests and elders believe that He was, in fact, Who He claimed to be?

For remember, while he was still on the cross, they had demanded a far lesser miracle of Jesus, a far easier proof of His power. "We will believe in you," they had insisted, if only he would "come down from the cross" (27:42). So, surely it would have been much harder for a dead man to walk out of His tomb than for a still-living man to remove nails from his hands and feet. Surely the empty tomb should have proved to the chief priests and elders that Jesus was, in fact, the King of Israel, the Lord's Messiah.

But regardless of the clear eyewitness testimony that was placed before them, and in spite of Jesus' prediction of His resurrection, they continued in their stubborn denial of His authority, their open rebellion against Him. In fact, they quickly transformed themselves into exactly the sort of charlatans they had feared Jesus' disciples would become. For they became the deceivers, the ones lying about the resurrection of Christ. In fact, they went so far as to pay the guards to deny the amazing events that had so obviously overwhelmed them.

Now, it's easy for us to denounce those ancient religious leaders for their blatant hypocrisy. It's easy for us to condemn their clueless hatred. But we need to take a step further and ask why – why did they keep on resisting the claims of Christ in the face of such compelling evidence to the contrary? Well, it had been obvious even to Pontius Pilate that they were envious of Him (27:18). After all, if Jesus really was the Messiah, they would have to recognize Him as the undisputed leader of God's people – and that would necessarily mean giving up their own power and influence.

Moreover, if Jesus really did rise from the dead, that would prove the truth of everything else He had ever said – including His numerous and pointed criticisms of all the moral and ethical rules they had built up around the Law of Moses. Yes, if Jesus really had been telling the truth, they would not

only have to abandon much of their tradition and their so-called scholarship. They would also have to change so many of the ways they had been living.

And now those chief priests and scribes don't seem quite so strange, do they? After all, many, many modern people continue to reject the claims of Christ for similar reasons. They don't want to give up the absolute authority they claim over their own choices. They don't want to change their self-constructed systems of morals and ethics. They want to keep living the way they want to, and believing what they want to, and imagining that they are completely in control of everything about themselves.

And so no – the historical evidence for the resurrection of Christ simply doesn't faze those kinds of people. It doesn't matter to them that His tomb is empty. They shrug off the fact that, even though none of His eleven disciples stuck with Him at the time of His arrest and crucifixion, they were all willing to die rather than to deny that He had in fact been raised from the dead. They simply don't care that people throughout history continue to be radically changed by their own encounters with the risen Christ – people like Paul who was suddenly and completely transformed from a persecutor of the Church into an apostle of Christ.

And it doesn't matter to so many modern people that their own delusions of competence are routinely challenged by the circumstances of their lives. It doesn't matter how helpless they become in the face of sickness or even death itself. It doesn't matter how many Christians bless them with the same sort of self-sacrificial, unconditional love that Jesus so clearly displayed on the cross. No, they close their eyes to all these and so many other demonstrations of God's power and truth, clinging instead to the idol of autonomy. Like those ancient chief priests and elders, they refuse to bow before the resurrected Christ, the King of Israel, the Son of God.

Okay, so why, in contrast, did the women rejoice at the angels' news? After all, the other gospel narratives make it clear that they didn't actually witness any of the Stephen Spielberg stuff that overwhelmed the guards in verses 2-4: the women didn't see the angel descending from heaven, shining like lightning and rolling the huge stone away from the tomb as easily as we might flick a tennis ball across a court. No, by the time the women showed up at the tomb, the only unusual thing about the angels was how shockingly white their clothes were – so the women were probably most afraid not of their mindblowing power but rather of their sudden and unexpected appearance. In short, the only truly marvelous thing the women witnessed the first thing on Easter morning was what they didn't see – the body of Jesus.

And that means that, when the women first heard the news of the resurrection of Christ, they stood exactly where the chief priests and elders stood and where we stand – seeing no miraculous visible evidence themselves, and having to rely only on the testimony of others. But while the chief priests and elders refused to accept the soldiers' explanation for the empty tomb, the women rejoiced when the angels told them exactly the same thing.

So, why the big difference in these two reactions? Because of the different relationships they had with Jesus. For remember: the chief priests and elders were jealous of their power and didn't want to change the way they were living. In short, they didn't want Jesus to be alive from the dead because they didn't want Him to be their reigning King.

In contrast, the women's response to the news of Christ's resurrection flowed out of their complete trust in Him, their undivided devotion to Him. After all, Luke tells us that Jesus had driven seven demons out of Mary Magdalene. And the other Mary may very well have been His own mother. So it's no wonder that they had followed Him from Galilee, ministering to Him and His disciples. And it's no wonder that they had come to the tomb to finish preparing His body for burial – it was the least they could do for someone they had loved so much.

And so, when the angel told them that Jesus had risen from the dead, well, that was the greatest news they could possibly have heard. So it's no wonder that, even though they were frightened by something so miraculous, something so impossible to understand, they were also filled with great joy. It's no wonder that they ran to tell the rest of His followers. Just like the chief priests and elders, their response to the empty tomb flowed out of their relationship to Christ.

For what happened when He finally revealed Himself to them? Instead of seeing Him as a threat to their autonomy, instead of resenting Him for daring to insist that they change the way they were living, they prostrated themselves before Him, falling to the ground, and daring only to touch His feet. They thus treated Him the way ancient people treated their kings and their gods – they worshipped Him.

So what about us? What is our response to the facts that Paul recounted for us in our responsive reading? What difference does it make to us that Jesus fulfilled so many Old Testament prophecies in the way that He lived and the way that He died? Are we really grateful that He went to the cross to atone for all our sins?

And does it matter to us that He was raised on the third day, just as He said He would? Does it matter that so many people saw Him alive in the following days, and that so many of those witnesses eventually chose to die rather than to deny the fact that He really did walk out of that tomb? Does it matter to us that He has transformed so many lives over the last 2000 years? Does the fact of Christ's resurrection, does the message of Easter fill us with joy?

Well, we won't have that kind of joy if we go on denying our sin, if we continue to be blind to our brokenness, if we try to justify ourselves by our actions, if we cling to our autonomy, if we insist on being our own gods. In that case, Easter will be just another holiday, and once the eggs are all collected and the family dinner is concluded we'll go back to our old ways and our old lives. There will be no transformation for us – and there will be no joy.

But if we are truly devoted to Jesus, if we love Him the way those women did, we will share the joy they felt as they ran from that empty tomb. We will have that kind of joy if we will confess our brokenness and our sin, claiming the risen Jesus as our Savior. We will have that joy if we bow down before Him, submitting every part of our lives to Him as our Lord and King. We will have that joy if we turn our focus away from ourselves and worship Him alone. In short, we will have that joy if we are in a right relationship with Christ.

So yes, the good news is that the Jesus who was crucified is no longer in that tomb. He has risen just as He said. And He really did appear to the women in the garden, and then to Peter, and then to the rest of His disciples, in the upper room and by the Sea of Galilee. He even appeared to more than five hundred of His followers at one time. Jesus is alive from the dead – in fact, He has conquered death for

all who trust in Him. He is our risen Savior, our ruling and reigning King. And He has been transforming the lives of His followers for 2000 years.

Christ is risen – so let us turn aside from our sin and ourselves. Christ is risen – so let us rejoice!