



# EASTER SUNDAY

*Matthew 28:1-20*

## WHAT WILL YOU DO WITH THE RESURRECTION?

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On Friday, we gathered to remember the last few hours before Jesus' death on the cross. Ray's song reminds us of the reality of those hours – the suffering which Jesus faced and the important work which it accomplished. It is sobering and thought-provoking. But we can look back on it from this side of the resurrection – we know how the story ends!

I wonder what it must have been like for those who lived those hours between the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are not given a lot of details – just glimpses. We see the followers of Jesus in confusion with many of them running away or hiding behind locked doors in fear that they will be next. We see a few followers, mainly women, staying with Jesus and arranging his burial. The Jewish religious leaders, while probably quite happy at Jesus' crucifixion, remain uneasy as they remember Jesus' assertions that He would come back from the dead. While they may not have believed this would actually happen, they are cautious enough to ask Pilate to station Roman guards at the tomb to make sure nothing happens. No one is at peace. All are on edge.

### THE EYEWITNESSES TO THE RESURRECTION

- The initial reaction: *fear*

This is the setting as the dawn begins to dawn that Sunday morning almost 2,000 years ago. The Roman soldiers are probably dozing off, wondering what all the fuss is about – what more can happen with a dead man? Meanwhile, some of the women followers of Jesus make their way to the tomb. They must have been physically and emotionally exhausted after the upheaval of the previous days. They didn't know what the future held.

Suddenly, the ground shook as an angel descended and rolled the stone away from the front of the tomb. So much for the careful sealing and guarding of the tomb! Even Roman soldiers were no match for an angel! The angel didn't roll back the stone to let Jesus out – He was already gone. No stone or seal or soldier could hold him in the grave. The stone was rolled away to let others look in and see for themselves that Jesus was indeed gone.

Those unperturbable Roman soldiers, who had probably travelled all over the Roman empire and seen many strange and frightening sights, shook with fear and fell into a dead faint. But the women didn't! How embarrassing for the soldiers! I don't know why the women didn't faint. Maybe they were prepared for a surprise by a glimmer of hope and expectation in their hearts that Jesus was going to do something to turn things around. After all, these women would have seen Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead after he had been dead for several days. They would have known it was not outside

the realm of possibility that Jesus wasn't finished yet. But it still must have been terrifying as the ground shook and they were blinded by the brightness of the angel.

- The Considered Response – *BELIEF VS UNBELIEF*

Once the initial reaction began to wear off, how did those at the tomb respond? We don't have much information on the soldiers at this point. We don't know how quickly they recovered from their fainting spell and what they might have heard of the angel's words. We do know that several of the soldiers who kept watch as Jesus died did in fact come to a level of belief. Some of those soldiers may have also been at the tomb. We are not told. We do know from their later actions that most of them did not believe.

We are told more about the women who were there. The first words the angel said was, "Don't be afraid." This isn't a condemnation for their very natural fear, but a reassurance that they are safe. The angel goes on to tell them that what Jesus said would happen (and maybe what the women were still hoping would happen) had indeed come to pass. Jesus had risen from the dead. And they didn't have to take his word for it – they could come into the tomb and see for themselves. I don't imagine the women were thinking through all the implications of Jesus' resurrection at that moment. but they did believe.

- The Resultant Action – *GO AND TELL*

How do we know they believed? They chose to do what the angel said and go and tell the disciples that Jesus was alive and wanted to meet them in Galilee. Matthew says that as they went, they were "very frightened but also filled with great joy". I think that is exactly how I would be feeling if I had been one of them! What happened next is wonderful. As they are going – after they had shown some measure of belief – Jesus meets with them. What a wonderful assurance that they are not going crazy! What a helpful boost to their confidence as they prepare to face the sceptical disciples. Surprisingly, Jesus chose to reveal His resurrection first to women. And, because he realised the questioning and disbelief they would face, He boosted their confidence and their believability by meeting with them in person. They responded by doing what He asked them to do and went to tell the disciples.

The soldiers also choose to go and tell their story to the Jewish religious leaders. But while the women's action came out of belief and the joy that came from that, the soldiers went out of fear. They didn't go to their commanders. Their one job was to make sure that Jesus' body stayed in the tomb and they had totally failed. They were afraid of what might happen to them.

## **THE LEADERS**

The women are heading to see the disciples and the soldiers are heading to see the Jewish religious leaders. What would these leaders do with the reports of the resurrection?

- The Jewish religious leaders

What a shock the Jewish leaders must have had when the soldiers arrived with their story of an earthquake, an angel and an empty tomb! All their best-laid plans had come to nothing and what they most feared had happened. But did that convince them to believe in Jesus and His resurrection? No! They stubbornly remained in their unbelief. And that unbelief entangled them in a web of fear and lies and sin. Not only did they become entrenched in their unbelief, but they pulled others down with them. They bribed the soldiers to go and tell others a false story which many believed. I am sure the soldiers didn't care what they said as long as they didn't get into trouble with their commanders and made a bit of money out of it as well. But I wonder if all the soldiers were happy with the lie? Did the conscience of some bother them so that they eventually changed and believed? What about the Jewish leaders? We do know that some did become followers of Jesus. Did this cover-up force them to declare their belief and even force them out of their leadership role? The Bible doesn't tell us everything we'd like to know!

- The disciples

Meanwhile, the women are heading to tell the disciples what has happened. Each Gospel tells us different part of what happened next. Matthew's account doesn't go into detail, choosing to just say that the disciples did as Jesus had asked them to do and went to the mountain in Galilee. We know from the other accounts, however, that it took a while for all the disciples to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead. It seems that Jesus was willing to be patient with them and to give each of them what they needed to come to belief. The disciples on the road to Emmaus needed to understand how the resurrection fit into their Jewish Scripture. Thomas needed to physically touch Jesus to be assured that Jesus had risen with a physical body. Peter needed personal time with Jesus to be assured of His forgiveness. Some needed to see Jesus multiple times before finally came to belief, but eventually their belief was put into action when they went to Galilee to meet Jesus as He had asked them to do.

There, we are told, they worshipped Him even though some of them still had doubts. The word for doubt here is not like the unbelief of the Jewish leaders. It is more a hesitancy, a shakiness in their belief. To be honest, I am so glad that we know that some of them still doubted because we often have a bit of shakiness in our belief, don't we? It is good to see that even with this shakiness, Jesus accepted them and included them in His plans.

As they met with Jesus on that mountain in Galilee, Jesus took their belief to the next level by calling them to now "go and tell" what they have believed. The Jewish religious leaders had told the soldiers to spread falsehood about the resurrection, but Jesus is telling his disciples to spread the truth about the resurrection. In the Bible, belief or faith is more than just an intellectual assent to the truth. True belief requires us to go on to build our lives on what we say we believe.

The disciples are commissioned to go and make more disciples. These new disciples must deliberately and publicly identify themselves with belief in Jesus through baptism. By doing so, they are putting themselves under His authority and committing themselves to following Him. But they won't be able to follow Him if they don't know anything about Him and what He taught, so they must learn this – not just to increase their intellectual knowledge but so that they can choose to obey Him and bring their lives into alignment with His life and His truth.

I am sure the disciples continued to have fear as they went out into the world to tell others about Jesus, but they moved through that fear to find joy in following Jesus. Yes, at times they hesitated and doubted, but they chose to move beyond that to worship. And the more they came to understand of the truth, the more it changed their lives. And they couldn't stop talking about it to others. A while after the resurrection, the Jewish leaders arrested Peter and John and tried to get them to stop talking about Jesus. Maybe they thought that what had worked with the Roman soldiers would work with the disciples. We read that they "*commanded them never again to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, 'Do you think God wants us to obey you rather than him? We cannot stop telling others about everything we have seen and heard.'*" (Acts 4:18-20) Their lives had changed because of the resurrection, and nothing would ever be the same again.

## **WHAT WILL YOU DO?**

The choices that the disciples and the Jewish leaders faced then still face us today. Jesus' death and resurrection doesn't give us the option to stay neutral. We either believe it or we don't. We either allow it to change us or we don't.

Fear is an understandable reaction to the resurrection. If it is true, then nothing can stay the same in our lives. It breaks into our world and demands that we acknowledge that there is something more than what we can see, more than what we can control. It demands that we acknowledge our sinfulness and our need of a saving God. It demands that we submit our lives to the God who loves us and wants to change us to be like Himself. This is the inconvenient truth that the Jewish religious leaders had to face. Their fear of the impact it would make on their world caused them to cover it up and hope that they could go on as if it hadn't happened.

But if we do choose to believe, what then? Our fear will be turned to joy and worship as we realise that the God who raised Jesus from the dead is the God who is patient with our shaky belief and will never give up on us. That His gift of salvation is bigger than we can imagine and will change us for the better in ways we don't even know need changing. That he will always be with us and will always enable us to do whatever He calls us to do. We will never need to be afraid again.

Do we really believe in the resurrection? Are we willing to allow it to change our lives like this? Do we believe it so much that we *“cannot stop telling others about everything we have seen and heard?”* Easter is always a good time to stop and think about what we really believe and how it is impacting our lives.

What will you do with the resurrection?