

Triumph of the Cross

Matthew 28:1-10

A few years ago in a certain church marketing newsletter, called the Church's Advertising Network, a campaign was promoted to attract people to church during the season of Easter. In this public relations campaign, it was suggested that the cross be removed from the altar. According to the author, a survey had revealed that the cross is one of those symbols that the new generation of church goers considered too "churchy ". One pastor interviewed for the campaign gave his whole hearted endorsement. "We are going to attempt to concentrate on the resurrection, and not the death of Jesus."

Can you imagine Easter without the cross? Is it possible to have resurrection without crucifixion? No. It distorts the entire gospel if crucifixion is separated from resurrection. The road to the empty tomb will forever pass by a cross. The one who was raised from the dead is none other than the crucified Christ. Easter without a cross is a hoax.

Easter is GOOD NEWS because of the cross. Paul gives a summary of the gospel in 1 Cor.15:3-4, **"For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures."**

We have come to the cross over the last few Sundays. And we have tried to comprehend the awesome power of the atonement that Jesus paid for us at the cross. But we cannot stop at the cross. Both Jesus' death and his resurrection are essential to our salvation. The resurrection without the atoning death would have been *powerless*. The death of Christ without the resurrection would have been *pointless*. The resurrection shows us the triumph of the cross.

The Apostles and the early church constantly preached the resurrection -- for no one who denies the resurrection can truly be a Christian. In fact, the very first sermon of the church, on the day of Pentecost was centered on the resurrection. PETER preached in Acts 2:23-24, **" This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him."**

JOHN, the last of the living Apostles while exiled on Patmos saw Jesus who said to him, **"I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death"** (Rev.1:18).

There have been many throughout the last 2,000 years who try to disprove and deny the resurrection of Christ. There have been and are many who neither deny nor accept it but ignore it. Such was the case with the Jewish authorities and the guards. Theirs was a response of unbelief and conspiracy. They were witnesses of what happened yet they refused to believe.

Matthew tells us **"Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see 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 from the door, and sat on it. His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. And the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men."** (28:1-4).

Skipping down to verse 11 we pick up the guard's story again. **"Now while they were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened. When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, 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.'" So they took the money and did as they were instructed; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day."**

For many people, the resurrection of Christ is merely an ancient conspiracy theory. In the face of insurmountable evidence, they absolutely refuse to believe that truth of the gospel that Jesus died, was buried and rose from the grave.

So the stolen body theory is just one of a host of rationalizations that, rather than disproving the resurrection, really just prove our deep need for a savior. The fact is that it often takes more faith to believe in most of these theories than it does to believe the obvious: that Jesus rose from the dead. Yet there are those who in spite of the evidence continue in their unbelief.

Johnny Hart who draws BC. often has Christian themes in his cartoons. In one a caveman is on his knees praying and he says "It's not easy to believe in you, God. We never see you. How come you never show yourself?"

Then in the next frame he asks: "How do we know you exist?" - just then a volcano blows up in the background, a daisy sprouts from the ground and topples a rock, a wave washes over him, two meteors converge in the sky to form the image of a cross.

Finally the drenched caveman stands up and says: "Okay, Okay...I give up!" And as he walks by a burning bush and an empty tomb, he mutters, "Every time I bring up this subject all we get is interruptions."

Some refuse to believe even when confronted with the evidence. On the other hand, God has always had His people who respond to the resurrection in great faith. In fact, such was the case with the first witnesses, two dedicated women who saw both Jesus' death and witnessed His resurrection. Theirs was a response of faith and joy. As we look briefly at the women's response, I want you to ask yourself, "How will I respond to the resurrection?"

Look at how they respond:

I. They Hear the Good News and Believe. (Vv. 5-8)

In verse 2 we saw the angel who **"came and rolled back the stone from the door and sat on it."** Now in verses 5-7 the angel speaks to the women, **"Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And 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."**

The angel reminds them of Jesus' promise and confronts them with the empty tomb. It may seem too good to be true. But the angel is calling them to believe.

It is still a fact that there are many who feel that the promises of Jesus are too good to be true. But the empty tomb confirms the word of Jesus. He can be trusted. We can believe in Him. We can take Him at His word.

Psalm 30 a great testimony of someone whom the Lord had delivered from the depths of despair. Psalm 30:11 says, "**You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; You have put off my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness.**" Certainly these women had the same testimony. Verse 8 says, "**So they went out quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to bring His disciples word.**" Even though they were still in "fear" their fear was overshadowed by a sensation of "great joy" as the significance of what they had witnessed began to become clear in their minds. Their "joy" was so great they "**ran to bring His disciples word.**"

Only one thing could have turned their despair and fear into joy. They believed the good news. But what happens next is even better:

II. They Meet Jesus and Worship (v. 9).

"And as they went to tell His disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, 'Rejoice!' So they came and held Him by the feet and worshiped Him."

As the women "**quickly**" left the tomb and were on their way to tell the disciples, "**Jesus met them**", He said, "**Rejoice.**"

Their response was instant and instinctive. It was a response of joy and worship. They fell on their knees and "**held Him by the feet and worshipped Him.**" Right there on the road a worship service broke out. They had felt the earthquake, seen the angel and examined the empty tomb, but seeing Jesus brought it all together. The confusion was gone. They saw Him die on the cross. They witnessed His burial. Now they saw with their own eyes their resurrected Lord! Tears of inexpressible joy fell on His nail-pierced feet!

I believe anyone who has been born again has experienced that same "joy." Can you remember it? And how do you respond?

When we really see Jesus, it doesn't matter where we are or what we are doing, we fall on our faces in worship. The question is: do we see Jesus? The disciples didn't see Him that morning but the women did. Why? They were acting in devotion doing what God had commanded them to do. When we draw close to the Lord and walk in humble obedience to Him, we see Jesus at work all around us. Then worship is as natural a response in us as it was in them. We fall at His feet in joyful worship.

III. They Are Sent by Jesus to Share (vs.7, 10).

Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me."

Jesus repeated the angel's instruction to not be afraid but to go to the disciples and tell them to "**go to Galilee**" where He would meet with them.

When the women have discovered the Risen Christ, their first duty is to "**Go and tell.**" I am convinced that if we are going to persuade the watching world in 2010 to believe the truths found in Scripture, we must answer this question: "Why do they find it incredible? Why don't they believe?" And I submit that the answer to this question is not primarily intellectual. It is no more difficult for people in 2010 to believe in resurrection than it was in the first century. The facts are the same now as then. If we are going to reach our communities and our world with the Good News of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, we have to give more than logical arguments, we have to show them what a resurrection looks like.

We must show what it looks like when an alcoholic wife-beater publicly repents and trusts Jesus for salvation. We must show what it looks like when a single mother is rescued from her sin and poverty through the faithful and loving ministry of a local body of Christ. We must show what it looks like when a self-righteous church member admits that he is a sinner in desperate need of the grace of Jesus and genuinely treads through the waters of baptism, despite the fact that his name has been on a membership roll practically since birth. In short, we must show living and breathing examples of those who were "**dead in trespasses and sins**" but were "**made alive together with Christ**" (Eph 2:1-5).

This is the kind of resurrection story we need to tell this Easter. A story that is historical. A story that is factual. A story that is scientific, logical, and sound. But, most importantly, it is a story we believe because we have seen it and we share because it has changed our lives. It's the story that we live and love to tell, first and foremost, because we know...it's true.

Is it your story? The gospel is good news. And it is not too hard to believe. The question today is not CAN you believe in Jesus—YOU CAN. To believe that Jesus is the Son of God who died for your sins and was raised on the third day makes more sense than anything else we could say about Him. Yes you have the ability to believe. In fact the Bible says in Ephesians 2 that the faith that you need to believe in Jesus is not of yourselves it is a gift of God. God makes saving faith available to everyone.

The real question then is not CAN you believe? But WILL you believe? Will you take that free gift of faith and decide to trust Jesus today?