



Sunday School Lesson for April 11, 2004.
Released on: April 9, 2004 (Good Friday)

Study Matthew 28:1-15. The Resurrection
Questions and answers below.

TIME: A.D. 30

PLACES: near Golgotha; Jerusalem

Matthew 28:1-15

- 1 In the end of the sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre.
- 2 And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it.
- 3 His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow:
- 4 And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men.
- 5 And the angel answered and said unto the women, Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified.
- 6 He is not here: for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay.
- 7 And go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead; and, behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him: lo, I have told you.
- 8 And they departed quickly from the sepulchre with fear and great joy; and did run to bring his disciples word.
- 9 And as they went to tell his disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, All hail. And they came and held him by the feet, and worshipped him.
- 10 Then said Jesus unto them, Be not afraid: go tell my brethren that they go into Galilee, and there shall they see me.
- 11 Now when they were going, behold, some of the watch came into the city, and showed unto the chief priests all the things that were done.
- 12 And when they were assembled with the elders, and had taken counsel, they gave large money unto the soldiers,
- 13 Saying, Say ye, His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept.
- 14 And if this come to the governor's ears, we will persuade him, and secure you.
- 15 So they took the money, and did as they were taught: and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day.

Lesson Background

The Jewish Sabbath was past, and Sunday morning was dawning when some women came to the sepulchre of Joseph of Arimathea, where the body of Jesus had been laid (Matt. 27:57-60; 28:1).

Imagine their surprise when they were met by the angel of the Lord, who had rolled back the stone covering the opening. He calmed them and announced that Jesus had risen from the dead.

In the meantime, those who had been guarding the tomb came back into the city of Jerusalem to report that the body of Jesus was missing. The chief priests met with the elders to decide how they might handle this situation.

Communication (Matthew 28:1-7)

1. Why did the women come to the tomb on Sunday (Matthew 28:1)?

The women who came to the tomb had not made the trip there and prepared the body as they wished on the Sabbath, for that was a day for rest (Luke 23:56). Now the Sabbath had ended. It was beginning to dawn on Sunday morning when Mary Magdalene and other women came to the sepulchre (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:1,10).

This tomb was owned by a man named Joseph of Arimathea, who had begged Pilate to give him the body of Jesus so that he could bury it there. The two Marys mentioned in Matthew 28:1 had been there when Joseph had rolled a great stone over the opening (27:57-61). They expected the stone to still be there as they approached, but they were due for a surprise.

2. What happened as the women arrived at the sepulchre (vs. 2-4)?

"There was a great earthquake." Only Matthew mentions this earthquake in addition to the earlier one that accompanied Jesus' death (Matthew 27:51, 54). Quite possibly these were more significant to the Jewish writer Matthew than to the Gentile writers Mark and Luke, as earthquakes were sometimes associated with appearances of God on the earth in the Old Testament (e.g., 1 Kings 19:11-13; Isaiah 29:6).

According to Mark 16:5, the angel, or messenger from God, looks like "a young man." He rolled back the stone from the door and sat on it. His appearance and clothing had supernatural radiance, perhaps reflecting the glory of heaven. Luke tells us that there were two angels, but it is common for writers to focus on only one figure when more than one are actually present.

"The keepers," or guards, are frightened out of their senses. The shock of the angel's appearance sends them into a dead faint. Perhaps we would react the same way!

The chief priests had requested guards from Pilate for the purpose of keeping the disciples from stealing the body (Matthew 27:62-66). Most likely these are Roman guards that serve as part of the temple police, a cadre of soldiers who maintain order in the temple. They serve the wishes of the religious officials at the permission of Pilate. This would explain why the members of this team of guards report back to the chief priests initially, and not to Pilate (Matthew 28:11-15).

3. The chief priests seemed to have understood Jesus' predictions of resurrection better than the disciples did. How could that be? How can modern disciples avoid the type of blindness that infected the first-century disciple?

Jesus' disciples were blinded by their own preconceived ideas about what the Messiah's kingdom would be (Acts 1:6). Death simply did not figure into the matter for them, so resurrection did not fit either.

Whenever we read the Bible with preconceived ideas, we can suffer from the same blindness. Of course we cannot merely ignore the interpretations we have already accepted. But the more we can let the Bible interpret itself, the more harmony we will have among believers.

4. How did the women learn that Jesus had risen from the dead (vs. 5,6)?

The sudden appearance of the angel had caused the guards to pass out. His presence also puts fear into the hearts of the women. The angel's first words were "fear not".

The angel knows why these women have come: they are looking for the body of Jesus. What is just as true, but unspoken, is the fact that the women are not looking for or expecting a risen Christ.

Jesus had predicted His resurrection on more than one occasion (see Mark 8:31, 32; 9:31; 10:32-34). Even the enemies of Jesus knew about this prediction (again, Matthew 27:63). The angel reminds the women of Jesus' own words, then invites them to "see" some (but not yet all) of the proof for themselves. The tomb is empty—the cave that had never been used as a tomb before is no longer being used as one now.

5. What is the significance of the bodily resurrection of Christ to all believers?

The significance of the bodily resurrection of Christ cannot be overstressed. This is the greatest miracle in the Scriptures, for the salvation of all believers is dependent on it.

Paul later wrote, "If Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain. . . . And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. . . . But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept" (I Cor. 15:14,17,20).

6. What two things did the angel want the disciples to know (v. 7)?

The angel next told the women to "go quickly" to tell the disciples that Jesus had risen from the dead. In addition to that message, they were told to say that He would go before them into Galilee. There they would see Him again. They could enjoy the thought that they would be reunited with Him.

Jesus had told the disciples about this after the celebration of the Lord's Supper and on the way to the Garden of Gethsemane: "Then saith Jesus unto them, All ye shall be offended because of me this night: for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad. But after I am risen again, I will go before you into Galilee" (Matt. 26:31,32).

7. Why was it important for over five hundred believers to meet Jesus in Galilee?

It is interesting that the angel told the women about Jesus going to Galilee, and Jesus soon told them the same thing (28:10); yet He appeared to many people

between the time of His resurrection and the time of His ascension. That meeting in Galilee involved over five hundred people (I Cor. 15:6) and evidently was of special importance. It involved His giving of the Great Commission to take the gospel to all nations (Matt. 28:16-20).

Contact (Matthew 28:8-10)

8. What two emotions did the women feel as they hurried to give the disciples the news (v. 8)?

The women departed quickly from the tomb to give the disciples the angel's messages about Jesus' resurrection and plan to meet them in Galilee. Two emotions predominated in their feelings. One was fear, but the other was great joy.

The fear they felt produced trembling and amazement in them. It caused them to say nothing to anyone, for they were afraid (Mark 16:8). Sometimes news is so good that we are afraid it might not be true. We need time to accept it into our thinking. These women had to absorb the good news fully into their minds, but they must have been bursting with inner joy that it could have really happened.

9. What did the women do when Jesus met them (v. 9)?

As the women hurried to tell Jesus' disciples the news, He appeared in their path. He greeted them with the exclamation "All hail," a common greeting. They came to Him and held Him by the feet as they worshiped Him. It must have been a tender moment for those who thought they had lost Him forever. Here was unquestionable proof that He was alive, visibly confirming the verbal announcement of that fact made by the angel.

10. Did the disciples believe the women's story (v. 10)?

When we harmonize the accounts of the four Gospels, it seems likely that the disciples did not believe the women's story. John tells us that he and Peter went to the tomb to check it out and found it empty as Mary Magdalene had told them. But even then they did not have the answers. Thomas is faulted for his refusal to believe until he can see the risen Christ with his own eyes, but all of the apostles acted in a similar manner. And although the women were told (both by the angel and by the Lord Himself) to send the disciples to Galilee, it will eventually take a personal appearance by the Lord to the disciples to get them moving in the right direction.

The fear felt by the disciples gives us greater confidence in the reality of the resurrection. Consider that in just the few weeks between Passover and Pentecost the disciples make a transition from cowering in locked rooms (John 20:19) to preaching fearlessly and openly in Jerusalem (Acts 2:14-41). Only the confidence given by the risen Savior can explain this dramatic turnaround.

Conspiracy (Matthew 28:11-15)

11. What explanation did the Jewish leaders create to explain the empty tomb (vs. 11,12)?

We have already discussed who the guards were and why they were posted at the tomb in verse 4. We cannot know exactly what some of them say unto the chief priests. But when these soldiers report "all the things that were done," (v. 11) they undoubtedly include the earthquake, the angel, and the empty tomb.

This report by the guards creates a great deal of consternation among the religious leaders. They quickly gather together to cook up another plan. This plan involves bribing "the soldiers" (v. 12).

The fact that it takes a large amount of money to pull this plan off indicates the stakes involved. The priests want this matter dealt with decisively. The story of an angel appearing would throw great doubt upon their role in Jesus' crucifixion. The chief priests and elders had declared during the crucifixion, "If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him" (Matthew 27:42). Now is their chance to realize the truth and make good on this pledge.

Truth, however, is not important to these leaders. What matters is the keeping their own positions of power and influence.

Roman soldiers who are derelict in their duty can be executed (Acts 12:18, 19). Members of the temple police are under the control of the Sanhedrin, however. With the right "connections," they may be able to escape such harsh punishment. The guards want to avoid this punishment just as much as the religious leaders want to maintain their own positions. So all agree on an "explanation" that "His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept."

12. The Jewish leaders are amazing! They have evidence of a supernatural event, and their plan is to cover it up. How could they harden their hearts in the face of such evidence? How can we reach people like this today?

The simple fact of the matter is that we will never reach some people. Jesus Himself couldn't reach everyone, and neither will we. The Jewish leaders continued to oppose God's truth, persecuting the apostles and other Christian leaders, for many years.

But some of the priests actually did change (Acts 6:7). A consistent witness by life and by word can, over time, lead people to consider the gospel claims. That can lead to opportunities to study the Word of God with them, and they may come to faith. The hardness of some people's hearts is never an excuse to fail to witness for the Lord Jesus.

13. Why did Matthew address the story that was circulating among the Jews (vs. 14,15)?

The soldiers took the money offered to them by the religious leaders and told the story that Jesus' disciples had stolen His body from the tomb. This explanation was commonly reported among the Jews right up to the time Matthew wrote his Gospel later in the first century.

Matthew's Gospel is most likely written for a Jewish audience. Therefore it is quite natural that he would address a story that was circulating among the Jews.

However, Matthew wanted to set the record straight as to what really happened. The religious leaders knew the truth of what happened at the tomb, but they tried to cover it up.

14. Matthew reports on the lie about the disciples stealing Jesus' body. What lies are commonly reported in our own day? How can we convince people of the truth in these areas?

Many lies are accepted as truth in modern culture. One of the biggest lies is that there is no truth, that nothing is absolute. (And the people who hold that lie believe it to be absolutely true!) Based on that lie, many others abound. One example is the lie "you only go around once" (denying the reality of life after death) and "it's your body and you can do with it as you please."

Rejecting such lies requires a shift in one's worldview to recognize that there is a Creator, and we are accountable to Him. Such a shift will not come easily. We need to demonstrate genuine concern for people and great patience as we testify to the truth. As opportunities arise, we can plant and water some seeds of truth and pray that God may give the increase (1Corinthians 3:6).

CONCLUSION

The Power of the Resurrection

The resurrection is no myth. It was a historic event. We serve a risen Saviour!

Jesus invited the disciples to touch and confirm the reality of His living, physical, resurrected body (Luke 24:37-39; John 20:27). The apostle Paul makes it clear that the resurrection is at the heart of Christian doctrine. He goes so far as to pin our entire faith on the truth of the resurrection: "and if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain" (1Corinthians 15:14).

Regardless of what false teachers today might say, it matters greatly whether Christ rose from the dead. If He is still in the grave, then we are still in our sins. Paul associates the resurrection with our justification (Romans 4:24,25), with our baptism (Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12), and with our own expectation of resurrection and eternal life (1 Thessalonians 4:14). Christ's resurrection is the centerpiece of Christianity. We can have confidence in Matthew and the other Gospel writers when they tell us what they saw: Jesus Christ is risen indeed!

We should consider what Jesus told Thomas: "Because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed" (John 20:29).

PRAYER

Lord, thank You for taking our sins on the cross. And thank You again for giving us new life-eternal life. We rely on Your power that raised Jesus from the dead, and we trust in You, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In Jesus' name, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Christ's resurrection guarantees ours!

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week we begin a new unit, "Preparing for the Lord's Return." 1 Thessalonians 1:1 through 3:13 provides the background.

Have a Blessed Easter !