

Welcome to the Kingdom

Matthew 28:1-15

INTRODUCTION

Do you ever wonder what that morning was like? That first Resurrection morning 2000 years ago?

- Was there a mist in the air? Dew on the grass?
- Was the temperature brisk? You know, the kind of morning when there is just enough of a chill in the air that you need to zip up your jacket just a little bit higher and put your hands in your pockets?
- Maybe there was a light frost on the ground?
- Or maybe it was one of those beautiful spring mornings? The kind of morning that causes my wife to say "It smells like spring today."

Our text does not give us many clues. It says only:

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. (Matthew 28:1)

In other words, it was early Sunday morning. No other details.

In my own imagination I have always pictured the morning this way:

- The sun has barely started to rise. It is probably not even technically "dawn."
- There's just enough light to see the next few steps, but not enough to fully light the way.
- It's a clear morning, but the birds aren't even awake yet.
- It isn't rainy. God wouldn't let it rain on resurrection morning! Right?

Whatever the morning was like, I am confident that the night before was restless. The text doesn't say this, but there is no way those women slept well. In fact, they probably had not slept well since last Wednesday.

- On Thursday night their friend Jesus had been arrested. He spent the entire night being transferred from courtroom to courtroom as his accusers tried to win a death sentence from someone in authority. Pontius Pilate finally complied. They were no doubt huddled together somewhere, waiting for any news to come.
- By Friday night Jesus was dead, killed in an utterly gruesome manner. They had spent the entire day at the crucifixion site.
- Nobody sleeps well when a death is freshly in the air. You know that. You've been there.
 - Even if you CAN close your eyes, there's nothing restful about what happens when someone you love dies.
- And then last night ... Saturday night ... the only thing on their minds Saturday night was the job that needed to be done.
 - In the rush to get Jesus buried before the start of the Sabbath on Friday evening, there had not been time to appropriately wash the body and anoint it with all the standard burial spices.

- That needed to get done quickly. It may have already been too late, but it still needed done.

Technically, the rules of their Jewish faith allowed them to tend to the body at the end of the Sabbath, that is, sunset on Saturday night. But it was dark then. Jerusalem was patrolled by Roman soldiers, and it was not safe for a woman to be out on the streets after dark. Not because of criminals, but because of Roman soldiers. Stuff happens in the dark.

- So they had no choice but to wait ... impatiently, I'm sure ... until the sun started to peek over the horizon.
- And it finally did ... very early in the morning. And that is where our story begins.

For you and me, Easter Sunday morning is a day of joy and celebration. Our worship service is filled "Alleluias." Our entire day is booked with family dinners and other Easter traditions that cause us to be happy. We get dressed up. (Y'all look good! Make sure you get your picture taken and share it on Facebook).

- Easter Sunday is a day we look forward to with great anticipation!
- For these women, however, it was a morning of sadness and sorrow. They dreaded this day.
- Jesus was dead. No other reality entered their minds. That's why they ...

... took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. (Luke 24:1)

On this morning ... this first Easter morning ... these women got up early and went to the tomb, fully expecting to find one thing but finding another.

They expected to find death but instead found life.

Our theme throughout this Lenten season has been reflected in a simple prayer ... one we pray almost every time we meet together:

THY KINGDOM COME

We have been learning what happens when the kingdom comes into the ordinary, expected circumstances of our lives.

- When we are going through our daily routines, like drawing water from the well.

Do you suppose they prayed the Lord's Prayer? Probably not. But they knew it. Jesus had taught it to them three year previously. But whether they prayed it or not, on this first Easter Sunday, the Kingdom came in a dramatic way. Jesus Christ was not dead, as they expected. No, the angels proclaimed:

"Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. (Matthew 28:5-6)

And on this Easter morning, when the Kingdom came, they made two discoveries:

#1: THEY DISCOVERED THAT ALL THE OBSTACLES WERE GONE

The resurrection story is in all four Gospels. When the Gospel of Mark tells this story, it includes a question the women asked each other as they made that early morning journey:

They asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" (Mark 16:3)

That was a major obstacle. In Biblical times a groove was cut into the ground in front of the entrance to the cave-like tomb. A huge stone, circular like an oversized wagon wheel, was rolled into that groove to close the entrance.

- They probably hadn't thought about that obstacle. Otherwise they may not have gone to the tomb that morning.
- It was well beyond the strength of these women to roll that stone away.

There was another obstacle in their way, too. There were soldiers ... like the ones who patrolled the streets during the night ... who had been posted outside the tomb. They were there by order of the Roman governor who had been pressured by the Jewish religious leaders. The religious leaders were afraid ...

... his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. (Matthew 27:64)

But the Kingdom had come, and when the women arrived, ALL the obstacles were gone.

There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. (Matthew 28:2)

And there is no mention of the soldiers! They fled the scene when God rolled away that stone. Who can blame them?

In fact at the very time the women were on the way, these soldiers were negotiating with the religious leaders, trying to come up with a story that allowed them to save face.

While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day. (Matthew 28:11-15)

When these women came to the tomb, they expected to find death. But they found life instead. And they found that everything that had stood between them and that new life had been fully eliminated on that Easter morning.

#2: THEY DISCOVERED THE PROMISE WAS FULFILLED

The angels who appeared to them that morning greeted them with these words:

“Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. (Matthew 28:5-6)

Dallas Holm has a song in which Jesus triumphantly proclaims:

'Cause I'll rise again
Ain't no power on earth can tie me down
Yes, I'll rise again
Death can't keep me in the ground!

I don't know what the Greek word for “ain't” is. I never learned that one. But no matter how He said, Jesus said it.

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. (Matthew 16:21)

But his resurrection was more than just a promise to conquer death. By His resurrection, every person who has ever and who will ever live can experience new life themselves.

Christ Himself said:

The thief (the devil) comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that you may have life, and have it to the full. (John 10:10)

That life to which he refers is eternal life ... a life that starts here and now for all who put their trust in him.

The message of Scripture is clear:

There is no one righteous, not even one (Romans 3:10)

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23)

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

The story of Easter is not a story of gloom and despair, of sadness and death. It is the story of eternal life:

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:17)

The resurrection is the ultimate fulfillment of that promise

APPLICATION

The Scriptures tell us that these woman were no longer afraid. They were no longer grieving. They raced back from the tomb and reported everything they had seen and heard to the 11 disciples and to everyone else who would listen.

When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. (Luke 24:9)

They had a story to tell. And they told it. And we continue to tell it today.

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.

Our memory verse for this Lenten season:

For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Colossians 1:13-14)

Amen.