

Chapter 116: Witnesses to the Resurrection

Matthew 28:1–15

Finally, the fullness of God’s eternal plan comes into view. In this grand courtroom drama, Jesus Christ, the Son of David, was falsely accused, convicted, condemned, crucified, dead, and buried. Now, upon appeal to the Judge of all the earth, that verdict has been overturned, and Jesus Christ has been vindicated, his conviction vacated, and his sentence reversed. The one who died in shame and ignominy now arises triumphant in glory, never to die again. From now on, the resurrected Jesus Christ will be the person on the fate of every human being will turn, pressing every individual to take a side for him or against him. Whatever the costs we may suffer at the hands of the world for following him, *Jesus’ resurrection pits the fear of God against the fear of man.*

The Fear of God (Matt. 28:1–10)

In the previous section, we observed a strict accounting for the timeline following Jesus’ death at 3:00pm (“the ninth hour”; Matt. 27:46, 50). Whereas Joseph of Arimathea had begun making preparations immediately for Jesus’ burial “when it was evening” (Matt. 27:57; i.e., “twilight,” or “between the evenings”—that is, the time of the evening sacrifice and the slaughter of the Passover lambs at 3:00pm), in order to bury Jesus’ body before nightfall, the chief priests and Pharisees came to Pilate “the next day, that is, after the day of Preparation” (Matt. 27:62; i.e., on Saturday) in order to work to suppress the possibility of false claims of Jesus’ resurrection. In Matthew 28, we have yet another strict time note: “Now after Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week...” (v. 1a). In part, this confirms that the women who do come to the tomb that morning had faithfully waited for Sabbath to pass before working to finalize Jesus’ body for permanent burial.

Yet, this statement of time is pregnant with theological meaning. To begin, we should remember that this was the last and greatest Sabbath observance, as the Creator of the universe (who had rested on the seventh day after creating the heavens and the earth; Gen. 2:1–3) finished his work of redemption on the 6th day of Holy Week, and then enjoyed perfect Sabbath rest in the grave on Saturday. While Sabbath observance is part of God’s moral law, summarized in the Fourth Commandment (“Remember *the* Sabbath day, to keep it holy”; Ex. 20:8), the celebration of *the* Sabbath day on the 7th day of the week was ceremonial and typological: “...the seventh day is a [note: *a*, not *the*] Sabbath day to the LORD your God” (Ex. 20:10).¹ Thus, while *the* Sabbath must be observed weekly as a part of God’s perpetual, moral law, the Lord may change the day on which he intends for us to observe *the* Sabbath.

Here, we are seeing the first glimpse of a shift from the final observation of *the* Sabbath on the

¹ John Willison, *A Treatise Concerning the Sanctification of the Sabbath* (Edinburgh: J. Pillans and Son, 1819), x.

seventh day of the week, to the first week that the Sabbath would be newly established on the first day of the week. Indeed, the phrase “the first day of the week” uses the word “Sabbath” in a way that is hidden in our English translations: εἰς μίαν σαββάτων (*eis mian sabbatōn*), which means “‘the first (day) with reference to the Sabbath,’ i.e., following it.”² While the phrase may have a generic meaning that can simply mean the first day of the week (i.e., Sunday), it only appears in the New Testament to describe the day of Jesus’ resurrection (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1, 19) and days when believers gathered for worship (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2). Just as the Lord sanctified the Sabbath day at creation to be observed on the seventh day, so the Lord sanctified the Sabbath day at his resurrection to be observed on the first day of the week henceforth, “which, in Scripture, is called the Lord’s day [Rev. 1:10], and is to be continued to the end of the world, as the Christian Sabbath” (*WCF* 21.7).

There is an additional point that we should notice in the description of time: this takes place “toward the dawn.” As Nolland reminds us, Matthew had previously quoted Isaiah 9:1–2 to identify Jesus as the “dawn”:³ “the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned” (Matt. 4:16). Jesus does not merely rise from the dead *at* dawn, but his resurrection from the dead *is* the dawn for those dwelling under the shadow of death.

So, early on Sunday morning, Matthew tells us about two women, “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary,” who “went to see the tomb” (v. 1b). While Mark 16:1 tells us that the women had gone the night before (after the conclusion of the Sabbath at 6:00pm) to buy spices with which to anoint Jesus, they “would not have been able to do much at the tomb during the hours of darkness, and in any case there would have been no urgency once the body of Jesus had been placed in the tomb.”⁴ Still, they show up as early on Sunday morning as they possibly can. Their faithful presence makes them “the first witnesses of the empty tomb. This is hardly likely to be a fictional invention, in a society where women were not generally regarded as credible witnesses, especially as the singling out of the women for this honor detracts from the prestige of the male disciples.”⁵

Lenski makes an important observation: “None of the evangelists attempts to describe the resurrection itself; it had no witnesses.”⁶ Instead, Matthew tells us only of the great earthquake upon the arrival of an angel of the Lord from heaven: “And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow” (vv. 2–3). Therefore, “the action of the angel in removing the stone from the entrance of the tomb draws attention even more clearly than in the other gospels to the fact that Jesus has already left the tomb, while the stone was still in place. This is not an account of the resurrection of Jesus..., but a demonstration that Jesus *has* risen.”⁷

² Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1148.

³ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1246.

⁴ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 734.

⁵ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1098.

⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1150.

⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1098. See also Carson: “There is no implication that the earthquake had anything to do with releasing Jesus. The stone was rolled back, the seal broken, and the soldiers made helpless, not to let the risen Messiah escape, but to let the first witnesses in.” (Carson, “Matthew,” 658.)

Understandably, the arrival of the angel and the earthquake creates fear in both the guards and the women; however, Matthew contrasts the nature of the fears of each group. On the one hand, he writes that, “And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men” (v. 4). Hendriksen notes that the word for “trembled” is from the same word as the “earthquake” in v. 2, “so that the rendering might be: “Suddenly there was a violent earthquake...the men on guard *quaked*...”⁸ Hagner describes the fearful quaking of the guards well: “The irony is not to be missed: the ones assigned to guard the dead themselves appear dead while the dead one has been made alive.”⁹

While the angel leaves the guards to tremble in fear, he soothes the fear of the women: “But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you” (vv. 5–7). John Calvin draws an important principle from the contrast between the fears of the guards and the women:

The soldiers, who were accustomed to tumults, were terrified, and were so completely overwhelmed by alarm, that they fell down like men who were almost dead; but no power was exerted to raise them from that condition. A similar terror seized the women; but their minds, which had nearly given way, were restored by the consolation which immediately followed, so as to begin, at least, to entertain some better hope. And, certainly, it is proper that the majesty of God should strike both terror and fear indiscriminately into the godly, as well as the reprobate, that all flesh may be silent before his face. But when the Lord has humbled and subdued his elect, he immediately mitigates their dread, that they may not sink under its oppressive influence; and not only so, but by the sweetness of his grace heals the wound which he had inflicted. The reprobate, on the other hand, he either overwhelms by sudden dread, or suffers to languish in slow torments.¹⁰

This scene, like many other scenes where the glory of the Lord terrifies people, reflects an important principle about the fear of the Lord. That is, the fear of the Lord involves genuine fear and trembling before the Lord; however, what differentiates between the righteous and the wicked is that, for the righteous, fear of the Lord is soothed by the Lord’s promise, received by faith. The wicked gain no such relief, and this scene stands as a warning: regardless of the earthly benefits that we may gain in this life (see v. 15, below), those who do not cling to the Lord’s promises in faith will endure eternal terror under the Lord’s wrath.

The angel then instructs the women: first, that Jesus has risen from the dead; second, to see for themselves the place where his body had lain; and third, to bring a message to the disciples. In this message, they are to report to the disciples that Jesus has indeed risen from the dead, and to remind them of Jesus’ instructions that they should meet him in Galilee after his resurrection: “But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee” (Matt. 26:32). In contrast to the conspiracies imagined by

⁸ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 989.

⁹ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 869.

¹⁰ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:343–44.

the chief priests, Nolland observes, “The disciples are so far from having played a role in masterminding this situation that only the message of the women connects them with this new development and prepares them for their own coming encounter with the risen Jesus.”¹¹ France then notes that the words, “See, I have told you,” “are reminiscent of the frequent OT formula, ‘The LORD has spoken’ (Isa 1:2; 25:8; Joel 3:8 etc.) or ‘I, the LORD, have spoken’ (Num 14:35; Ezek 5:15, 17, etc.). The formula marks an authoritative pronouncement (perhaps even that the angel speaks for God), and functions now as a call to action.”¹²

These faithful women obey the command that they have been given: “So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples” (v. 8). We should notice not only that they left “quickly” and “ran” to give prompt obedience to the command, but also that they did so filled “with fear and great joy.” That Jesus had risen from the dead both struck terror into their hearts, and filled them with incomprehensible joy. Even today, we struggle to get our minds around the implications of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, and we have had two thousand years to ponder its significance. For these women first hearing the good news, it must have been absolutely overwhelming.

Even more overwhelming, Jesus himself met them on the way: “And behold, Jesus met them and said, ‘Greetings!’ And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him” (v. 9). As the crucifixion of Jesus had been understated (Matt. 27:35), so now France observes that the resurrection appearance of Jesus is understated:

The first of Matthew’s two accounts of appearances of the risen Jesus (the other will be in vv. 16–20) is surprisingly low-key, though another dramatic *kai idou* prepares us for something remarkable. To say simply that “Jesus met them,” when the last we saw of him was as a corpse sealed in a tomb, is a masterly understatement, and his greeting, *Chairete*, “Hello,” is almost banal in its everyday familiarity. Jesus is with his friends again.¹³

Nevertheless, what Matthew does say is momentous, as Hagner notes:

In that culture the grasping of feet (note the fact that Jesus was tangible) was to make an obeisance, usually to a ruler or king, expressing submission and homage. When combined, as in the present context, with the verb προσκύνησαν [*proskunēsan*; “worship”], worship is clearly entailed (the latter verb also signifies “worship” in v 17, as in 4:9–10; 14:33).¹⁴

These women not only rejoice to see Jesus, they freely (and rightly) worship him. In response, Jesus reiterates the message that the angel had given to the women, namely, to remind the disciples of Jesus’ previous instructions: “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me” (v. 10). The message Jesus has for the disciples is of paramount importance to finalizing the case that Matthew has been building throughout the whole book: that Jesus is the true Son of David, the rightful King of Israel (see Matt. 1:1).

¹¹ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1250.

¹² France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1101.

¹³ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1102.

¹⁴ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 874.

The Fear of Man (Matt. 28:11–15)

As Matthew alone had narrated the story of how the chief priests and Pharisees asked Pilate for a guard to secure the tomb (Matt. 28:62–66), so now Matthew alone tells us the story of how the chief priests change their approach once Jesus truly rises from the dead:

While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers and said, “Tell people, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day. (vv. 11–15)

As the fear of the guards had been contrasted with the women, so the news of the women is contrasted with the guards.¹⁵ First, the phrase “while they were going” sets the actions of the guards parallel with the actions of the women. Second, the word “told” in v. 11 (“...told the chief priests...”) is the same word used to describe how the women were to “tell” the disciples about what had happened (vv. 8, 10). This contrast is important, since “Matthew’s key focus in vv. 1–10 (and on into vv. 11–15) centers on the witnesses to the resurrection—the angels, the soldiers, the women, and, more indirectly, the religious leaders.”¹⁶

Additionally, this scene parallels the guards with the actions of Judas, in that both took money to betray Jesus.¹⁷ Whereas the “centurion” and the “soldiers” who crucified Jesus bore witness at his death that Jesus must have been the Son of God (Matt. 27:25, 54), this “guard” (Matt. 27:65, 66; 28:11) takes a bribe to deny Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. It is important to think about this scene in contrast to the scene of the angelic arrival with an earthquake. They experienced deathly terror when an angel revealed that Jesus had been risen from the dead. Now, though, they are more concerned with the fear that they may get in trouble for the fabricated story they would tell: namely, that they fell asleep, and Jesus’ disciples had come and stolen his body. In other words, they fear man more than they fear God. So, while the angel gave them no comfort from God (comforting the women alone), they are willing to suppress the truth about Jesus in dependence upon the comfort given them from the bribe of the chief priests instead.¹⁸ Nolland notes, “Matthew has earlier used διαφημίξειν [*diaphēmizein*] (‘spread’) of the spreading fame of Jesus (9:31); now he uses it, by way of contrast, of the spread of misinformation.”¹⁹ While we may have pitied the guards when they had been left in their terror at the tomb, we now see that their own faithlessness doomed them.

¹⁵ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1254.

¹⁶ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 426.

¹⁷ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1255.

¹⁸ “It must have been with a degree of bewildered delight that the soldiers walked away with the large amount of money in their pockets when they had no doubt expected to be censured and perhaps sent back to Pilate with a complaint for not having succeeded in their mission.” (Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 877.)

¹⁹ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1257.

Discussion Questions

1. Why was the seventh day established originally as the day for observing the Sabbath (Gen. 2:1–3; Ex. 20:8–11)? What did the Sabbath signify (Ex. 31:13)? How did celebrating the Sabbath after a full week of work hold out future hope to God’s people? How does v. 1 suggest a shift in the day of observing the Sabbath (see also Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2)? What does celebrating the Sabbath before working remind us about the completeness of Christ’s work?
2. How might the language of “dawn” in v. 1 connect back to Matthew’s quotation of Isaiah 9:1–2 in Matthew 4:16? What causes the earthquake (v. 2a)? Why does the angel roll back the stone (v. 2b)? Why do you think Matthew uses the same word for the earthquake as to describe the trembling of the guards (v. 4)? Why does the angel tell the women alone (rather than the guards as well) not to be afraid (v. 5)?
3. What does the angel tell the women to do (v. 7)? How do the women respond (v. 8)? What does it mean that they went “with fear and great joy” (v. 8)? How do the women respond to Jesus when they meet him (v. 9b)? Why does Jesus insist—in addition to the angel’s command—that Jesus’ disciples must meet him in Galilee? What do the actions and the responses of the women teach us about the proper fear of the Lord?
4. How does Matthew contrast the actions of the guards with the actions of the women (v. 11)? Even though the guards had trembled like dead men at the appearance of the angel, and even though the guards had heard that Jesus had been raised from the dead, what do they primarily fear (v. 14)? Why does Matthew draw a comparison between the bribe taken by the guards and the bribe taken by Judas (v. 15)? How are you tempted to heed the fear of man?