

He Goes Ahead of You

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Rev. Frank Allen

First Prebyterian Church, Kissimmee, FL

Matthew 28:1-10

1 After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.

2 And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow.

4 For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.

5 But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. 6 He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.

7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.”

8 So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

9 Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. 10 Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

## SEISMIC ACTIVITY IN JERUSALEM

There had been a lot of seismic activity in Jerusalem over the past few days. In fact there were earthquakes loud enough to wake the dead.

Picking up where we left off last week, we read that after Jesus cried out in despair, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” he breathed his last breath.

And things began to happen.

The curtain in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook. Boulders crumbled. The tombs were opened and many of saints were raised from the dead.

The centurion and the soldiers who presided over the execution of Jesus were terrified. And those tormenters were the first to proclaim the truth about Jesus. They said more out of fear than faith, “Truly this man was God’s Son.”

Up to this point in the story it looked like the powers that be have had their way with Jesus. The religious leaders and the political leaders put him on trial. They mocked him. They beat him. They crucified him.

It really did look like God had abandoned him.

And yet, just a moment after his death things look a lot different. The darkened world is shaken by the power of God.

There is an earthquake. The dead don’t stay dead. Big boulders are crunched. The temple curtain, that symbolic sign of the chasm between heaven and earth has been ripped from top to bottom.

And Jesus’ tormenters are fearfully praising his name. These are signs of things to come.

## A GUARDED TOMB

Joseph of Arimathea, a rich man who was one of Jesus’ disciples asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Pilate agreed to let Joseph have the body and Jesus was buried in a new tomb. A heavy stone was rolled across the entrance to that tomb.

Once Jesus is safely in the tomb the powers that be seem to regain their “courage”.

The religious leaders come to Pilate and say,

“When this imposter was alive he said that he was going to rise from the dead after three days. We’re afraid his disciples will come and steal the body. That will make things even worse. They will say that he has been raised from the dead.

Why don’t we put a guard in front of the tomb for three days?”

Pilate agreed. Not only did he provide guards for the tomb; he also sealed the tomb in order to make it as secure as possible.

I am fascinated by the fact that even a dead Jesus is a danger to the political and religious authorities. Even after they crucified him the religious leaders want a guard posted around the tomb. They said, “We don’t want those nefarious disciples stealing the body and then claiming that Jesus rose from the dead.”

The disciples don’t seem like much of a threat to me. They had all run away and were in hiding. Would they really have the courage to steal the body of Jesus when they were afraid to stand by him when he was alive?

But, even in death some thought that Jesus was a man to be watched.

## HEAVEN CAME DOWN

As it turns out they had a point. The guards posted by Pilate were not enough to do the job. When heaven came down and glory filled the earth, not even the bravest soldier was a match for the angel of the Lord.

In our lesson for today, Jesus has been in the tomb since Friday. The Sabbath was over and the first day of a new week is dawning. Two women, Mary Magdalene and the “other Mary” are going to “see” the tomb of Jesus. That’s all they can do because you’ll remember that the tomb is sealed and guarded.

But, the women and those who guard the tomb are in for a big surprise. There’s another earthquake. And an angel of the Lord rolls back the sealed stone and sits on it.

This angel is not the namby-pamby kind of angel that you see in many paintings. This angel is fearsome. His face is like lightning. His dazzling appearance reflects the very glory of God.

God has split a crack in the universe, and everything that we thought we knew has changed. This is the shock and awe of Easter. The resurrection shakes the foundations of the earth. Nothing will be the same ever again.

And the battle hardened Roman soldiers who have been assigned to guard the tomb fall on the ground in fear. They're like dead men before the presence of God's messenger. It's ironic. The one who was supposed to be dead is now alive, and the ones who were supposed to be guarding the tomb are like dead men.

### THE MESSAGE

The women are afraid too, but they do manage to maintain consciousness. And this fearsome angel tells the trembling women that there's no need for them to fear.

And he has a message for them.

He said, "I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.

And then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.'"

The women leave the tomb with conflicting emotions. They are still afraid, but they are also filled with great joy.

### THE GREETING

And while they are on the way to give the disciples the message from the angel suddenly Jesus appears to them.

What does Jesus say? "Greetings" or "Good morning!" It was a common greeting, but it is transformed by uncommon circumstances. The root Greek word is related to our word for grace.

So, the first word of the risen Jesus is a word of grace.

The two Marys grab hold of Jesus' feet and worship him. Fear and great joy are once again mingled. And Jesus reinforces the message of the angel. He said, "Don't be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee. There they will see me."

Notice how Jesus refers to the men who had run away and denied him in his hour of need. They are his brothers.

Though they had abandoned Jesus, Jesus does not abandon them. He goes ahead of them. He is waiting for them in Galilee with a word of grace and forgiveness.

The risen Christ will resurrect the lives of his disciples.

## HE IS GOING AHEAD OF YOU

Matthew's account of the resurrection is brief but striking. In Matthew's gospel resurrection is earthshaking. Resurrection is heaven coming to earth. Resurrection defeats the powers of the unjust.

Resurrection creates fear.  
Resurrection takes away fear.

But, more than anything else resurrection prompts disciples to move to a new location. Resurrection prompts disciples to go and tell the story.

The women were able to overcome their fear because both the angel and the risen Christ gave them the same message.

Christ is risen. It all happened "as he said" it would.

Those three little words are important. Three times in Matthew's gospel Jesus tried to tell his disciples about his death and resurrection, but the disciples couldn't accept the message.

So, now the angel reminds the women and the disciples that this really shouldn't come as a surprise. It is part of the plan.

They had gone to the tomb expecting death. But, what they found was life and a whole new world. They had seen it with their own eyes.

And now Jesus is going to meet them in Galilee. The angel put it this way; “He is going ahead of you into Galilee.”

That’s another thing that the resurrection teaches us. Jesus was ahead of them, all of them.

Jesus was ahead of the political and religious authorities that sought to destroy him. Jesus was ahead the disciples that ran away and hid. Jesus was ahead of the women that came to the tomb.

And Jesus is ahead of us as well.

Most of us come to Easter thinking that we know what to expect. We know the story of the empty tomb and the story of those who saw the risen Christ.

Every year we hear the story. We dress in our Easter best, watch the kids pick up Easter eggs and look forward to a nice meal with family and friends after the service. It’s all very familiar and reassuring.

## RISEN TODAY

But, suppose the story is about more than what happened way back when? How would that change our view of the story?

Suppose there are still tremors reverberating from that earthshaking experience that we call resurrection? Suppose the risen Christ still goes ahead of us? Suppose he still meets us suddenly and unexpectedly?

Well, I believe he does.

Just as the resurrection of Jesus disrupted the world long ago, the world today is still being disrupted by the power of resurrection.

Easter is not a tame celebration of spring. Easter is a new creation. And fear and joy still live side by side in this Easter.

We can try to deny it. We can try to seal him in the grave and leave him there.

But, that's been tried before, and it didn't work the first time. And I don't think it will work now. A risen Lord can't be contained and controlled.

Oh, the religious authorities tried their best to keep news of the resurrection under wraps. They paid off the guards who fell out of fear.

They said, "Tell everyone that the disciples came and got the body while you were asleep. We'll intervene on your behalf if Pilate hears about this."

And the guards did as they were told.

(I'm not surprised. How many people would believe that an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and rolled away the stone? Better to take the money and tell a more plausible story.)

But, despite the best efforts of the religious and political authorities the word about the resurrection did get out. The word got out because Jesus asked his disciples to meet him in Galilee, and in Galilee the power and authority of the risen Christ was passed on to his disciples.

Galilee was that place where the disciples first heard the call and started following Jesus.

And Jesus is taking them there to reset the clock. They are being given a second chance to be his disciples.

And this time by the power of the Spirit they will proclaim the story of Jesus throughout the world. Resurrection will be about more than just the raising of Jesus from the dead.

It will be about the coming of God's kingdom and hope that is eternal.

## RESURRECTION AND MISSION

In Matthew's gospel the effect of resurrection is a call to mission. Immediately after the resurrection Jesus meets the disciples in Galilee and

calls them to go and tell others about what they have seen and what they have heard.

It did all happen as Jesus said.

On a mountain in Galilee the disciples met the risen Christ, and they worshipped him. And the risen Jesus gave his disciples a job to do. We call it the Great Commission.

He told them to “Make disciples of all nations.”

And then he gave his disciples a promise; “I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

The risen Jesus gives us that same commission and that same promise.

He calls us to make disciples by telling our story of faith. We go and tell others how the Spirit of the risen Christ has changed our lives.

And he reminds us that no matter where we go he is always with us.

He is with us *always*. The hymn has it right. Jesus Christ is risen today. The power of the risen Christ is a present reality.

Our lesson for today reminds us that the death-dealing world will not have the final word. The final word comes from the risen Christ.

And it is not a word of cosmic destruction. It is a word of cosmic creation.

It is a word about a new heaven and a new earth. It is a word about grace that is greater than all our sins.

Jesus with us, and Jesus goes ahead of us. Jesus prepares the way for you and for me.

Jesus is (as the Bible puts it) the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. He has blazed the trail for us, and he invites us to follow him. He leads us into the future.

He invites us to go to our Galilee, that place where we were first called.

In that place we will see him. In that place we will have the joy of our salvation restored.

In that place we will be forgiven. In that place we will worship him.

In that place the risen Christ will resurrect dead faith and broken disciples.

And in that place we will be commissioned to go and tell the message. We will be commissioned to go and tell what we have seen and what we have heard.

#### WHAT WE HAVE SEEN AND HEARD

We can't argue people into the kingdom of heaven. We can't make people believe in the resurrection by presenting our evidence that demands a verdict.

There is always another explanation for resurrection, for something that has never happened before or since.

The greatest evidence for the resurrection is still found in the lives of those who have experienced the power of the risen Christ. The greatest evidence is still in the testimony of those whose lives have been touched by his Spirit.

This was true in the first century when timid disciples were turned into brave proponents of the gospel. They insisted to their own death that Jesus was in fact raised from the dead.

And even today there are disciples who make the same claim in the face of terrible odds. There are Christians who live lives of discipleship that make no sense if Jesus has not been raised.

They present a powerful witness to a death-dealing world. And it is our job to join this chorus of witnesses.

## HE IS RISEN!

I'm going to close this morning with my favorite Easter illustration. Some of you have heard it before but it bears repeating, especially considering current world events.

About 1930 a communist leader journeyed from Moscow to Kiev. His mission was to address a huge assembly. His subject was atheism, the official dogma of the party.

For a solid hour he aimed his heavy artillery at Christianity, hurling powerful arguments and ridicule at the faith. At last he was finished and viewed what he thought to be the smoldering ashes of the Christian faith.

He asked with a sneer, "Are there any questions?"

A solitary man arose and asked permission to speak. He mounted the platform and moved close to the communist. The audience was breathlessly silent as the man looked to his left and then to his right.

Finally, he shouted the ancient Orthodox greeting, "Christ is risen!"

The vast assembly arose as one and the response came crashing like the sound of an earthquake, "He is risen indeed!"

Apparently the power of the Easter earthquake had traveled all the way to Kiev in the Soviet Union.

Easter reminds us that the death-dealing world will not have the final word. The final word comes from the risen Christ. He is risen, and he goes ahead of us. Our job is to follow where he leads.

Amen.