

Matthew 28:1–15*the Easter reading ends with v.10*

¹ After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb. ² And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, approached, rolled back the stone, and sat upon it. ³ His appearance was like lightning and his clothing was white as snow. ⁴ The guards were shaken with fear of him and became like dead men. ⁵ Then the angel said to the women in reply, “Do not be afraid! I know that you are seeking Jesus the crucified. ⁶ He is not here, for he has been raised just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ Behold, I have told you.” ⁸ Then they went away quickly from the tomb, fearful yet overjoyed, and ran to announce this to his disciples. ⁹ And behold, Jesus met them on their way and greeted them. They approached, embraced his feet, and did him homage. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.”

¹¹ While they were going, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had happened. ¹² They assembled with the elders and took counsel; then they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, ¹³ telling them, “You are to say, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him while we were asleep.’ ¹⁴ And if this gets to the ears of the governor, we will satisfy (him) and keep you out of trouble.” ¹⁵ The soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has circulated among the Jews to the present (day). ¹⁶ The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had ordered them.

Context

The narrative context is familiar to all readers: Jesus has been crucified, died, and laid within a tomb guarded by soldiers (27:65) and watched by Mary Magdalene and “*the other Mary*” (27:61). The Sabbath has passed and dawn approaches on the first day of a new week.

The canonical accounts of the empty tomb are fairly similar. Women (names and number of women differ) come to the tomb early on Sunday morning. The stone is rolled away and the tomb is empty. The synoptics also have a messenger (or two) speak to the women.

There is great diversity in the accounts of the appearances of the risen Christ. It is difficult to harmonize any of them. Perhaps there is a message in that: Our contemporary experiences of the risen Christ will differ. There are those who visibly see a white light and others don't. There are those who experience Christ in a radical transforming, “born-again,” event in their lives. There are those for whom Christ has been such a reality throughout their lives that they can't think of a moment when Christ wasn't present to them or when there was a great turning point in their lives. How the risen Christ comes to people differ – then and now. Our stories about the risen Christ's presence in our lives differ – and in that lack of uniformity there is witness to the breadth of humanity.

Speaking to the diversity of resurrection accounts, Keener (697) notes that “a calculated deception should have produced greater unanimity. Instead, there seem to have been competitors: ‘I saw him first!’ ‘No! I did.’” “But the divergent details suggest independent traditions, thereby underling the likelihood of details the accounts share in common.”

Canonically Matthew bases his account upon Mark 16:1-8 and a comparison of those verses with Mt 28:1-8 reveals the dependence – and get there are differences. The two points that are common to the resurrection testimony of all the gospels are that the tomb of Jesus had been found empty and that the risen Jesus had appeared to certain persons, or, in the original form of Mark, that such an appearance was promised as soon to take place (see Mark 16:7). At one level it might appear as though Matthew is constructing a Christian apologetic for the faith. But the emphasis throughout (except in the story of

the guard) is not on factual proof of the Resurrection for the non-Christian world, but on the impact of the incredible truth on Jesus' bewildered and exhilarated followers, on their fear and joy, doubt and assurance. It is with the restoration of their broken relationship with him, with all that this implies for their continuing mission, that Matthew will conclude his book.

On this central and all-important basis, Matthew has constructed an account that interprets the resurrection as the turning of the ages (Matthew 28:2–4), shows the Jewish opposition to Jesus as continuing to the present in the claim that the resurrection is a deception perpetrated by the disciples who stole his body from the tomb (Matthew 28:11–15), and marks a new stage in the mission of the disciples once limited to Israel (Matthew 10:5–6); now they are to make disciples of all nations. In this work they will be strengthened by the presence of the exalted Son of Man, who will be with them until the kingdom comes in fullness at the end of the age (Matthew 28:16–20).

Commentary

Fittingly, the two women who sat by the tomb (27:61) on that fateful day before the Sabbath, return to visit the tomb. Why women?

Why Women?

Throughout Matthew's Passion, women have proven to be the model disciples. There is the unnamed woman who anoints Jesus for his burial (26:6-13). The men argue about the waste of the expensive ointment. Jesus commends her for her good work for him.

After all the men have run away and Peter who had followed, but then denies knowing Jesus, the women remain through the crucifixion: "*Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala.*" (27:55-56)

We are told that they had "provided" for Jesus, which could also be translated "served" or "ministered to" (*diakoneo*). This same word is used of the angels serving Jesus after the temptation (4:11) and of Peter's mother-in-law serving them after her healing (8:15). Jesus had said: "Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant (*diakonos*) (20:26b) and "The greatest among you will be your servant (*diakonos*) (23:11). It is only angels and women who actually serve Jesus in Matthew.

When the morning sun rises on the third day, seemingly out of nowhere these women appear – and they had been with Jesus since Galilee, yet had been invisible up until this point. Now they appear as witnesses in a time and place where women were not allowed to testify in court. They were not considered reliable witnesses. Keener (698-9) writes:

Most of Jesus' Jewish contemporaries held little esteem for the testimony of women; this reflects a broader Mediterranean limited trust of women's speech and testimony also enshrined in Roman law. By contrast, the guards' report that the disciples had stolen the body (28:11-15) might command much greater respect then, and in an antisupernaturalistic culture like much of modern academia as well.

A little later he notes: "In view of the prejudice against women's testimony in antiquity, no one would have invented the testimony of the women attested in all four Gospels; indeed, Paul even omits it" (702).

Matthew is also noting the contrast between women and the guards. Both the guards and the women are confronted with the same situation, which involves the earthquake, the rolled-back stone, and the presence of the angel of the Lord who is "from heaven." There are two distinct reactions – the guards shake with fear; the women are told not to fear.

The women receive commands – the angel's (28:7) and Jesus' (28:10) command. In both they are ordered to announce Jesus' resurrection to the disciples (as they do, 28:8). Although outside our text, the guards also receive commands from the Jewish authorities (28:13) – say that the disciples have stolen Jesus' body (as they do, according to 28:15). Both have seen the same thing. Both are commanded to speak about the event. Both are to report more than what was (originally) seen. For the women, the events at the empty tomb happened because Jesus has been raised. For the guards, the events at the empty tomb happened because they fell asleep and the disciples stole the body.

A great irony in all of this is that the guards were posted and the tomb sealed with the large stone so that there would not be a deception about a resurrection following the burial. Now it is clear that it is the chief priests who have devised the deception.

The point made by the opposition between being raised (27:63b, 64b) and stealing the body (27:64) – two actions that would result in an empty tomb – simply contrasts what God and human beings can do. God alone can fulfill what has been announced by Jesus: “*After three days I will rise again.*” Acting on their own, human beings perform only fraudulent actions, as reflected by the use of the verb “to steal.” Similarly, the opposition between sealing the stone (27:66) and rolling back the stone (28:2) contrasts divine action with human action. The earthquake manifests the character of God's power, while the description of the “angel of the Lord” descending “from heaven” (28:2) makes clear what is the origin of this power. All that human beings can do is attempt to safeguard a situation as it stands, to preserve the status quo, a futile attempt because God's intervention is of an earth-shaking proportion, and intervention that shatters the status quo.

In sum, these two oppositions underscore that human beings by themselves can only do two things: they can either transform a situation in a fraudulent manner or strive to maintain the status quo. In contrast, God through his intervention radically transforms a situation and shatters the status quo. In short, the resurrection can be understood and accepted only insofar as one abandons a human perspective, which can lead one either to contradict the will of God (as stealing does) or to refuse God's intervention by striving to maintain the status quo that it would shatter.

In both the crucifixion and resurrection, Matthew has a greater eschatological emphasis: the earthquakes, the splitting of rocks, the opening of tombs. These signs are meant to point to our redemption and salvation. Boring (504-5) writes:

The resurrection is an eschatological event, the ultimately decisive event for human history, not merely something spectacular that happened to Jesus. Thus resurrection faith is not merely believing that a dead body came back to life, or that the tomb was empty on Easter morning. Those who believed that Jesus was John the Baptist risen from the dead did not have resurrection faith (14:1; 16:14). The soldiers and chief priests who knew the fact that Jesus had “come back to life” did not have Christian faith in the resurrection (28:11-15).

What is needed for resurrection faith? It is perhaps the shattering of the status quo. Women, who can't be witnesses, are called by God to be witnesses of the resurrection. All of the disciples who had run away and Peter who had denied Jesus, are called “my brothers” by the risen Jesus (28:10). The women also become agents of reconciliation! Not only is the believers' attitude about death radically changed – there is life beyond death, just as Jesus said; but also their attitude about people whom society considered “least,” such as women and children, was transformed.

How long would the disciples have to rely solely on the women's word and witness? However long it would take to walk from Jerusalem to Galilee. That is where Jesus promises they would see him (and they do in 28:17).

The Appearance of Jesus

It is when the women respond to the angel's command to go quickly and tell (v. 7) -- and they leave quickly, *running* to tell the disciples (v. 8) -- that the risen Jesus appears to them. Part of Matthew's purpose in this account is to show the reality of the physical resurrection as the women grab his feet; and the proper response of worshiping the risen Lord (v. 9). The women are already en route on their mission when they are joined by the risen Christ, a paradigm of Matthew's understanding of the reassuring presence of the risen Christ in the missionary activity of the church (cf. 1:23; 10:40; 13:37; 14:22-33; 16:18; 17:17; 18:5, 20; 28:20).

A Bribe

Unlike the women who go and tell the world of the good news, the guards, who have seen the same thing, did not respond in the same way. They simply reported what had happened. There was no generation of faith in the face of the eschatological events. There was the report to the ones who were already neck deep in conspiracy. The Chief Priest and elder are forced to become the source of the story (disciples stole the body) that the guards and sealing of the tomb were intended to prevent.

A Final Thought

Resurrection faith does not arise on the basis of evidence, of which the chief priests and soldiers had plenty, but on the basis of the experienced presence of the risen Christ (28:8-10, 16-17), by testimony of those to whom he appeared (28:10, 16), and by his own continuing presence among his disciples (28:20). (Boring, 503)

We need to proclaim a radical resurrection faith in the present, not just a historical event.

Notes

Matthew 28:1 *After the sabbath...dawning*: Since the sabbath ended at sunset, this could mean in the early evening, as "*dawning*" (*epiphōskō*) can refer to the appearance of the evening star as it does in Luke 23:54. However, it is probable that Matthew takes the usual meaning as the morning dawn of the day after the Sabbath. This is further indicated given that Matthew has in large part followed the narrative of Mark, where it says "*when the sun had risen*" (Mark 16:2). ***came to see the tomb***: Note that the women come to the tomb not to anoint the body as in Mark, for the anointing has already taken place.

Matthew 28:2 *a great earthquake*: This is peculiar to Matthew and likely indicates the eschatological nature of the event that takes place. ***angel of the lord***: Just as angels were prominent in the infancy narratives in communicating God's will, so the angel explains what is happening here. ***descended from heaven***: this trait is also peculiar to Matthew, although his interpretation of the "young man" of his Marcan source (Mark 16:5) as an angel is probably true to Mark's intention. ***rolled back the stone . . . upon it***: Their action is not to allow the risen Jesus to leave the tomb but to make evident that the tomb is empty. Unlike the apocryphal Gospel of Peter (9, 35-11, 44), the New Testament does not describe the resurrection of Jesus, nor is there anyone who sees it.

Matthew 28:5 *Jesus the crucified*: the perfect participle used by the angel indicates an act that is completed with on-going consequences.

Matthew 28:6 *just as he said*: a Matthean addition referring to Jesus' predictions of his resurrection, e.g., Matthew 16:21; 17:23; 20:19.

Matthew 28:7 *to Galilee*: reaffirming the promise already given in 26:32.

Matthew 28:13 while we were asleep: The story suggested by the chief priests would not only discredit the soldiers, but was also dangerous, in that sleeping on guard duty was a serious offence, perhaps punishable by death. To persuade them to spread such a story would need a substantial sum. But they may have been more easily persuaded by the consideration that, even without the story of their sleep, their watch had been a failure. Either way they could expect little mercy from Pilate.

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