

Matthew 28:1-10

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. ²Suddenly, there was a great earthquake! For an angel of the Lord came down from heaven, and going to the tomb, he rolled away the stone and was sitting on it. ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing was as white as snow. ⁴The guards were so terrified of him that they shook and became like dead men. ⁵The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid! I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶He is not here. He has risen, just as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. ⁷Go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has risen from the dead! And look, he is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him.’ See, I have told you!”

⁸They hurried away from the tomb, with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!”

They approached, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him.

¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go, tell my brothers that they should go to Galilee, and there they will see me.”

He Is Not Here

I.

Have you ever been to an Easter Vigil? I never have been to such a service. I haven't heard of any churches in our fellowship holding one, but there is a rite available to hold that kind of service.

Easter Vigil is to be held on Easter Saturday, or perhaps you could call it Easter Eve, after sunset. Historically, the service was timed so that the Easter announcement, “Christ is risen!” was spoken at midnight.

In the early Christian church, Easter Vigil was the time when those being brought into the church as adults who had gone through instruction were baptized. Remembrance of baptism plays a part in the Easter Vigil service. Even in its modern form, Easter Vigil is designed to be a long service—90 minutes or more—with many readings from Scripture.

One would have thought if there would ever have been a time for an Easter Vigil, it would have been the first Easter Eve. Shouldn't they have been right there, around tomb in the cemetery, waiting? They had heard Jesus say: “Just as Jonah was in the belly of the huge fish for three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:40, EHV). Jesus was not-so-subtly indicating that he would die, be put in the grave, and rise from the dead again.

Sometimes the disciples didn't take a hint. The Jonah reference was one Jesus made for the general public, but the disciples needed to be told much more directly. Matthew says: “From that time, Jesus began to show his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and experts in the law, and be killed, and on the third day be raised again” (Matthew 16:21, EHV).

With all his teaching, shouldn't they have known what he meant? Shouldn't they have been there that morning, long before sunrise? Wouldn't his closest friends and followers be expected to be holding an Easter Vigil?

II.

Christianity is unique among religions. Perhaps you have heard that said before. I've heard it said that Christianity is unique in that it is the only religion where the founder of the religion does not have a grave. On Good Friday we mentioned the Via Dolorosa—The Way of Sorrows. If you go to Israel, you can walk the Way of Sorrows and see what they

believe to be tomb where Jesus' body had been laid. But, of course, it's empty.

Christianity is the only religion with an empty tomb. That makes it unique. On the other hand, that makes Christianity unique in another profound way. If you can dig up the remains of Jesus somewhere, then Christianity is disproven. If you can make sure that Jesus did *not* rise from the grave on the third day, you can disprove Christianity and totally wipe out this religion. Paul said it just a few verses after today's Second Reading: "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is pointless, and your faith is pointless too" (1 Corinthians 15:14, EHV).

The disciples weren't waiting. Jesus called them people of little faith. They were looking for something different. They were looking for pointless things. The things they had been waiting for hadn't materialized. So they weren't there on an Easter Vigil.

We have the full resurrection story. We know that Jesus came to bring forgiveness of sins and life everlasting. We know that he paid for every sin of every man, woman, and child who has ever lived or ever will live. Yet, is that where we put the focus in our Christianity? Are we more interested in the social aspects of being a believer? Do we think more about feeding the hungry than bringing them the life-giving message of the gospel? Rather than waiting at the tomb expectantly, we are too intimidated to even *talk* about the tomb with others. Even admitting to being a Christian doesn't get you any kudos, and can often mean you might be labeled a bigot, so you just keep quiet about your Christian faith.

It's almost as if Christ is still in the tomb, waiting for someone to find him and disprove Christianity.

After Good Friday was over, and when Jesus was safely laid in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb: "The chief priests and Pharisees gathered in the presence of Pilate⁶³ and said, 'Sir, we remembered what that deceiver said while he was still alive: "After three days I will rise again"' (Matthew 27:62-63, EHV). The disciples hadn't paid much attention when Jesus made his Jonah comparison and prediction, but there was a group who had listened.

"So give a command that the tomb be made secure until the third day. Otherwise his disciples might steal his body and tell the people, 'He is risen from the dead.' And this last deception will be worse than the first" (Matthew 27:64, EHV). The chief priests and Pharisees certainly didn't believe Jesus would rise from the dead, but they *did* believe that the disciples would try to make it *look* that way. They wanted no chance of that happening.

"Pilate said to them, 'You have a guard. Go, make it as secure as you know how.'⁶⁶ So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and posting a guard" (Matthew 27:65-66, EHV). The only ones there for Easter Vigil were some soldiers, guarding the entrance stone. They wanted Christianity disproven before it could ever get started.

III.

At the beginning of today's Gospel, Matthew records: "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, EHV). While they hadn't been sitting around the graveyard waiting for Jesus to rise from the dead, the women were the first ones other than the guards on scene after the Sabbath Day, intending to properly care for Jesus' body.

"Suddenly, there was a great earthquake! For an angel of the Lord came down from heaven, and going to the tomb, he rolled away the stone and was sitting on it.³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing was as white as snow.⁴ The guards were so terrified of him that they shook and became like dead men" (Matthew 28:2-4, EHV). That stone was not a small stone. It would take more than one person to roll it out of the way. If the terrified guards would have had the courage to look inside the tomb, they would have

found it already empty. Jesus didn't need help getting out of his grave clothes. He didn't need the angel to roll away the stone. He was already gone.

"The angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid! I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶He is not here. He has risen, just as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay'" (Matthew 28:5-6, EHV). Easter Vigil or not, the tomb was empty. When Jesus announced "It is finished" from the cross, it really was. The hellish business of paying for the sins of the world was completed. He is not here. There is nothing to fear in this empty tomb. This impressive stone could not hold him. The place where Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea carefully laid him under the watchful eyes of these very women was empty now. They could see that place, and the graveclothes laid there, and the fact that Jesus was gone.

"Go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has risen from the dead! And look, he is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him.' See, I have told you!" (Matthew 28:7, EHV). Ok, ladies. You've seen enough now. Don't stand around gaping, there is work to be done! Go, tell the disciples.

"They hurried away from the tomb, with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples" (Matthew 28:8, EHV). Fear and joy. Anytime a person is in the presence of holy angels it causes fear. This time, however, the fear was overwhelmed with joy. The angel was a credible witness. They knew he spoke the truth to them. They did as instructed, and went to share the news with the disciples at a run.

IV.

"Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' They approached, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him" (Matthew 28:9, EHV). Their joy must have grown exponentially when they actually saw Jesus. If they had failed to understand as much as the disciples had, if there had been any lingering doubts, those were all gone. Their Lord and Savior stood there before them, obviously alive!

Christianity is unique among religions. There is no dead body, but an empty tomb. Christianity can not be disproven by the remains of our founder—Christ Jesus. There are witnesses.

As the Apostle Paul wrote in today's Second Reading; "I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. ⁶After that he appeared to over five hundred brothers at the same time, most of whom are still alive, but some have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:3-6, EHV). Paul had received his information directly from Jesus, even though he hadn't been one of the disciples while Jesus still walked the earth. Nevertheless, he saw and spoke also to many of the witnesses—many of the people Jesus had appeared to during the days between his resurrection and his ascension into heaven. While the evidence for Jesus' resurrection is not something we can see personally nearly 2000 years later, there was ample evidence that has been recorded for us.

"Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid. Go, tell my brothers that they should go to Galilee, and there they will see me'" (Matthew 28:10, EHV). Go and tell. It wasn't just for the women to go back and tell the 11 remaining disciples. It wasn't just for the women and those 11. It wasn't even just for the 500 Paul mentioned who had seen Jesus. Go and tell is for you and me.

He is not here gives us such great joy. He is not here, he is risen! Spread the word. Everyone needs to come and see Jesus, too. Amen.