

Matthew 27:55 – 28:15

^{27:55} Many women were there looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee while ministering to him. ⁵⁶ Among them was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. ⁵⁷ When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸ This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. ⁵⁹ And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, ⁶⁰ and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the entrance of the tomb and went away. ⁶¹ And Mary Magdalene was there, and the other Mary, sitting opposite the grave. ⁶² Now on the next day, the day after the preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with Pilate, ⁶³ and said, ‘Sir, we remember that when he was still alive that deceiver said, ‘After three days I am to rise again.’ ⁶⁴ Therefore, give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, otherwise his disciples may come and steal him away and say to the people, ‘He has risen from the dead,’ and the last deception will be worse than the first.’ ⁶⁵ Pilate said to them, ‘You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how.’ ⁶⁶ And they went and made the grave secure, and along with the guard they set a seal on the stone. ^{28:1} Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave. ² And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. ³ And his appearance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. ⁴ The guards shook for fear of him and became like dead men. ⁵ The angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. ⁶ He is not here, for he has risen, just as he said. Come, see the place where he was lying. ⁷ Go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead; and behold, he is going ahead of you into Galilee, there you will see him; behold, I have told you.’ ⁸ And they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to report it to his disciples. ⁹ And behold, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; go and take word to my brethren to leave for Galilee, and there they will see me.’ ¹¹ Now while they were on their way, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all that had happened. ¹² And when they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, ¹³ and said, ‘You are to say, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ ¹⁴ And if this should come to the governor’s ears, we will win him over and keep you out of trouble.’ ¹⁵ And they took the money and did as they had been instructed; and this story was widely spread among the Jews, and is to this day.

Historical and Cultural Background

- Jesus’ stepfather and mother were also named ‘Joseph’ and ‘Mary’
- One angel appeared in Mt.1, saying to Joseph, ‘Do not be afraid’
- The Sabbath: a day of no work. The Jewish leaders had criticized Jesus for healing on the Sabbath (Mt.12:10 – 12).
- Isaiah 53:9 speaks of the Messiah-Servant, ‘yet he was with a rich man in his death’
- The seal on the tomb might be heard as an echo of Daniel 6:17. ‘A stone was brought and laid over the mouth of the den; and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the signet rings of his nobles, so that nothing would be changed in regard to Daniel.’

Questions

1. If you've been reading Matthew's book, what things would you want to see wrapped up?
2. What does happen in 27:55 – 28:15? Anything surprising? Anything predictable?
 - a. Disciples become one unit
 - b. Mary's become major characters whereas they weren't before
 - c. Jewish elders and chief priests continue down the path they were headed on, except for Joseph of Arimathea
 - d. One angel, like the beginning of Matthew's Gospel.
 - i. (if this comes up) Were there men (Mark, Luke) or angels (Matthew, John) at the tomb? Angels. The Old Testament literary precedent was to describe the appearances of angels and even God as 'men' (e.g. Gen.18:2; 19:1; Judg.13:16; Dan.10:5; Zech.1:8, 11). Jewish scholar of the Hebrew Bible Jon D. Levenson says, 'The notion that "man" (ish) can denote an angel in biblical Hebrew is beyond dispute.'¹ Of course, one suspects that Luke's description, 'two men suddenly stood near them in dazzling clothing,' should probably not be taken to mean two ordinary human beings. On Mark, see below.
 - ii. (if this comes up) Was there one angel (Matthew, Mark) or two angels (Luke, John) at the tomb? Two. Hebrew biblical narrative and common sense allow a narrator to leave out information, but not to make up anything.² On the number of angels, each Gospel writer desires a literary symmetry between beginning and end:
 1. Matthew relates the same elements in the beginning of his Gospel as at the end: one angel's announcement, the fulfillment of a prediction, Gentile inclusion through Jesus, Jesus' kingly authority by virtue of being a descendant of King David, and the theme of Immanuel – 'God with us.' Matthew appears to narrate one angel at the tomb in Matthew 28 to match the appearance of one angel to Joseph in Matthew 1.
 2. Mark also seems to desire literary symmetry between beginning and end. In Mark 1, one man, John the Baptist, directed people to Jesus in Galilee. In Mark 16, one 'man' directed people to the resurrected Jesus, once more in Galilee.
 3. Luke starts his narrative with two people, Zecharias and Elizabeth (Luke 1), announcing to all Israel the news of the Son of God taking to himself human nature. Luke ends his narrative with two 'men' (Luke 24:4) announcing to a renewed Israel the news of Jesus rising with a renewed human nature.
 4. John started his narrative with an image of Jesus as a new Temple: 'the Word became flesh and tabernacle among us' (John 1:14). John seems to end with the two angels (John 20:12) because they were another image from the old Temple: the two angels over the ark of the covenant between whom the presence of God was manifested.
 - iii. This principle of economy in storytelling also explains why the lists of women vary. Each Gospel writer is probably pointing out women familiar to the Gospel writer's original audience, and not claiming to be exhaustive. Notice that John's account highlights Mary Magdalene yet, though her, refers to the other women (Mary says 'we' in Jn.20:2).
 - e. Some things still need to be worked out: relations with the Jewish leaders, continuing work
3. What are the chief priests doing?
 - a. Did the Jewish leaders really admit the empty tomb? And claim that the disciples stole the body? The earliest Jewish arguments against Christianity admit the empty tomb. The *Toledoth Jesu*, a compilation of early Jewish writings, is a source acknowledging this. It acknowledges that the tomb was empty, and attempts to explain it away. The *Toledoth Jesu* in its final form dates from anywhere between the 4th to the 9th century. Further, the recorded debate in the second century between a Christian named Justin Martyr and a Jew named Trypho refers to the fact that the Jews claim the body was stolen (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, ch.58). So it is reasonably well established that the early Jewish leaders admitted the empty tomb. Why is this

¹ Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), p.108

² Meir Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*

‘Had it been a case of a trespass only, and not of a subsequent corruption, repentance would have been well enough; but when once transgression had begun men came under the power of the corruption proper to their nature and were bereft of the grace which belonged to them as creatures in the Image of God. No, repentance could not meet the case. What – or rather Who – was it that was needed for such grace and such recall as we required? Who, save the Word of God Himself, Who also in the beginning had made all things out of nothing?... Thus, taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, He surrendered His body to death instead of all, and offered it to the Father... This He did that He might turn again to incorruption men who had turned to corruption, and make them alive through death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of His resurrection. Thus He would make death to disappear from them as utterly as straw from fire.’³

‘The Word perceived that corruption could not be got rid of otherwise than through death; yet He Himself, as the Word, being immortal and the Father’s Son, was such as could not die. For this reason, therefore, He assumed a body capable of death, in order that it, through belonging to the Word Who is above all, might become in dying a sufficient exchange for all, and, itself remaining incorruptible through His indwelling, might thereafter put an end to corruption for all others as well, by the grace of the resurrection. It was by surrendering to death the body which He had taken, as an offering and sacrifice free from every stain, that He forthwith abolished death for His human brethren by the offering of the equivalent. For naturally, since the Word of God was above all, when He offered His own temple and bodily instrument as a substitute for the life of all, He fulfilled in death all that was required. Naturally also, through this union of the immortal Son of God with our human nature, all men were clothed with incorruption in the promise of the resurrection. For the solidarity of mankind is such that, by virtue of the Word’s indwelling in a single human body, the corruption which goes with death has lost its power over all. You know how it is when some great king enters a large city and dwells in one of its houses; because of his dwelling in that single house, the whole city is honored, and enemies and robbers cease to molest it. Even so is it with the King of all; He has come into our country and dwelt in one body amidst the many, and in consequence the designs of the enemy against mankind have been foiled and the corruption of death, which formerly held them in its power, has simply ceased to be. For the human race would have perished utterly had not the Lord and Savior of all the Son of God, come among us to put an end to death.’⁴

5. What does Jesus’ resurrection mean for Jesus’ people? (this is the main point) Jesus takes the acts of Joseph and the Marys – they think they are giving their last acts of devotion – and catapults them into something much greater and bigger and deeper than they thought.
 - a. Joseph of Arimathea
 - i. How does Joseph use his resources here? To honor Jesus, vs. the chief priests using their resources to bribe Judas and then pay the guards!
 - ii. Joseph probably didn’t think that Jesus would rise again. So he becomes a public disciple of Jesus by asking for his body, touching his dead body, which would have made him unclean for the Passover, and then laying Jesus’ body in his own tomb.
 - iii. In a sense, Joseph takes his place with Jesus. In a sense, Jesus takes his place with Joseph. He goes ‘ahead of Joseph’ into the tomb. But when Jesus rises again, Joseph’s public career will be on the line. He will die a social death. Given the hostility among the other leaders, his career as a Jewish leader is over.
 - iv. Therefore Joseph’s small act of devotion becomes magnified and expanded in significance by Jesus. Jesus takes it into his resurrection as a witness to himself. It fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah 53:9.
 - b. What about the Marys?
 - i. ‘Mary’ comes from the Hebrew *marah*, meaning ‘bitter.’ Jesus as the Passover Lamb is surrounded by ‘bitter herbs.’
 - ii. Why did they meet the angel first? Why not have Jesus come himself to the women? Because everyone must hear and believe, like the parable of the four soils (Mt. 13:1 – 23). Also, the angel appeared to a man, Joseph of Nazareth, in Matthew 1. Now the angel appears to women, the Marys, in Matthew 28. There is symmetry there.
 - iii. Is this why the women are so prominent and come first? There is less reconciliation necessary? That’s why they can mediate between Jesus and the disciples.

³ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 2:8 – 9

⁴ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 2.9

- iv. That's a reversal of Eve bringing a word that brings death to Adam. The women bring a word that brings life to the men.
- v. Why does he hang around the disciples in v.8 – 9? How come he doesn't just say, 'On with it?'
 - 1. Teaching them about what he had predicted, and about what the Hebrew Scriptures said about him and the resurrection.
 - 2. Restoring their relationship. In John's Gospel, Jesus restores Thomas and Simon Peter explicitly, presumably because they represent the disciples as a whole.
 - 3. Application: How is your last interaction with Jesus going to affect how you relate to him next?
 - 4. What the resurrection achieves in Jesus' own body, he enacts relationally with his disciples
- vi. Illus: Sometimes small acts of following Jesus can become things that he uses, takes up, and invests with more powerful meaning. Corrie Ten Boom's story about extending a hand of forgiveness:

During World War II, on February 28, 1944, Corrie Ten Boom and her sister Betsie were arrested for housing Jews in their home in Holland. They were taken eventually to Ravensbrück, a prison camp in Germany where they were treated horribly. Corrie watched labor camp guards strike Betsie for being too weak to shovel. Betsie later died. Corrie was discharged in 1945, and she began to share all over Holland, Europe, and the United States what God had done in those dark days. Then, she went to Germany, and this is what she writes in *The Hiding Place*:

'It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing center at Ravensbrück. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there--the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie's pain-blانched face.

He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. 'How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein,' he said. 'To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!'

His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people in Bloemendaal the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.

Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him.

I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness.

As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.

And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.

- c. Illus: Here's a poem that helps me think about Jesus' resurrection. I wrote it in Uganda when I went there in June – July of 2012, to help me pray for my new friends in Uganda. It's about the red dust and red dirt of this land. The soil of Uganda is so rich in iron and other minerals that it is red. They make beautiful clay pottery out of this material. At the same time, the red dust was really hard to keep out of my light colored shirts and khaki pants. So I took that as a launching point for reflection about what God was showing me. In this context, I hope it's helpful for you to think of Jesus' resurrection.

Red Dust

This red dust gets everywhere
On my white shirt, on Brian's hair
It follows me in, it waits on the floor
To jump back on my feet outside the shower
door

These red dirt roads wind on and on
Past Kampala's slums and Murchison
Stretching farther than I can go
Calling out and saying, Slow

Go slowly over the bumps and holes
Eat matoke slowly from your bowls
Move slowly to conserve your strength
And hear these stories at greater length

Stories of hope along the red dirt road
Of mothers dreaming as their children grow
Like Irene, who studies while her little girl
Plays by the green river of sewage swirls

A church prays for change to flow
Like the integrity of martyrs bold
That corruption would one day be no more
And trust in promises might be restored

Hopes flower and bloom in the dusty red
From beneath the ground where the sandals tread
Their roots must draw from a secret store
Nourishment leaking from behind hope's door

Yes, this red dust sings with whispering voice
In creation's chorus since Adam's choice
Groaning for God to one day extend
The abandoned garden that He alone now tends

The red earth bleeds hope into every fruit
Mouthfuls of longing sweet but mute
Hope hides in the flesh inside mango skins
It lingers on banana peels in garbage tins

And Eden's soil flows in all our blood
Thick as the rain and the rich red mud
These red dirt roads point to Eden's soil
Despite the dust and despite the toil

For rumors whisper from another land
That the Son of God did come and command
Our own red blood, in his body, like ours
To receive the Father's cleansing power

So hope lives in the flesh inside his own skin
And lingers in an empty tomb in a small garden
The Spirit, with whispers sweet and slow
Says, Taste and eat, and renewed, go



Go down those red dirt roads and find
Those loved by the Father before all time
And the thick red dust will remind you still
Of all the places He longs to fill

This red dust gets everywhere
Though I wash my clothes, it stays right there
But if it follows me home, perhaps I won't mind
Red gift of God, stay with me a long time

- d. Reflection: Sometimes we think that we should tease apart 'what God does' and 'what we do'. Like, 'what is God's part?' and 'what is my part?' But what if God comes into humanity as Jesus in order to expand our ability to act? Or to make our small actions even more significant?
 - i. Like how he took 2 fishes and 5 loaves and multiplied them (Mt.14 and 16)
 - ii. Like how he praised the woman who poured perfume on his head before his death (Mt.26)
 - iii. Like Joseph of Arimathea offering his tomb as a last act of devotion, now catapulted by Jesus to be one of the first to lose his life and find new life in Jesus
 - iv. Like the female disciples of Jesus coming to the tomb as a last act of devotion, now catapulted by Jesus to be new Eves.
 - v. Like Corrie Ten Boom raising her hand for a handshake and feeling the power of God flowing through her.
 - vi. Like Jesus coming into humanity so that our small offerings would be taken up by him and used. We do and must offer something: ourselves, and our choices. We must keep in mind that they are but small tokens in comparison with what he does with us.
- e. APPLICATION: What is one small act of obedience that Jesus wants to inhabit and magnify and deepen and enhance?