

Jesus Conquers His Greatest Enemies

Acts of the Exalted Jesus Sermon Series

Matthew 28:1-10 and Acts 9:1-19

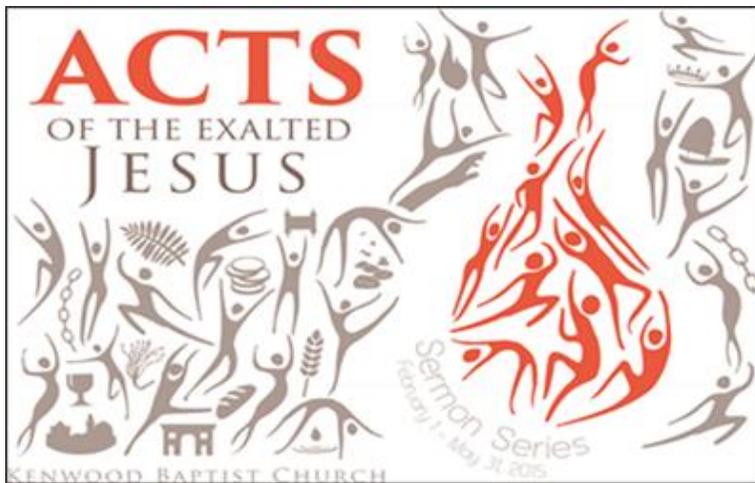
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

Easter Sunday, April 5, 2015

TEXTS: Matthew 28:1-10 and Acts 9:1-19

It's a joy to open the Scriptures together this morning on this glorious Easter. Jesus Christ continues to capture the attention of the world. Even CNN has gotten in on the story. For the



last several weeks, CNN has branched out from cable news to a documentary inquiry entitled *Finding Jesus: Faith, Fact, or Forgery*. In a six-part series, they are exploring six items to try to establish both the historical existence of Jesus and His claims. These items are listed as the shroud of Turin, relics as part of the true cross, relics believed to be bones from John the Baptist, the ossuary of

Jesus' brother James, and a couple of ancient, non-canonical texts. David Gibson, the author of the book, when asked why he seeks to understand Jesus by exploring these artifacts, says:

“One reason is that for so many, these artifacts — or relics, if you will — have become a kind of substitute for the Gospels. Look, people love the Gospels but don't read them that much, or don't know them as well as they think they do.”

The challenge for us this morning is that we have a staggering claim as Christians that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified and has risen from the dead. The fact that we are gathered on a Sunday morning testifies to this reality. I want this morning to consider our two passages for today in conversation with this mini-series about finding Jesus. Where do we go for evidence of the truth of who Jesus claims to be? We go to the truth of the empty tomb. Do we find this in relics, artifacts, or archaeological discoveries? We will see in the texts themselves that the evidence for the resurrected Jesus Christ is more compelling than these.

The first text is from Matthew 28. Matthew takes great pains to tell us that it was at the dawn of the first day of the week, that interval between the changing of one day to the next. As the

light begins to shine on that very first Easter morning, we read that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, the mother of James the younger, came to the tomb of Christ to look. We read in Matthew 28:2 that when they arrived:

“There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it.”

The earthquake shook the ground around them, and they saw an angel coming down from heaven. I've been thinking this week about what an assignment this angel was given. The Bible says there are thousands and thousands of angels, and they do whatever God tells them to do. Can you imagine this angel being told: “I want you to go down and roll back the stone”? What an assignment! He goes down and he rolls the stone back, and it's like an earthquake, Matthew tells us. Not only does the earth shudder at his presence, but with the rolling back of this stone, he opens the tomb. Then he does this great thing: he just sits on the stone. What an assignment! The appearance of this angel is arresting. He looks like lightning. Have you ever stared at lightning? Matthew 28:3 tells us:

“His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow.”

Just his appearance terrifies the guards. We read in Matthew 28:4:

“The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.”

It's a public event, not a private, inner vision. Not only does this angel appear gloriously, not only does he sit down on the rolled-back stone, he also speaks, because the God of the Bible is a speaker. He speaks in Matthew 28:5-6:

“Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; He has risen, just as He said.”

The angel concedes the real death of Jesus, and this excludes from our consideration any imagination that Jesus just appeared to die. The angel knows Jesus was crucified. He says: “I know you are looking for Him,” and then he gives this astonishing announcement: “He is not here; He has risen.” This expression *He has risen* is just one word in Greek in the text: *ἠγέρθη*, *egerthe He has been raised*. It takes us four words to say this one word. In a sense, the truth of the Gospel hangs on this one word, like an inverted pyramid. If this word is not true, but is trumped up or poetic or symbolic, then the whole edifice of Christianity comes crashing down, and deserves to, because it is a lie to say that a man is alive who is not. But, if the word *ἠγέρθη* *egerthe* is true, then everything really important starts to come together. If Jesus has been raised, it is evidence of the reality of God, and the expression *He has been raised* invites us to the One who does the raising. If it is true, then there is a real, historical answer to the question of death, for if God did raise Jesus, then you and I have reason to hope for life after death, something that we all crave and long for. If *ἠγέρθη* *egerthe* is true, then there is a purpose for

living, because if Jesus has been raised from the dead, then He is Lord, and human beings, you and I, have a rule for living: Jesus's words. So much depends on the truth of this one word.

The angel invites Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to verify this claim, and the first supporting statement is that He has been raised, just as He said, and we are pressed closer into the reliability of Jesus Christ. Jesus said in Matthew 12:40:

“For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

In Matthew 16:21 we read:

“From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”

It happened, just as He had said. In Matthew 28:6b, the angel invites the women:

“Come and see the place where He lay.”

This is one of the missing assumptions for the CNN mini-series. The trailer of the mini-series says: “We have stumbled onto the clues, the signposts that Jesus left so that we could follow this trail.” The angel invites: “Look where He lay.” The greatest evidence for the truth of Jesus is not a fragment of a medieval cross; it’s not the bones of His brother; it’s not a medieval shroud; it’s not non-canonical documents. The greatest evidence for the truth of Jesus Christ is actually the absence of His body. It’s the lack of evidence; the inability to produce His body. The fact that the relics of Jesus's body are not found is the greatest evidence for His resurrection: “Come and see.” The angel announces: “He is risen!” As glorious as that news is, the angel also says in Matthew 28:7:

“He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see Him.”

He is not just risen from the dead and removed from the scene of history, His resurrection from the dead enthrones Him as Lord of history. He is walking out in front of you, and He is on His way to Galilee right now. You will see him there. The empty tomb is not just a static statement about Jesus. It is a declaration that He has defeated death forever and that He sits enthroned this morning, and that He is on the move in the world.

The angel’s announcement carries a past, present, and future summons. The past event is that Jesus has been raised, and I declare to you this morning the truth of this past event. The angel also announces a present reality, that Jesus is going out in front of you and me, that He is on the move in this world, and I affirm this as well. Then there is a future promise that you will see Him. They go; the women hurry away with this news, and the angel’s announcement turns

them into missionaries. If you understand the resurrection of Jesus, it comes with great responsibility; not just satisfaction of our own eternal state, but a sacred responsibility in this world as a witness to Him. In Matthew 28:8:

“So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell His disciples.”

On the way, suddenly Jesus meets them Himself. What would you say if you had just defeated the devil forever, if you had just atoned for the sin of all humanity? What do you say? Jesus just says in Matthew 28:9:

“Suddenly Jesus met them. ‘Greetings,’ He said.”

He simply says: “Hi.” We might have expected Him to give a long report about the battle in the grave, about the offering accepted, but He just says: “Hi.” These women fall and worship Him. We read in Matthew 29:9b:

“They came to Him, clasped His feet and worshiped Him.”

His resurrection is real; it's human; and they grab His feet. He is not a ghost. Have you ever noticed that in most ghost stories, ghosts don't have feet? Jesus is not a ghost. They grab hold of His feet. His resurrection is real, and they worship Him. He says in Matthew 28:10:

“Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see Me.”

Knowing that Jesus is raised always carries with it a mission. I suspect that some of you this morning don't know Jesus Christ as Savior and that the thought of His being raised from the dead is difficult for you to grasp. I can assure you that it's just as difficult to imagine that you have 22,000 miles of capillaries and blood vessels inside your body. Just look at yourself, they are in there. There are all kinds of things that you don't understand, and I don't, either. Yet, Jesus Christ said He would do this. People saw Him, and I can assure you by the promises of Christ's own lips, that He is not here; that no bones of His will ever be found.

I believe, however, that most of us in the sanctuary actually believe this at some level. These texts carry for us a great challenge. It is not the challenge of belief, it is the challenge of mission, the challenge that the angel says go and tell. Jesus says here: *“Go and tell My brothers.”* The ending of the Gospel of Matthew is Jesus' then meeting the disciples and telling them: “Go and tell!” Do you live, do I live, on mission with Jesus Christ? Jesus conquers His greatest enemies. Sin, death, and hell are destroyed by His resurrection. But Jesus' resurrection and the appearance of Him alive continues in this world, daily. Those who know me well know the number 174,000. I just love it. Every day, 174,000 people come to faith in Jesus Christ. Every day. Most of those people come to faith in Jesus Christ through people who know Him. Jesus is constantly on the move, appearing throughout the world. I saw an interview, really a

discussion, on *Al-Jazeera* news recently, and a couple of leading Muslim clerics were lamenting the fact that 16,000 Muslims convert to Christianity every hour. What are you doing on mission for Jesus? That's the challenge of these texts, because Jesus appears to the Twelve. He is alive; He is on the move, and He goes out to Galilee. From there, He sends them to the ends of the earth, and Jesus continues to appear and triumph and conquer His greatest enemies.

We meet His greatest enemy in Acts 9: Saul of Tarsus, breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples, dragging the followers of Jesus into prison, both men and women. With letters authorizing their capture and imprisonment, assenting to the death of Jesus' followers, Saul is Jesus' greatest enemy in the world at this moment. What does Jesus Christ do? Jesus Christ is raised; He is on the move. So as Saul nears Damascus on his journey, we read in Acts 9:3, that:

“. . . suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.”

Luke uses the same word, *lightning*, that Matthew uses of that angel at the tomb, except the lightning is all around him. It is so blinding that he falls to the ground. In Acts 9:4, he hears a voice speaking:

“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?”

Struck with blindness from that heavenly light, Saul asks in Acts 9:5a:

“Who are you, Lord?”

The resurrected Jesus says in Acts 9:5b:

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

He is alive! Jesus does what Jesus always does: He appears; He reveals himself; and He transfers Saul to a mission. He says in Acts 9:6:

“Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

Seeing Jesus, believing He is raised from the dead carries with it implications of who we are to be in the world. It grieves me that so many Christians just consume the Gospel like it's something you get through the drive-through for your own benefit. The Gospel is not to be consumed for our own benefit alone. The gospel is ingested for the sake of the world; the Gospel is taken in so that we are on mission for the world. Whom have you shared Christ with this week? Who of you pointed, saying: “Come, see the empty tomb”? Saul, who persecuted Jesus, struck with blindness, is taken by the hand. He who sought to take people bound to Jerusalem is escorted by the hand to Damascus, and the Lord Jesus appears to one of His other disciples, Ananias. He says in Acts 9:11:

“Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for

he is praying.”

We see that Saul, struck with blindness, is there in the city praying, and in his prayer time he has a vision. The specificity of this vision is remarkable. In a time of prayer before God, Saul asks: “What shall I do?” and the Lord gives him a vision. In Acts 9:12 we read:

“In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.”

Ananias panics at this assignment. Ananias says: “You want me to do what?” He says in Acts 9:13-14:

“Lord, I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to Your people in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on Your name.”

You want me to go and meet him? Ananias is placing his own life in danger. Are you willing to go where Jesus sends you even if it places your life in danger? Some of us are so cowardly that we won't tell someone about Jesus just because we think we might lose a friendship. In Acts 9:15, Jesus says to Ananias what Jesus says throughout these texts:

“Go! This man is My chosen instrument to proclaim My name.”

So Ananias goes. He comes into the house at risk of his life, and the first word he uses as he places his hands upon Saul is *brother*. He says in Acts 9:17:

“Brother Saul, the Lord--Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here— has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

And then, filled with the Spirit, the persecutor becomes the great missionary of the New Testament. You see, Jesus conquers not only sin, death, and hell on our behalf, but He conquers us. The greatest evidence for Jesus is the empty tomb. The relics that are to be found in this world today are not in museums. The relics found of the truth of Jesus Christ and His defeat of His enemies are the living representatives: you and I. The mini-series should have had another segment, not artifacts, but of individuals who have said: “I have seen Him, and He has changed my life. I have been changed from a persecutor of Christ to an ardent defender. I was a distracted dad, and now I'm a devoted disciple.” Jesus Christ is on the move today. He is going out in front of us, and He calls us to follow Him. His resurrection appearances continue daily in this world. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8:

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then He appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of

all, as to one untimely born, He appeared also to me.”

Paul believed that he had seen the resurrected Jesus Christ, and that seeing Him changed him into an apostle. He says in 1 Corinthians 15:10:

“But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain.”

What did he mean by that? The next line makes it clear:

“On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.”

If you know Jesus Christ, then the challenge this Easter Sunday is to be drawn into mission with Him. He is on the move in the world.

I remember being invited to speak at the Harvard Atheist Club, and we were going through this same passage in 1 Corinthians 15. I had never seen anyone so hostile to the Christian message. I was explaining from 1 Corinthians 15 the number of resurrection appearances, and that the resurrection of Jesus didn't happen in a corner. It wasn't an idea that early Christians made up. Hundreds of people saw Christ and continue to see Him day after day. One of the young men in the Harvard Atheist Club got so mad at me, so frustrated, that he grabbed a Gideon Bible nearby. He was so mad, he just ripped the page out of 1 Corinthians 15, and he blew his nose. I wonder how he would have responded to the angel. You can rip a page out of a Gideon New Testament, but Jesus continues on the move every day. If you know Him, then you have a responsibility to share Him with boldness and courage and truth and with your eyes wide open and your heart aflame: “I have seen Him and I know He is alive!” Would you pray with me?

Lord Jesus, You are alive this morning, and we sing *Hallelujah* to You. We thank You, Savior of the world, that You chose the cross on our behalf. We thank You, Lord Jesus, that Your blood has been poured out for us, that the weight of every sin and the curse of death has been broken forever. We thank You, Lord Jesus, that You have done battle on our behalf forever, that the war on death has ended with Your victory, the power of hell broken. We thank You, Lord God, that You are our resurrected King, and, Lord Jesus, I ask that You would appear now to any who do not yet see You. Lord, for all of us who do see You, I ask that You would breathe upon us afresh the Holy Spirit and commission us anew to serve You and to be Your living relics in this world, testifying that You are alive, and that the price has been paid. We give You glory and desire to sing unto You forever and ever, *Hallelujah!* Amen.