

The Church's Confidence

Matthew 27:57–28:15

We love to tell stories in our family. Funny stories. Family lore. Meaningful memories. The story of Carissa's and my first date, during which I uttered the words, 'Wow, You're a good eater!' Somehow, there was a second date. The story of my wife attempting a 30-foot cliff jump which ended in a belly flop. Thankfully, there was not a second jump. The story of the small brain tumor I had years ago, that resolved on its own and went away without surgery. The story of Carissa and some friends getting caught in a hail and thunderstorm above tree line in Colorado, getting lost, and only finding their way back to the trail when the fog lifted just long enough for someone glimpse the cairn of rocks marking the trail.

And every now and then, amid the storytelling, one of our kids will stop us and start doing a little fact-checking. 'Is that true? Did that really happen? Or are you just making that up?'

Because, while some stories can be entertaining or inspiring regardless of whether or not they're true—fiction, for instance, doesn't have to be grounded in history or reality to have its intended impact—other stories lose their significance if they're not true. What's the point of a historical biography that plays fast and loose with history? Or a journalistic report that's full of inaccuracies? Or family history that's largely made up? It might be entertaining to picture your mom doing a 30-foot belly flop, but it's not nearly as funny if you find out it's not true. Nor nearly as inspiring to hear how God led her safely out of the Colorado mountains if you find out it didn't happen that way.

So my kids' question, 'is it true?' is entirely appropriate. And it's the same question we need to ask when we come to the story of Easter, the story of Jesus' resurrection. Is it true?

Because the resurrection of Jesus is not some incidental detail in the Christian story; it's central to our hope and message. We often rightly summarize Christianity with the cross—the crucifixion of Jesus, wherein he willingly gave his life as a ransom for our sins. But what Christ accomplished on the cross is completed with his resurrection. After all, three people died on the cross that Friday; only one got up Sunday morning. The resurrection matters.

And it matters whether it happened in real life as well. The stories that we have in the Gospels are not meant to be fictional. These are not myths or fables. This is written as historical narrative. A record of what actually happened. And so the questions, 'Is that true? Did that really happen?' are not only appropriate, they're essential if we are to have confidence in the Christian faith. Take away the resurrection of Jesus, and you lose Christianity. If the resurrection of Jesus is not true in history, then we are wasting our time in worship. More than that, we're wasting our lives. That's essentially what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15: "And if Christ has not been raised, then

our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. . . . And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.” (1 Cor. 15:14, 17).

But then again, if it’s true—if he did rise bodily from the grave on the third day, then that changes everything.

So is there a basis for the basis of Christianity? Should we believe in Christ’s resurrection from the dead? That’s what I want to explore with you this morning in Matthew’s Gospel. And unlike John or Paul, Matthew doesn’t spend a lot time explaining the theological significance of the resurrection. His primary burden is simply to demonstrate the fact that it actually happened—that *Jesus really did die, that he really was buried, and that he really did rise from the dead*, just as he said he would. He didn’t just rise in my heart; he rose bodily from the grave.

And the way Matthew makes his point is like a well-played game of chess.¹ Matthew carefully anticipates the different moves that critics or skeptics might make in trying to explain away the resurrection, and cuts each one of them off at the pass. He confronts one theory directly—that the disciples stole the body, but he undercuts multiple theories in the way he carefully tells the story.

So I want us to *see* that game unfold—the anticipated theories and Matthew’s skillful check at each point, so that we can *believe* his message with confidence—that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, which if true, changes everything.

So let’s look at our passage and consider the first theory in trying to explain away the resurrection . . .

1. Jesus wasn’t really dead (27:57-59)

It’s possible, some might suggest, that Jesus hadn’t quite died while on the cross. That they took him down too early, he had only swooned or fainted from blood loss or shock, and then came to on the third day and left the tomb.

This theory has been quite popular over the last 150 years.² And yet, what’s interesting is that Matthew anticipates it by going into the details of what happen to Jesus’ body after the cross. Look at Matthew 27:57-59: “When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud . . .”

Nobody came and just took Jesus’ body. Rome handed it over to Joseph, and as one historian puts it, “Roman soldiers and governors didn’t go in for half measures when it came to carrying out capital sentences.”³ They knew how to kill people, and they knew how to make sure they were dead. In fact, Mark’s account of this story shows how Pilate himself double checked with the guards to make sure Jesus was dead before he handed him over (Mk. 15:44-45).

Jesus really died. And he really was buried. Joseph wrapped him in a linen shroud, and John tells us that together with Nicodemus, they applied about 75 pounds of spices to his body as part of

¹ This illustration is inspired by Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part Two* (Louisville: WJK, 2002, 2004), 194.

² E.g., Friedrich Schleiermacher; see Grant Osborne, *Matthew* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 1055.

³ Wright, *Matthew*, 195-196.

the Jewish burial custom (Jn. 19:39-40). Had Jesus only fainted and then later awoken and come out, then as scholar David Strauss (himself a skeptic of the resurrection) famously put:

It is impossible that a being who had stolen half-dead out of the sepulchre, who crept about weak and ill, wanting medical treatment, who required bandaging, strengthening and indulgence, and who still at last yielded to his sufferings, could have given to the disciples the impression that he was a Conqueror over death and the grave, the Prince of Life, and impression which lay at the bottom of their future ministry.⁴

It just doesn't compute. Jesus really died. *But did he stay dead?*

2. Wrong body (27:59-60)

What if they were looking for the wrong body? That's theory #2. Ancient Jewish burial practices were pretty different than what we do today. They didn't bury bodies in a coffin in a hole in the ground, much less burn them like their pagan neighbors. Instead, it was common to put many bodies to rest in a single tomb, and then after the body is decayed, to go in and collect the bones and place them in a box called an ossuary. And so what if they were looking at the wrong shelf—Jesus' body was actually over here with several others, but they were looking at an empty slot over here?

Again, Matthew anticipates this move and blocks it in vv. 59-60: “And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud and laid it in *his own new tomb*, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away.” It was a new tomb. There were no other bodies in there. There is no way to be confused about which body was missing that morning.

3. Wrong tomb (27:61)

But what if they simply went to the wrong tomb? That's theory #3. And this is a popular explanation in recent years.

When Carissa and I lived in Wheaton, we had a knock on our apartment door in the middle of the night, only to open it and be greeted by several police officers. They had seen a broken window outside with a ladder underneath it. They wanted to check our place for an intruder (or to make sure we weren't the intruders), because they thought that the broken window belonged to us. But they miscounted. It belonged to the young guys who lived next door, who had gotten drunk and locked themselves out of their apartment, and then tried to break into it rather than call Dad.

Maybe that's what happened here. Maybe the women who discovered the empty tomb simply miscounted. *Maybe*. But notice what Matthew says in v. 61: “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.” The same Mary and Mary who were at the cross in v. 56, had been at the tomb when Jesus was put to rest there on Friday. They knew where to go on Sunday (cf. 28:1). Moreover, if they had gone to the wrong tomb, it would have been pretty easy for Rome or the Jewish leaders to go to the *right* tomb, grab his body and cart it around town, and put Christianity to rest once and for all. The tomb was empty.

⁴ D. F. Strauss, *The Life of Jesus for the People*, vol. 1 (London: Williams and Norgate, 1879, 2nd ed.), 412. As cited in Josh McDowell, *More than a Carpenter* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1977), 94.

4. The Disciples stole the body (27:62-66; 28:11-15)

So he really did die, he really was buried, they really did go to the right tomb when they found it empty. Well how else do we explain this? *Aha!* Theory #4: The disciples are going to steal the body. This is what the chief priests and Pharisees are concerned will happen, and so they go to Pilate to try and cut them off at the pass.

Look with me at 27:62-66:

Next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate⁶³ and said, "Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.'⁶⁴ Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last fraud will be worse than the first."⁶⁵ Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can."⁶⁶ So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

What's funny here is that the Jewish religious leaders really don't have much to worry about in this regard. In fact, Joseph is just as concerned to protect the body from people getting into the tomb—whether thieves or grave robbers. He's the one who rolled the large stone in front of the tomb—the one that Pilate has guarded and sealed with a Roman seal as a warning against anyone who would try to break into the tomb. 'You mess with this tomb, you mess with Rome.' The disciples just saw what Rome could do; they were in no frame of mind to tickle that dragon. Moreover, as one scholar notes, to steal the body "would run totally contrary to all we know of them: their ethical teaching, the quality of their lives, . . . Nor would it begin to explain their dramatic transformation from dejected and dispirited escapists into witnesses whom no opposition could muzzle."⁵

Moreover, if they stole the body, then they *knew* that Jesus had not in fact risen. Yet all but one of them was killed for their testimony that Jesus is the Christ, that he died and that he rose again. Would they really willingly face torture and death for what they knew to be a lie?⁶

But here's where Matthew puts his opponents into check. He recognizes that this theory is actually one of the prevailing theories in the days following Jesus' resurrection, and on into the early period of the church (28:15). And so he exposes the real source of this story—not the disciples' actions, but the Jewish leaders' conspiracy. Look at ch. 28:11-15:

While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place.¹² And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers¹³ and said, "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.'¹⁴ And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble."¹⁵ So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

The best move that the religious leaders have against the claims of Jesus' resurrection is based on a lie and a bribe. And pretty poor logic.

⁵ J.N.D. Anderson, *Christianity: The Witness of History* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1970), 92; as cited in McDowell, 95.

⁶ See McDowell, 60-71.

So if Jesus really did die, and really was buried, and if the witnesses really did find an empty tomb, and there's no way the disciples stole the body—how else do we explain what happened?

There's one more theory to consider this morning . . .

5. Jesus rose bodily from the dead (28:1-10)

Matthew 28:1:

Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ² And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. ⁵ But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you." ⁸ So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" 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 tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me." (28:1-10)

How do we explain the empty tomb? *Jesus rose bodily from the grave, just as he said he would.* The king who was enthroned on a cross, is the king who has now conquered death.

But is this theory credible? I think there are several good reasons to take confidence and believe the truthfulness of this account. First, if you were going to make up a story in the ancient world about your failed king rising from the dead, you wouldn't identify women as your star witnesses. It's sad but true: in that day, women were not seen as reliable testimony. You're going to have a hard time convincing people that Jesus rose based on their testimony. So why do all four Gospels say that the women arrived there first? *Because that's what happened.* They're simply telling the truth.

Second, these weren't the only people who saw the resurrected Christ. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:4-8 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."

But what about some of the variations in detail among the different Gospel accounts? For instance, Matthew says there was one angel; John says there were two (20:12). In Matthew the women seem to encounter Jesus on their way to get the disciples; in John, Mary retrieves Peter and John, then meets Jesus, and then goes and reports what she saw (cf. Jn. 20:1-18). Doesn't that discredit the story?

When I get home from work and my kids tell me about their day, sometimes they'll dispute the details with each other. But just because they sometimes disagree on the details, doesn't mean therefore that nothing actually happened on that day. In the same way, we may find minor variations in the Gospel stories about Jesus' resurrection—which, by the way, I don't think

reflect contradictions so much as different levels of precision in reporting—but no one from these variations can conclude that nothing therefore happened. Something most definitely happened. Something so category-breaking, so earth-shattering, that no single witness could take the whole thing in.⁷

Jesus Christ rose bodily from the dead, just as he said he would (28:6). And when he did, he changed everything. His resurrection not only proved his innocence, that he was not guilty of sin and therefore Death had no jurisdiction to hold him, no power to keep him in the grave. It not only vindicated his identity as God's eternal Son, the true King of Israel and Savior of the whole world. His resurrection was more than that. It was the firstfruits of God's new creation, the down payment of heaven. It was the defeat of death itself—the greatest enemy of fallen humanity. Because he conquered the grave, Jesus is able to give new life—eternal, unending, God-saturated life—to all who will turn away from their sin and trust him as Savior and King.

And as we let that truth hit us this Easter, and all that it represents, we realize why the women responded the way they did in v. 8: “So they departed quickly from the tomb *with fear and great joy . . .*”

Fear, because if Jesus is raised, this changes everything. God is so much bigger than we could have ever imagined. The possibilities of what he might do in and through us, or what he might call us to, are so much greater, because here is a God who has the power to raise the dead. If you follow him, life will never be the same.

Joy, because if Jesus is raised, this changes everything! Jesus really is king; he is worthy of my wholehearted allegiance—every square inch of my life.

- If Jesus is raised, help is near; I have a living Savior who is with me by the Spirit to strengthen me for every good work.
- If Jesus is raised, hope is real; there is waiting for me a perfect inheritance, kept in heaven, and the promise of my own bodily resurrection when Christ returns (cf. Phil. 3:20-21).
- If Jesus is raised, opposition to the gospel will not succeed; God will reign supreme.
- If Jesus is raised, then no matter what suffering or hardship I face today, I have confidence that this will end well. Life will get the last word, not death. Not for those who belong to Christ.
- If Jesus is raised, God really is making all things new, and he will be faithful to complete it in the end.

If Jesus is raised, we can't help but respond with fear and joy. A fear and joy that are grounded in faith and overflow in worship. They are grounded in faith—no longer trusting in who I am, or what I can do for God, but only in what Christ has done for me. And they overflow in worship, just like the two Mary's in our story. We bow before Christ our King, to whom we owe everything. Who has loved us, and saved us—not because we deserved it, but by his grace.

Is this story true? I believe it is. Jesus Christ is raised, and this changes everything. May we trust him and find forgiveness and life. And may we, with fear and joy, worship him—our King, our risen Savior.

⁷ See N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 31-33; 53-76.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Opening Question

1. Why do you think Easter service is often the most attended service of the year?

Questions for Study and Understanding

2. What happened just prior to this story that supplies necessary context for understanding our passage?
3. What are the Jewish and Roman leaders in the story afraid will happen? What do they do to try to prevent it? How realistic are their fears?
4. What does Matthew tell us really happened? What kind of details does he include?
5. How does this passage give us confidence in the resurrection?

Questions for Reflection and Application

6. Why is the resurrection so necessary to Christianity? What is lost without it?
7. How does the truth of the resurrection impact your life practically?
8. How does it (or should it) impact your witness to others?