

“Do Not Be Afraid ... Ever Again!”

Matthew 28:1-10

A woman doing her last-minute Christmas shopping at the mall was tired of fighting crowds and standing in line. Her arms were full of bulky packages when an elevator door opened. It was full. The occupants grudgingly tightened ranks to allow a small space for her and her load. As the doors closed, she blurted out, “Whoever is responsible for this whole Christmas thing ought to be arrested, strung up, and shot!” A few others nodded their heads in agreement. Then, from the back of the elevator, a single voice assured her: “Don’t worry. They already crucified him.”

From time to time, Johnny Hart, the creator of the comic strip B.C., finds himself in a secular doghouse for allowing his work to reflect his faith. One Easter, the strip showed a tomb in the first frame. In the second frame, light is seen shining around the edges of the stone. In the subsequent frames, Peter, one of Hart’s cavemen, is awakened as the stone rolls through the door of his cave and crashes with a loud “bang.” Peter steps out to investigate. A cross-shaped star illuminates a path of footprints leading away from the tomb. As the sun rises, he follows the footprints up to a small lake. The sun has now fully risen. The footprints go right across the water. As Peter looks across the lake he sees a snake obviously mad and recovering from some sort of trauma. The snake says, “Well, that was rude! ... Some guy just stepped on my head.”

The earliest declaration of the gospel was to Eve when the Creator assured her that one day her seed would crush the head of the serpent. On the morning of Christ’s Resurrection, that ancient promise was fulfilled. Jesus defeated death and with it, all the works of the devil. For several weeks, we have explored various encounters of heavenly messengers with human beings. Each encounter was prefaced with the words, “Do not be afraid.” Each of these admonitions was fulfilled in the gift of Jesus to the world. But, the force behind those words, “Do not be afraid,” was rooted not in the mere fact that Jesus came to us, but that He came to destroy the work of the devil by dying for our sins on a cross and by walking out of His tomb, fully alive.

I. The Proof of Resurrection

If the *messiah* of God was born into this world in a remarkable way, it only follows that He would establish His kingdom in a similarly remarkable way. We spent the entire month of December celebrating the miracle of Incarnation. God became a man and entered our world as a baby. We have noted the humility of His birth – the manger, the poverty, the shepherds. But, clearly, there was supernatural majesty as well when Christ exited this world. In fact, it is interesting to compare the details surrounding His birth with those surrounding His Resurrection

A. Remarkable Similarities

Angels were present at both the Advent and the Resurrection of Jesus. Gabriel appeared to Mary, saying, “Do not be afraid.” Perhaps, this same Gabriel is the unnamed angel of Matthew that tells Joseph, “... do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife.” An angel announced to shepherds in the fields near Bethlehem, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy ...” Then, the skies were filled with angels singing. Now, to announce the conquest of Jesus over the grave, another angel greets these frightened women with the words, “Do not be afraid.”

Nature reacted to both the Advent and the Resurrection. A star appeared in the skies over Bethlehem when Jesus was born and remained in the heavens to guide magi from the East into His presence to worship Him. A great earthquake announced that Jesus was raised from the dead.

Interestingly, those threatened most by Jesus were wildly paranoid at the time of both the Advent and the Resurrection. It is hard to imagine a baby striking terror into the heart of a king, but when Herod heard talk of the birth of a king in Bethlehem, he ordered a slaughter of that town's babies. Throughout His ministry, Jesus struck fear into the hearts of those whose places were threatened by the light He shed on matters. He revealed pharisaic righteousness as inadequate for entry into God's kingdom. He taught truth with an authority that the scribes could not touch. He indicted the priesthood as corrupt. Now, after the guards reported the events of the Resurrection that had terrified them to the point of passing out cold, Jesus' enemies would buy their silence.

B. Two Remarkable Signs

A remarkable sign verified both the Advent and the Resurrection of Jesus. The shepherds were told to find a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger. At the Resurrection, these women received the sign of an empty tomb. The angel invited them to step inside and to check things out. They had seen Jesus die. They had followed the men who buried Jesus to this tomb. They had seen Jesus placed inside and the stone rolled into place. They may have even seen Rome's official seal set across the tomb. But now, the tomb was empty, and Jesus was not there.

All this, according to the angels, was "just as he said ..." The Prophets of old spoke in detail about the coming of Jesus; His birth to a virgin, His birth in Bethlehem, His flight to Egypt, His residency in Galilee. Jesus Himself had announced on a number of occasions, in unmistakably clear terms, that He would be put to death in Jerusalem and raised to life after three days.

All we know of the birth of Jesus come from the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke. Cynics simply dismiss these accounts as "Christian myth." However, all four Gospels recount the Resurrection. Paul touches on the theme repeatedly. Secular history cannot dismiss the impact that belief in the Resurrection had on the early Christians. Cynics are up against a little more:

"Despite our efforts to keep him out, God intrudes. The life of Jesus is bracketed by two impossibilities: a virgin's womb and an empty tomb. Jesus entered our world through a door marked "No Entrance" and left through a door marked "No Exit."

- Peter Larson

II. The Peace of Resurrection

A. The Peace that Calms Our Fears

A certain cartoon depicts two Roman soldiers guarding Jesus' tomb. Each has a cup of coffee in his hand. One is encouraging the other. "Cheer up, it's Sunday morning. Way I see it, we've got one more day of guarding this tomb. By Monday this whole thing will blow over."

"Do not be afraid" was an amazing greeting, for everything about this scene screamed, "Be afraid! Be very afraid!" There was an angel whose clothes beamed with an unworldly whiteness. The stone was moved. The guards were unconscious. But, a certain reality breathed calm into what should have been a moment of terror: "He is not here; he has risen, just as he said."

Jesus said that He would rise again. He had many other things as well. Now, the disciples knew what they always wanted to believe; that when Jesus spoke, His words would never fail. This was one great and practical ministry of the Resurrection to the earliest disciples. If He could keep this promise to rise again from the dead, He was good for any promise He ever worded.

In the midst of the darkest storms of our lives, we have peace because Jesus once told His disciples, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you" (John 14:7). We can know that heaven is real because Jesus once told them, "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you." (John 14:2). We can know that the Holy Spirit abides with us even when we feel the most abandoned because Jesus once promised His disciples, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you" (John 14:18).

And, even when we have failed to be what God has called us to be, either because of a lapse into sin or because of our inability to attain some goal, we can know that all is not lost, for there is more to our acceptance in God's eyes than our perfect performance. We can know this because of another promise that Jesus once uttered to His earliest disciples: "You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴Remain in me, and I will remain in you" (John 14:3, 4).

All of these precious assurances are trustworthy for one reason. Jesus said that after He was put to death, He would be raised back to life. His Word was true then. His Word is always true.

B. The Peace of Reconciliation

The women left the tomb to tell the other disciples that Jesus had been raised from the dead. They did this on faith in the angel's testimony, for they had not yet seen Jesus Himself. But, Jesus saw fit to reward their faith. He appeared to the women while they were still in route to find the other disciples. Understandably, their first impulse was to fall worshipfully at Jesus' feet and cling to Him. But, in verse 10, Jesus reiterated the mission on which the angel had sent them: "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Earlier in His ministry, when Jesus' disciples had not been through a trauma like they had endured in these last few days, Jesus had said: "For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matthew 12:50). Now, after His Resurrection, Jesus reiterates His affection for His followers. It meant a great deal back in Galilee that Jesus had called them His brothers. But, that was before they had run like scalded dogs when He was arrested and crucified. Back then, they had boasted of their loyalty and courage. Now, to hear that Jesus still considered them brothers even after they had failed Him, it must have meant even more.

As precious as the scenes surrounding Christ's Nativity are, Paul treated His Crucifixion and Resurrection as the seminal events of our restoration back to God: "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (Romans 4:25). In fact, in the one passage from Paul that we might hear read during the Christmas season, the Apostle links Jesus' Advent to His redemptive work: "... But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, ⁵to redeem those under law ..." (Galatians 4:4, 5).

III. The Power of Resurrection

A. The Posture of the Christmas and Easter Angels

At Christmas, the angels of God are depicted as quite busy. Four announcements are made regarding the events at hand; one each to Zechariah, Mary, Joseph and the shepherds. Then, the heavenly host fills the skies and sings of the birth of Jesus. Here, Matthew says that this angel “rolled back the stone and sat on it.” To the Hebrews, the posture of sitting was a posture of repose. Once the work is done, one sits down. Angels are not typically depicted as sitting. Priests never sat when they were engaged in priestly duties. But, when this particular angel had rolled back the stone, he sat on it. There is a profound note of finality to this angel’s assignment.

This note of finality is reminiscent of words used in the letter to the Hebrews. On four occasions, Jesus’ redemptive work is described in different ways – once as providing purification for sins, twice as offering an all-sufficient sacrifice for sins and, finally, as enduring the cross. In each instance, however, that single activity is followed up by a statement of the finality of that work. In each instance, Jesus is depicted as “sitting down at the right hand” of God.

The early disciples did not delineate between Jesus’ death on the cross and His victory over the tomb. Together, these events constitute the heart of the gospel. And, it was this gospel of the cross, this message of a finished redemption, that Paul described as God’s power to save us.

B. The Power to Live as Believers

In the church at Rome, certain alleged believers desired to embrace the promises of the Gospel without abandoning the pleasures of sin. They argued that since a man’s salvation is of grace, it really did not matter how he lived. Some even went so far as to suggest that failing morally was no tragedy at all for it only showcased God’s grace all the more. Paul was horrified. He asked,

¹What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ²By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ³Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. – Romans 6:3-4

In other words, baptism into Christ reflects an important spiritual reality. A believer is identified with the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. Submersion into water pictures a burial. Being buried, no matter how briefly, testifies to the reality of death, in this case, death to sin. The life into which we are raised is new life. It can no longer be characterized by old affections for sin. Elsewhere, Paul links the power of Jesus’ Resurrection to a power in the believer to live above the world.

... And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you. – Romans 8:11

Paul endeavored to know Christ “in the power of His resurrection” (Philippians 3:10). This means that it is possible for Christ’s resurrection power to be operative in the lives of His brothers. What does that look like? It looks like the power to say, “No!” to temptation. It looks like the power to love the unlovely. It looks like the power to forgive and to reconcile. It looks like the power to abandon comfort and personal dreams for which you may have worked your whole life if that’s what is required to serve Christ. It looks like the strength to forge ahead when the path of obeying God seems terrifying. It looks like the power to follow in the steps of Jesus.

IV. The Promise of Resurrection

When all is said and done, the Resurrection of Jesus gives us a basis for knowing that one day we will be raised to life and to eternal fellowship with God. In I Corinthians 15, Paul calls Jesus the “firstfruits” of those who have died and the firstfruits of those who are raised back to life. In other words, His resurrection is the firstfruits of a final resurrection of believers. The idea is that if it was done once in Jesus, then, we should never struggle to believe that it will be done for us.

There was a day when all this talk of heaven was so basic to Christian faith that believers delighted in thinking of themselves as short-timers or pilgrims on this earth. This mindset was basic to biblical Christianity, but I get a sense that it is utterly foreign to modern, western Christianity. Oh, we find comfort in the notion of heaven at the funeral of a loved one, but we abandon all thoughts of heaven with the final “Amen.” We have lost our connection to heaven and to the resurrection of Jesus. When Paul wrote I Corinthians 15, his most powerful treatment of resurrection, Christ’s and ours, his practical objective became evident in the very last verse:

Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. – I Corinthians 15:58

Do you feel fully given to the Lord’s work? If not, dare I suggest that it might be because you are too connected to this world? I’m not just talking about family and work obligations. Your comfort and your leisure and your recreation are too precious to you. When is the last time you truly sacrificed for the cause of Christ, for the work of His church or for the needs of those around you? When is the last time you radically altered your comfort zone to respond to some great invitation into the work of the kingdom? There is no more frightening notion to a worldly mind. There is nothing more natural to a mind empowered by Resurrection to lay hold of heaven.

Together, we stand at the threshold of a new year. As I resolve to put my own shoulder to the work of the kingdom and encourage you to join me, I am compelled to share a realization. The fruit of the kingdom we bear this year may be less dependent on what we encourage one another to bite-off in the form of projects and challenges and more to do with what we can encourage one another to release. We are raised with Christ. Let us fix our eyes on Him. We can never embrace the life into which He calls us if we are afraid to release the one we have built for ourselves.