

Heaven Does All the Heavy Lifting

Matthew 27: 62 – 28: 1 – 10

How do you take an old story and make it fresh?

How do you make a familiar story live again?

As Christians, we know the story of our Savior's resurrection forwards and backwards. We read it every year. And before that, we probably had it read to us annually since we were toddlers.

Here's my first Bible. It was presented to me on August 28, 1974. I was nine years old. It's the Children's Living Bible. I love and cherish it because it contains beautiful illustrations like the animals entering the ark, Elijah being fed by ravens, Jonah being vomited up on shore by the great fish, and David fighting off a ferocious lion. Nine year old boys love these kinds of stories.

But surprisingly, there's no illustration of the empty tomb in my Children's Living Bible. There's an illustration of Jesus in the upper room with his disciples, and one of Jesus on the cross, but there is no artist's rendition of resurrection Sunday.

No matter. We can imagine what that must have been like ... The pre-dawn darkness of the morning anticipating the first rays of light, the dew on the grass causing our feet to get wet and stirring awake our senses, the birds calling to one another, announcing the promise of a new day.

We don't need a drawing. It's fresh in our minds and no more so than today as we come into the Lord's house to celebrate and honor Him who is the firstborn of those who have fallen asleep in faith.

In the Easter story we know about how the ladies, who out of love and devotion for their Lord, went to the tomb very early that Sunday morning, carrying with them spices to anoint Jesus' body.

We recall their surprise and shock when they arrived at the tomb and discovered the massive stone rolled away from the entrance.

We smile and even chuckle to ourselves as we picture the angel sitting on the stone looking down at the guards who were frozen with fear as if dead.

We can even imagine Peter and John racing to the tomb, jockeying for position, so they could be among the first to witness this remarkable scene.

We'd better know the resurrection story, because without it, our faith is meaningless and worthless. The Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15, *"If there is no resurrection from the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith."*

Thanks Jesus! Without your rising again, I'd be out of a job!

The Resurrection of Jesus is absolutely foundational to our faith. Without this central truth of life after death, we are as Paul put it, *"to be pitied more than all men."*

As Christians, we know the resurrection story and claim it as our own, believing that if we have faith in the person and work of Christ Jesus, we too shall partake in the resurrection and experience life eternal with our Blessed Savior.

When we stop to think about it, we cannot help but come to the conclusion that the central message of scripture has always been a message of resurrection and hope - a message that death is not the end for those who belong to God. For the believer, death has never been an end but a doorway that leads to eternity with God.

Look at these wonderful Old Testament examples:

Abraham willingly obeyed God's command to sacrifice his only son Isaac, because in faith, *"he considered that God is able to raise men even from the dead."*

The **psalmists** declared, *"God will redeem my soul from Sheol; for he will receive me"* and that *"with thy counsel thou will guide me and afterward receive me to glory."*

Isaiah proclaimed, *"Your dead will live; their corpses will rise."*

Through **Daniel** the Lord assures his people that, although they die, one day they *"will awake to everlasting life"*.

Hosea assures believers that the Lord will raise up all believers to live before him.

Even **Job**, the ancient man of God, foresaw the reality of resurrection and proclaimed to his three friends, *"I know that my redeemer lives, and at the last he will take his stand on the earth. Even after my flesh is destroyed, yet from my flesh I shall see God."*

And probably the most dramatic description of resurrection is found in **Ezekiel** when God takes his prophet to the middle of a valley full of dry bones asking him, *"Son of man, can these bones live?"*

Sure, some scholars say that this is simply a picture of the national restoration of Israel and a resettling of the Israelites into the land of Israel after its devastating destruction and has nothing to do with prophesying a future resurrection of believers.

I say why can't it be both, since it will only be by God's power, mercy and grace that either event will ever come to pass.

Yes, the plain fact is that the truth of resurrection weaves itself through the pages of the Bible like water flowing along a riverbed to the ocean.

And we, as people of the book, should be so tremendously thankful that we can take our place among those who are called by his name.

But what are we to do in the mean time? I understand that that we have a glorious future to look forward to – when this life is said and done and we cross over the river to go beyond the veil.

Peter speaks of our glorious future writing, *"In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you."*

But it's this last phrase that gives me pause. We may look at this phrase, "kept in heaven for you" and mistakenly think that Christ's resurrection has no impact on us in the here and now – that it's all about the future. And until that future shows up, we must remain weak, powerless, susceptible to sin, and at the mercy of the evil one.

In a very real sense, Christians may unintentionally interpret this phrase to mean that the implications of Christ's resurrection are only for the next life, not for the here and now.

Perhaps to many Christians, the phrase “kept in heaven for us” – sounds too much like a layaway plan at Walmart! It’s too far off in the future to make any difference today, and they’re wondering, “Will I ever return to claim my goods?”

In the mean time, how shall we live?

It sad to say that many Christians go through life operating as if the resurrection never happened, because in a practical sense, they believe it hasn’t changed a single thing in their lives.

To many, the resurrection becomes nothing more than a dream that they’ll realize only when this life is done. In the meantime, they say, leave me alone. I have bathrooms to clean, bills to pay, and carpool kids to pick up.

Now I understand that people don’t say this stuff out loud. It’s mostly subconscious, but it doesn’t take a psychiatrist to see it written all over one’s face and in one’s actions.

What I’m trying to say in all this is that the reality of Christ’s victory over death two thousand years ago has the power to change our actions and attitudes today, right now, right here in the present. We don’t have to wait to go to heaven before we realize God’s transformative and life-giving power released in our lives.

Yes, our inheritance with Christ is in heaven where it can never perish spoil or fade, and we long for this glorious culmination, but our new life in Christ begins now, in the moment we believe in the person and work of God’s Only-begotten Son.

It must begin now, because our world is desperately crying out as in the days of Ezekiel when God described the House of Israel crying out, *“Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.”*

This introduction leads me to the 27th and 28th chapters of Matthew, where once again we are confronted with the familiar account of Christ’s resurrection. Here we can learn some basic truths that by God’s grace will encourage us to live a new resurrected life now, not just some time in the distant future after we breathe our last.

Truth number one: God will even use the darkness to bring us to the light.

When I speak of the darkness, I’m speaking of evil. I’m speaking of anything that opposes God - that is anti-God - whether intentional or not. This could be as innocuous as a toddler trying to assert his will over his parent. It could be as violent and as tragic as a jet plane crashing into a skyscraper.

Please do not misunderstand me. In no way am I saying that God is the author of evil. God is light and there is no darkness in him. But what I am saying is that in the grand scheme of things, God is sovereign and Lord over all – He’s Lord over the good and the bad stuff, the righteous and the wicked, the wheat and the chaff.

They all fall under his jurisdiction and authority. This means that even the darkness that opposes God and everything about him can never operate outside the boundaries of God’s will. This means that God’s purpose and plan for mankind will never be thwarted no matter what schemes are put into action by the evil one and his accomplices.

We see this clearly in the last few verse of Matthew 27. These are the verses we so quickly skip over to get to the exciting and joyous news of Christ's resurrection. It's in these verses that we once again learn about the extreme and insatiable hatred Christ's enemies have for him.

They hate him so much they can't even bring themselves to call him by name. Instead they refer to him as the deceiver, and this, after he has already been put to death.

Now I could say much more about the religious authority's hatred for Christ. For example, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to the **Gentile** governor, Pilate, on the Sabbath, and not just any Sabbath, but the once- a – year **Passover Sabbath** which is the highest and holiest day on the Jewish calendar to ensure that their evil scheme was completely accomplished and that all loose ends were neatly tied.

For the life of me, I fail to know with what I could compare this, but imagine, if you will, being a lawyer, and breaking every rule in the ethics book, and going against everything your office stands for in order to preserve that which you destroyed in the process. It makes no sense. This is probably why the scriptures describe Jesus' enemies saying, *"They hated me without cause."*

But should the actions of these religious men who hated Jesus so much surprise us? The first thing jettisoned by people controlled and blinded by hatred is their integrity. No holds barred when the destruction of your enemy is at stake.

But here's the most important thing in all this, and it goes back to the religious leaders request to have the tomb sealed and guarded. The religious leaders' obsession to keep the disciples away from Jesus' body in order to prevent a resurrection hoax, in the end, actually makes the Lord's resurrection even more credible!

Think about it! Drastic measures were put into place to ensure the body of Jesus was not stolen: The tomb was sealed by order of the Roman government. Guards were posted at the tomb to fend off any revolutionists.

And so the Jewish leaders got exactly what they wished for – a dead body, completely inaccessible by outside human forces – a body that only God himself could reach and raise.

What's that old saying? Be careful what you wish for, you just might get it!

How do you like that! In going to such extremes to ensure that Christ's body could never be stolen, those who opposed God the most became his unwitting accomplices to the world's greatest miracle!

I want us to all think about this next time you read something or hear something in the news or even experience it yourself. When you hear about a situation where it looks as though God's enemies have soundly pummeled the people of God, and where it appears that a significant victory against Christianity has taken place – maybe it's a court ruling, a prominent Christian leader who falls from grace, or some other event that casts a dark shadow over the family of God.

Remember, nothing operates outside of God's sight and knowledge.

God is never caught off guard or by surprise. He is the Risen and Living Lord of the universe, and all powers and authorities bow before Him. As God himself declares in Psalm 2, *"I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill."*

Our natural instinct is to wring our hands, shake our heads, and ask, "How could this happen?" But this is not a spiritual response. The activities of man and spiritual forces that influence them are never out of God's reach. His glorious and righteous purposes will be fulfilled no matter how much his enemies try to thwart him. Of this we can be certain.

Two: Blown expectations can be our salvation. I see this truth shining forth through in the story of the resurrection as well. Specifically in the account of the women who came to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body.

Although they had no idea how they would even get access to the body because of the large stone placed in front of the tomb – and according to Mark 16:3, even asked each other, "Who will move the stone away?", they fully expected to find a dead person when they got there. Why else would they have carried spices to the tomb?

Evidently, these women understood Jesus' teaching on the resurrection as purely figurative, rather than literal, just like all the other disciples did. So when they showed up, and saw that his body was missing, the only conclusion they could draw was that someone else had gotten there first and taken the body. Their expectation that had settled in their minds would not allow them to see any other alternative.

Faith and salvation came to the Marys only after their initial expectation had been destroyed and changed. Only after they heard the Good News from God's messenger and witnessed the place where he lay were they shaken awake by a new reality!

They went to the tomb looking for a dead body, because that is what they expected to find, but they left with faith and a new expectation and hope: *"He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him."*

What expectations do have as you navigate life?

Relatively good health?

A higher education?

A stable job?

A strong marriage and family unit?

A network of supportive friends?

Safety and security in a loving home environment?

An ability to pay monthly bills?

the occasional vacation?

Some comfort and ease in retirement?

Have some of these been met? Have all of them been met? Have some gone unfulfilled and left you in bitter disappointment? Perhaps some of these expectations have gone unfulfilled leaving you with an opportunity to experience other things that you would have never expected in your wildest dreams?

Whatever your personal story is, never lose faith in the One who blows all our expectations away!

Our stories are so much like the Marys. We went to the tomb looking for death, but upon hearing God's word and believing, we hurried away with new lease on life founded on Christ.

And because of this where will this take us? I hope to a place that is so much more fulfilling than getting your nine holes of golf in and the early – bird special at your favorite diner!

This is death, but God wants to give us life and a life more abundantly through his Son! This means a life of purpose, meaning, sacrifice and service for his kingdom and glory!

Finally, Let us settle once and for all in our hearts and minds that Heaven always does the heavy lifting. You may not have thought about this before, but do you realize that the stone was rolled away, not so that Jesus could come out, but that we could see in!

I bet most of us have it in our minds that Jesus was stuck in that tomb until the angel came down and rolled the stone away. Maybe we even picture Jesus and the angel exchanging high fives as he exits the dark cavern – and I admit that would be really a cool scene.

But the Lord of the Universe who is not made of stone or wood or metal, and who made all things, and conquered death itself and makes all his enemies his footstool, needs no door service.

The stone was moved away solely for our benefit, so that by faith we might look into that that grave and see our vanquished enemy and believe in the Savior who made it all possible.

Heaven does all the heavy lifting so that we might have new life right now in the Son and be reconciled to the Holy Father who lives in heaven, and now in us in the form of the Holy Spirit and so that we might gain righteousness and a hope of an inheritance that can never, perish, spoil or fade.

Heaven did the heavy lifting by moving the stone away so that we could peer in and comprehend the fact that our greatest enemy, sin and death had been defeated by our God.

More than this, Heaven did the heavy lifting when Jesus said yes to the Father's will and set aside his divine place and power so that he could walk among, talk to and teach humanity about his father in heaven.

Heaven did the heavy lifting, when Jesus, who being in the very nature God chose to become man, stepping off his throne at the right hand of the Father to be our teacher, our brother, our friend, our High priest, our king, the perfect Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world and gives to us life eternal.

Heaven does all the heavy lifting and it is all accomplished through Jesus Christ our Lord, so that we can proclaim him Lord of Lords and King of Kings among all who will listen, and say with all his people what the Psalmist declares in Psalm 115: *"Not to us, O Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness."*

Heaven has done all the heavy lifting, and now the expectations we once had as we approached the tomb of death have been completely changed. We went there expecting death and we found a victorious God and life ever-lasting. Amen.