

## Matthew 28 A Day that changed the world

### Introduction

Am I imagining this or is it real? With both good and bad news all of us at times would have experienced these emotions at some times in our lives. The more significant the news is for us the greater will be the shock we have experienced. The joy of holding your new-born child and the numbness of hearing the news of the death of someone very close to you are the two contrasting emotions experienced very day in thousands of families around the world. The events of the first Easter rank as the most amazing of all. The Lord Jesus Christ was not expected by any of His earthly followers to come back to life on Easter Sunday morning, despite Him telling them on a number of occasions that on the third day after His death He would come back to life. We know the wonderful story. At the time they were totally shell-shocked and turned in on themselves. Why? because although as good Jews they believed in the resurrection of the dead when the Messiah comes at the end of the world, no-one seriously expected a resurrection now. Even though Jesus had raised Jairus' daughter (Luke 8:49-56), the Widow of Nain's son (Luke 7:11-17) and His friend Lazarus from the dead (John 11:1-44), their resuscitation was only temporary as they would die again. Real permanent resurrection was deemed a step too far.

We might be tempted to say, but surely they had been with Jesus and seen all His miracles and heard His amazing sermons, how could they not believe? How could they not grasp what He was saying as the world's greatest teacher? Our list of criticisms of these men and Jesus' wider circle of followers could easily grow quite lengthy, until we stop to look within our own hearts and minds. We have access to the Word of God and have the New Testament to add to the Bible, the Old Testament, they possessed. We look back in the light of the Day of Pentecost and the miraculous start of the Christian Church; we look back in the light of the bodily resurrection of Jesus; can we honestly say we have always taken God at His word and never had our doubts and fears? When we ask that question we realise that they were people just like you and me. If anything we have less excuse for our doubts and fears because we have so much more information than they had; after all at the start of the Christian Church it was a body of people. Maybe this morning you have come with your doubts or fears? You might be new to church wanting to find out if the extraordinary events of that first Easter can transform your life as it to the first followers of Jesus? or here as a Christian feeling battered and bruised by life's circumstances and want to renew your faith afresh in the One who gave His life for you on the cross. This passage reveals a variety of responses to the extraordinary events of that day.

### **1. The dedication of the two Marys (Matthew 28:1-3, 5-10)**

(a) **A Solemn Occasion** (Matthew 28:1) *After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.* Anyone visiting that place of burial that day did so to pay their last respects; and in accordance with local customs took spices to anoint the body of their dead loved one before the tomb would be left undisturbed until the next family member was placed nearby. These ladies were amongst the most devoted of Jesus' followers, but their perspective on the significant of what had taken place on the cross, like many others, was that it was a tragedy and a disaster that crushed their hopes. This is something we need to remember; they were not playing mind games convincing themselves that Jesus 'had to be alive' somewhere. Only when this fact is firmly lodged in our minds can we walk with these followers of Jesus to the tomb borrowed from Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent MP from the party of the Pharisees, in the Jewish ruling Council, the Sanhedrin, and also a secret follower of Jesus (Matthew 27:57-61). Some people over the centuries have claimed that the ladies were mistaken in locating Jesus' tomb, but this claim does not hold up

in the light of Matthew's careful note indicating that they had been present when Jesus was placed in the tomb (Matthew 27:61). (b) **A Surprising Occasion** (Matthew 28:2-3, 5-8) <sup>2</sup> *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. <sup>3</sup> His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow.<sup>5</sup> The angel said to the women, Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. <sup>6</sup> He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. <sup>7</sup> Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you. <sup>8</sup> So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples.* The accuracy and dependability of the resurrection accounts is much greater than we often realise. In that culture women were not used as witnesses in court, only men could serve in that capacity. The Bible records that the first witnesses of the resurrection were women. This serves to make two points. First of all it implies that God valued women as equal persons to men and their testimony was equally valid in His sight. Secondly, the first followers of Jesus would not have made it up. It was hard enough to convince other people in that culture that Jesus had risen from the dead without having to admit that your primary witnesses were women. The Bible tells the story as it happened, the most extraordinary day in human history since the creation of the world. In this light the presence of an angel or angels at the tomb seems pretty reasonable. There had been an angelic presence around the time of the birth of Jesus, to explain the miraculous nature of His conception. Therefore, there is a pattern which fits very well with this supernatural intervention in history on the first Easter day. No wonder the angel told them *Do not be afraid* (28:5)! Any one of us would have been totally transfixed with wonder at the events unfolding before our eyes. There is a place for time alone with God; times of quiet and reflection, but there is also a time for telling others who need to hear this wonderful good news. Would the two Marys do as they were commanded? Yes! it appears that with a high degree of promptness they set off to report the extraordinary news. How willing are you and me to bear witness to Jesus? They had mixed emotions of fear and joy; and at times so do we, but let's never be ashamed to testify to our faith in the risen Lord Jesus Christ. (c) **A Sacred Occasion** (Matthew 28:9-10) <sup>9</sup> *Suddenly Jesus met them. Greetings, He said. They came to Him, clasped His feet and worshipped Him. <sup>10</sup> Then Jesus said to them, Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see Me.* In our relationship with the Lord we too will have special times when we sense His nearness and are overwhelmed with a desire to offer Him worship and praise. Be thankful for these precious moments, but remember that they are special treasures not to be expected on a regular basis in our lives. However, like these ladies we have a mandate to fulfil to make Him known. These first witnesses got special honour for their faithfulness to the Lord, but we too will be blessed as we give our lives in service for Him.

## 2. **The confusion of the soldiers** (Matthew 27:62-66; 28:2-4,11-15)

(a) **A Simple Duty** (Matthew 27:62-66) <sup>62</sup> *The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. <sup>63</sup> Sir, they said, we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.' <sup>64</sup> So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first. <sup>65</sup> Take a guard, Pilate answered. Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how. <sup>66</sup> So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.* Imagine you are a gifted mathematician and you have just started an interview for a prestigious post and your interviewers state that they have only one task for you to perform at the interview –should you complete it satisfactorily then the post is yours. You would wonder what the challenge might be, but if it was simply to recite the two times table then you might have serious doubts about the credibility of the whole occasion. It was this kind of scenario experienced by a

detachment of possibly as many as twelve Roman soldiers. Their commanding officer told them to report to a particular location and guard Jesus of Nazareth. You can imagine the conversation: 'But he's dead?', 'yes' – 'you are going to guard his tomb for three days'. 'Why to prevent grave robbers?' 'No' 'to stop his followers who are currently in hiding coming and stealing the body.' In effect, their task was to stop Jesus of Nazareth leaving a sealed tomb. For twenty-four hours, approximately, absolutely nothing happened. They would not have been human had they not questioned the necessity of such a strong body of troops being required to guard the final resting place of a condemned man. Our lives too have their moments when life is relatively easy and we can so easily take it for granted, but how suddenly it can change

(b) **An Impossible Task** (Matthew 28:2-4) *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.* <sup>3</sup> *His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow.* <sup>4</sup> *The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.* All of us have times of regret when we know we could have done better in particular situations. This was not one of those moments. It was in the opposite category where we are totally helpless to do anything about events unfolding before our eyes, like the people in North East Japan when the tsunami came ashore on 11 March 2011. We should not be ashamed of our weaknesses. We are not supermen or wonder women, such people only exist in comics. Real people need help and support to get through a whole range of situations in their lives. The question is simply this: do we have enough courage to ask for it when those moments arise. They are windows of opportunity from God to look at life in a different way. A young man I know in his late 30s was doing exceptionally well in his career. He was a Christian and a fine family man, but an unexpected stress-related stroke stopped him in his tracks. Some time later he went back to work and his work resumed, but his priorities were changed from that moment onwards. God fine tuned his priorities through that experience, according to his testimony. In your life just now are you listening to God and heeding His claims on your life? Or what will it take for you to give your life to serve Him?

(c) **An Unethical Action** (Matthew 28:11-15) <sup>11</sup> *While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened.* <sup>12</sup> *When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money,* <sup>13</sup> *telling them, 'You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.'* <sup>14</sup> *If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.* <sup>15</sup> *So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.* Bribes all round covered the backs of the soldiers and the Jewish religious leaders, but what a price to pay. Rather than face the truth about the resurrection of Jesus they were prepared to live in denial of the facts. This is the day that changed the world, but some people would rather bury their heads in the sand and pretend it never happened, or if it did that it has no relevance to their lives. Has this been your choice up to now? Do you now need to look afresh at the significance of what happened that first Easter? If Jesus is who He claimed to be, the Son of God and if God the Father raised Him from the dead, then I have to take seriously His claims over my life. For two centuries this lie was passed on in the Jewish communities of the Roman world –yet the men most enthusiastic about spreading it did so for money knowing that their story was demonstrably false. Yet by contrast many of the followers of Jesus who saw Him that first Easter were martyred for that faith, because they refused to deny the reality of what they knew to be true. Would you rather give your life for what you know to be true or get rich perpetrating a lie? To the present day thousands of people each year choose to lose their lives rather than deny their faith in Jesus Christ. No wonder the Christian Church is growing around the world. Do you need to commit your life to Christ today and begin the journey of faith?

### 3. **The hypocrisy of the priests** (Matthew 28:11-15)

<sup>11</sup> While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened.<sup>12</sup> When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money,<sup>13</sup> telling them, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.'<sup>14</sup> If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.<sup>15</sup> So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day. What the soldiers had done in accepting the bribes was wrong, but it pales into insignificance compared to the wicked choice of the religious leaders who paid them to lie about the most important day in the history of their faith. What kind of witness was that? None of us are perfect and that is not expected of us. However, other people do watch how we live and have certain expectations of us as Christians. What kind of witness are we showing at the present time? Our lives are the only Bible many people will read. What view of Jesus are we presenting to them?

### 4. **The responses of the disciples** (Matthew 28:16-17)

<sup>16</sup> Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go.<sup>17</sup> When they saw him, they worshipped Him; but some doubted. Matthew returns to the followers of Jesus and their response to the extraordinary events of that first Easter. Had this account been fictional no gospel writer would have recorded that some of the followers of Jesus doubted that it could really be their Lord risen from the dead. After all dead men don't come back to life again, do they? When you have had your life transformed by the power of the gospel you don't mind the truth being told. This is why the story of the cowardice of the disciples in Gethsemane is recorded; why the denials of Peter are reported; these are not the most obvious candidates for leadership positions in the Early Church, yet this bunch of inadequate people, empowered by the Holy Spirit, rocked the very foundations of the worlds greatest empire to date, within four centuries, by the power of prayer and the effectiveness of their testimonies as to what god had done in their lives and by the practical love and care they showed to each other and fellow citizens throughout that period of time. However, both responses can be part of the experience of genuine believers. Sometimes our faith is very strong; at other times we can have our doubts and fears, but God does not reject us for our frailties. He wants us to come to Him as we are and make ourselves available to serve Him and in His name to serve the people around us. Have you come to that place in your life today? Have you put your faith and trust in Jesus? if you can say 'yes' to that question, then He says 'follow me'. This journey of faith is with Jesus and its ultimate destination is known, spending eternity with Him; However, the pathway through this life will be very mixed, sometimes the going is very tough and we may even need Him to carry us through those times; However, He has promised: *never will I leave you; never will I forsake you. So we may say with confidence, The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?* (Hebrews 13:5b-6). Will you trust Jesus with your future?

### 5. **The message from Jesus** (Matthew 28:18-20)

The final scene in this Gospel is the commissioning of Jesus' followers to carry on the work He had begun on earth. (a) **All Authority** (Matthew 28:18) *Then Jesus came to them and said, All authority has been given to me.* The one who had come as the humble servant was now in a different role. Philippians 2:9-11: *Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name,<sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,<sup>11</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.* We either acknowledge Him voluntarily as Lord and Saviour now or compulsorily after leaving this life! No wonder that a sense of awe overcame the aged disciple John, in Revelation one, when he had that extraordinary encounter with the risen

Lord Jesus. John reported that: *When I saw him, I fell at His feet as though dead. Then He placed His right hand on me and said: Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. <sup>18</sup> I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades. This is my Lord and Saviour; is He yours?* (b) **All Places** (Matthew 28:18) *Then Jesus came to them and said, All authority **in heaven and on earth** has been given to me.* An earthly government has more powers than we are sometimes comfortable with them possessing, but they have their limits. We can never be outside the limits of His grace and love as children of God. Psalm 139 is a meditation on the fact that God can be everywhere at once –so we can never hide what is going on in our lives from Him. In Psalm 139:7 David declared: *where can I go from Your Spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence?* These are rhetorical questions. He knew that the answer was no-where! We are never alone in the universe. This is a great blessing, but it also means we are accountable to Him for the way we live our lives. We can never hide anything from Him. (c) **All Nations** (Matthew 28:19)<sup>19</sup> *Therefore go and make disciples of **all nations**, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...* We have a duty to be witnesses for Jesus in Broughty Ferry and Dundee; we have a responsibility for our nation, in partnership with other churches; but it goes beyond that to a duty to take the gospel to the world, every people group on the planet. The first step of discipleship here is believer's baptism. This was actually quite shocking for these Jewish people. They were already part of the covenant community of God having been welcomed in as babies. Praise God for those of us who had believing parents who committed us as young children into His care. However, our faith needs to be personal, accepted by each person individually. Have you taken that step of obedience to Jesus? the focus here in this verse is the next step of testifying to the Lord through the act of believers' baptism. Is God speaking to you about taking this step of obedience to the commands of Jesus? We are all disciples, that means believers with 'L plates', always more to learn from Him, in the process of taking the good news of the gospels to all people groups wherever He has placed us. (d) **All Things** (Matthew 28:20a) *and teaching them to obey **everything I have commanded you**.* Obedience to Jesus does not mean picking and choosing which bits of the Bible we follow, it means following in His footsteps – wherever he leads us. This is a matter of trust, like a little child in their parents. Is there some step of faith he wants you to take today? Please be obedient to His calling.(e) **Always** (Matthew 28:20b) *And surely I am with you **always**, to the very end of the age.* What a wonderful assurance He gives. May each of us experience it as we follow Him in coming days, Amen.