

To the End of the Age  
Matthew 28:1-20  
April 9, 2023 Easter

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

<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>4</sup>The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

<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. <sup>9</sup>Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped 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."

<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.

<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 worshiped him; but some doubted. <sup>18</sup>Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Here ends the reading of God's Holy Word. Glory to you, O God, now and forever!

If Jesus were physically here with us this morning, what do you think he'd look like? Well, since it's Easter, maybe a pair of slacks and a shirt with a collar, same as the rest of the guys! He wouldn't be wearing a long white robe and sandals, so he might be easy to miss! Look around – do you see him here?

No, of course not. Jesus hasn't been physically present with us since 40 days after his resurrection, when he ascended into heaven.

So how do we know that he is with us until the end of the age? Well, we know that because he really did rise from the dead. He really did. It was not just some metaphorical thing, like when we say things like, Beethoven lives on in his music. I agree that his genius has given us music that we still enjoy. But that's not what we mean when we say that Jesus was resurrected from the dead.

Well, how can that be? We all know that when someone dies, they are gone. Most of us have probably seen that for ourselves. When you watch someone die, the person that they were vanishes. They are gone, and all that's left is just a remnant. They do not return to life. And the people of Jesus' day knew that even better than we do, because back then there were no undertakers. Families generally buried their own dead. They knew what "dead" meant.

Sometimes skeptics will say, "Well, maybe Jesus wasn't really dead; maybe he was in a coma and recovered after a few days and then left the area." No, that wasn't what happened. First of all, the Romans were not that sloppy. They'd crucified thousands of men, just in Judea, within a few decades, and – to put it politely - they were VERY thorough about it. And second, even if Jesus wasn't completely dead when he was put into that tomb, how could he have recovered enough to move a boulder from the inside so that he could get out? And how would the guards not have noticed his efforts?

So, yes, Jesus was really dead; and yes, when the women came to his tomb, they saw that it was empty. All 4 of the gospel writers agree on that point. And the gospel writers wouldn't have mentioned it if there were any doubt about it. Back then, women were not considered to be reliable witnesses; so the writers wouldn't have recorded that women saw an empty tomb, unless it was so well known as the truth, that they couldn't ignore it.

Maybe someone came in the night and stole Jesus' body away and reburied it elsewhere? But the tomb was sealed and there were guards. And not only that, there were massive crowds of people throughout the area because of Passover. Even if the disciples - who had all run away in terror - did somehow manage to stun the guards and break the seal and roll back the boulder and take Jesus' body away, there would have been witnesses. There was no privacy for anybody in Jerusalem at Passover back then. So, no, it's not at all likely that Jesus' body got stolen and hidden.

And then after that, people started seeing Jesus. Alive and well. They could touch him. He could eat. And the marks of crucifixion were on him, so it wasn't like there was some mistake. Many people saw him, on many different occasions. Matthew mentions appearances both to the women and to the remaining disciples; Mark, Luke and John describe multiple appearances in various places; in addition to all of these, Paul also lists an appearance to more than 500 believers at the same time, most of whom, he says, are still alive. So you can go ask them if you have any questions.

I know it seems incredible. No one else had ever been resurrected from the dead before, after having been dead for several days. And no one else has ever been resurrected since. Yes, there have been people brought back from clinical death; but that's not the same thing as being dead for several days and then being resurrected – as the same, and yet also transformed. It's never happened with

anybody else. So then how could it have happened with Jesus? Because Jesus is much more than a human being who lived on earth 2000 years ago. Jesus is also fully God, incarnate as a human being. And God is infinite in every dimension, in space and in time.

And because God is fully present in every time as well as in every place, then we can indeed be assured that Jesus, as fully God, is indeed with us always, to the very end of the age. We don't see him. But his words are with us, and so is his presence, and so is his power.

So therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea. Therefore we will not fear, though the rivers flood and the storms blow and the temperatures rise. We will not fear, though our bodies grow older and our bank accounts grow smaller, and it seems that there are fewer and fewer people who want to hear what we have to say. We will not fear because Jesus is with us until the end of the age.

What might that mean for our church if we truly believed that Jesus is with us until the end of the age? Maybe our perspective would change, from discouragement to curiosity- what's going to happen next? Yes, the pandemic years have been hard for our church, as they have been for a lot of churches; but Jesus has been with us through them. And he is still here. He hasn't gone anywhere. The end of the age hasn't happened yet. So who knows? I'm curious to see what Jesus might do; how about you?

In a couple weeks' time we will hear from the denominational people in charge of church plants. Maybe things will happen with that, that we could never have imagined on our own. Entirely new things. (And I hope that you are all still praying every day for the planters God will send.) And here's another possibility: other community events are opening up too. We rented our sanctuary to the Saratoga Symphony a couple of weeks ago, and the place was packed. We could make an effort to welcome all these people in Jesus' name. What if we had a hospitality table next time? I don't know what all might happen here. But just knowing that Jesus is here, changes my perspective. I really am curious about what he's going to do next in our midst – can't wait to see it!

And what might that mean for each one of us personally if we truly believed that Jesus is with us until the end of the age? Perhaps if we believed it, we could let go of our anxiety and not worry so much about the details of our lives. Maybe we could let go of worries such as, "Am I going to be late?" "Is that person mad at me?" "Am I going to be laid off?" "Is the next windstorm going to blow my neighbor's tree onto the roof of my house?" "Who will take care of me when I am frail?" "How will I be able to pay for all this?" Now, I'm not saying that truly believing that Jesus is with us, will automatically make everything easy for us. It doesn't. Trees do still fall and bills do still pile up; that part of life isn't going to change anytime soon. But what can change with Jesus, and what does change with Jesus, is our perspective. Our own problems start to look smaller, when our gaze is directed at him.

Because Jesus is with us, to the end of the age, our strength is renewed. How about if we renew our efforts to do what he commands us to do: "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you"? Let's give it a try, shall we?

## Ending prayer

O God, we give you thanks for the hope we have in Jesus, who died but is risen and is with us to the very end of the age. We praise you for his presence with us. Because he lives, we look for eternal life. Because he lives, we know that nothing past, present, or yet to come can separate us from your great love made known in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.