

“Fear and Joy”

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Easter matters because your body matters – now and in eternity.

Matthew 28:1-15

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A gospel for everyone

My son-in-law is an ice hockey player and noted the other day that he’s more critical than most of us of the quality of ice hockey in movies. I answered that I am more critical of sermons than most. I have heard a lot of Easter sermons I wouldn’t want to preach. I try to imagine what you might be thinking as you listen.

Some of you are thinking, “Did this really happen?” Others, “Does it matter?” Still others, “Church is boring. I like exciting.”

Some of you know this story well – maybe better than I do – and you’re wondering if I’ll tell it right. If you do attend here regularly, you know that I like to stick to one passage in the Bible. I actually do know that the different accounts in the Gospels vary the story a bit. My interest is in how Matthew tells the story.

Since Christmas, we’ve been studying parts of Matthew’s gospel at Corinth. Some say he probably had the highest IQ of Jesus’ disciples. He was multi-lingual. He was a go-getter, on a fast track to riches and power when he met Jesus. His brother James had been an anti-Roman terrorist, but Matthew was a collaborator. He was getting rich collecting Roman taxes. As a tax collector, he was a detail guy and a record keeper. Matthew loved a party and didn’t really care what religious people thought of his friends. When Matthew answered Jesus’ call to give up his lucrative career and “Follow me,” he invited Jesus to dinner at his house. Jesus himself was criticized for attending a party with all those “tax collectors and sinners.”

One aspect I love about Matthew's gospel is that he has a broad audience in mind. He thinks whether you are a Jew or Gentile, a believer or skeptic, driven by intellect or emotion, you need to know this Jesus. Whatever your background or faith perspective, Matthew is likely to connect to you as well.

When it comes to the Easter story, the parts of it that only Matthew tells are designed to address these questions: Is this exciting? Does it matter? Is it true?

Is this exciting?

Yes, it is, especially with the details Matthew adds to the story. As I said, the details vary among the four gospels. There are many reasons for that. I'll mention an important one in a moment. For now, let's just remember that the description of every historical event is selective. If you ask what I had for breakfast, "Eggs and chocolate" is sufficient detail. You probably don't care how I like my eggs, where I got them, or what I put in them – or whether my chocolate was light or dark. Whoever tells a story – in writing or in person – will always be selective. What details matter for this listener or reader?

All the gospel records of the first Easter share some of the same details. It happened early Sunday morning. Women were the first to see the empty tomb, and they were surprised that the stone was rolled away. An angel said, "He is risen!" The women then reported the events of the morning to Jesus' twelve disciples.

Today I'm interested in what Matthew alone tells. Remember, he's a party guy. He likes a thrill. He's also a detail guy. He doesn't want you bored with this story. If you like lights and sound and action and surprise and drama, Matthew's your gospel. It's one reason I was OK with having bagpipes, the big screen, and everything else we put together. Matthew would love it. Of all the gospel writers, he's the most sensory.

Matthew describes "a violent earthquake" – literally a "*mega seismos*." If I had it in my power, I'd make the ground shake a bit your feet at this moment, like an Epcot thrill ride. Matthew tells us an angel shows up, but he's not content with whatever your image of "angel" is. He wants you to imagine brilliance – like a bolt of lightning or pristine snow. He also has this angel descending from heaven and chillin' on top of the stone that was, in his words, "rolled back." It might be more like a spherical boulder than the round flat stone usually described. It rolls back perpendicular to the cave.

Matthew also has terrified guards trembling – the same root word as "earthquake" (*seismos*) and then playing possum on the ground. It's really a very dramatic scene. If you want exciting, Matthew is your gospel.

Does it matter?

A more important question is whether this matters. Matthew addresses that as well. One of the central and critical points of Christian teaching is that we believe in the resurrection of the body. That's even in the Apostles' Creed. We don't believe that once you die, your memory just lives on. Nor do we believe you become a ghost.

We believe that you come back as a person. Even though you are in a totally different kind of body – as different as a butterfly from a caterpillar or an oak tree and an acorn – you are you again. Better, eternal, perfect, but still you.

The next part of this story unique to Matthew is in verses 8-10. Matthew alone tells us that the women were “afraid and filled with joy.” A more literal translation is that they ran “with fear and mega joy.” Have you ever been afraid and ecstatic at the same time? Maybe on a roller coaster? Perhaps on the edge of the Grand Canyon? Possibly even at the bedside of a dying loved one. You know they're fine but you're not.

The women have just heard the words, “He is not here; he has risen, just as he said” (6). Those words are common to Mark and Luke as well. The exclamation must have elated these faithful, courageous, pioneer witnesses that early morning. Remember, those words were spoken by the same angel whose dazzling appearance had caused seasoned guards to quiver and play possum. They ran to find the disciples with fear and mega joy.

Matthew tells us “Suddenly, Jesus met them.” What Jesus says to them translates to something like “Hey, y'all!” I love imagining the twinkle in his eye. Only Matthew tells us these women “clasped his feet and worshiped him” (9). When they reached out to him, it wasn't like reaching for a form but grasping only air. There was a body to hold on to. He – really he, Jesus, the one they had heard and seen and hugged – he really was back and in a body!

Why does that matter? It matters because Jesus' resurrection body is a *body*. If his is, yours and mine will be too. If ours is, so will those of others who have died and will die in the Lord. That body will be seeable and huggable and conversable. I don't know anywhere near as much as I'd like to know or people think I should know because I'm a pastor about the next life. But I know it's a bodily thing. All those people over in our memorial garden whose earthly remains have been reduced to ashes, along with my Dad and your Mom and your child and your husband and father – they will and we will have bodies like Jesus' glorious body. We will see them, know them, and touch them.

The body is central to the Christian faith. What you do with your body matters. It is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Being at church in your body matters. We want your butt back in the pew and in the small group. In the meantime, we are OK with social distance because the health of your body matters. When you wash feet or advocate for

justice or adopt a child or welcome someone into your home, it is because in this faith, bodies matter. That's why Easter matters.

Is it true?

But is it true? Another unique part of Matthew 28 addresses that as well.

Here at Corinth we try to chill about some areas of church teaching and practice that are non-essential. We Christians are notorious for getting worded up over things that really aren't going to matter in heaven. Whatever your politics or social agenda or opinion on baptism or women leading in a church, those are secondary issues. It's not that members or leaders in Corinth don't have convictions and opinions. But we think a church can be a place where people can agree to disagree.

What happened on Easter is *not* one of those "secondary issues." The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is not a "take-it-or-leave-it" part of our story. The Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, we're a pitiable lot of fools wasting our lives and missing out on a lot of sinful fun. There would be no Corinth, no church anywhere, if Jesus's body didn't rise. To join this church, we require that you declare publicly, "Jesus died and *rose again* for my salvation."

Matthew is very interested in the question, "Is it true?" We think that Matthew was probably writing this gospel about three or four decades after the events of Easter morning, quite possibly from Antioch in Syria. The details don't matter, but he was part of a community of Jesus followers from Jewish and non-Jewish backgrounds.

The variance of the gospel records makes the core story credible, because these are independent traditions. The evangelists had their own memories and/or sources, including in some cases each other, but they did not corroborate. Decades after the events, they had had time to tell the story exactly the same way if they wanted to try.

Some in Matthew's circle, particularly those from Jewish backgrounds, had heard an alternative explanation for what happened on Easter morning. In their worlds it was just as easy as it is in ours – maybe even easier – to hear different versions. They had their own parallel to FoxNews and CNN – both giving their own spin on the facts. Part of what Matthew is telling us is to be careful when you only listen to people who validate what you want to believe.

These two facts nobody denied: (a) the tomb was empty and (b) nobody ever produced Jesus' dead body. But there was an alternate explanation of those facts – that Jesus' disciples (who are almost to a man conspicuously absent even from the Gospel records from Thursday evening through Sunday morning) came and stole the body. Because that had been believed among Jews who might read his gospel, Matthew explains its origin. He had twice already mentioned these guards. They had been told to make the tomb secure with a seal and sentries (27:63), and were witnesses to the

earthquake and angel (28:4). Matthew now says the guards reported the earthquake and the angel and the empty tomb to the religious authorities, who then bribed the guards to say that the disciples stole the body while they were sleeping.

That version makes no sense, because (a) how would the guards know who stole the body if they were sleeping, and (b) they had been placed there to prevent this. They would have lost their jobs or even their lives for letting it happen.

But if that's the best you can come up with, you go with it. Matthew isn't being anti-Semitic by blaming this story on the Jews. Sadly, so much of Jesus' story for two thousand years has been used by Christians to justify everything from discrimination to hate crimes to the Holocaust. But that's not Matthew's purpose. He just wants you to know this is true and it matters and oh, by the way, if you heard something else I'll tell you where the fake news originated.

Matthew's legacy

I suspect Matthew was about my age when he wrote this gospel. I feel a little bad for Matthew because there's some confusion about his legacy. You may know that in our main stained glass window, we have an image of Jesus on resurrection day. The sleeping soldiers are there in the garden as well.

Surrounding Jesus are shields representing the twelve apostles. Several of them depict how these men died. Bartholomew was skinned alive. Andrew was crucified on an X-shaped cross. James was sawn in two.

What makes me a little sad is that Matthew didn't get a shield in our window. Whoever designed the window confused him with Matthias, who was chosen to replace Judas after he betrayed Jesus and committed suicide. That was a common mistake in history – confusing Matthew and Matthias.

So it's a little hard to sort out all the details of Matthew's life after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, but here's what we think we know.¹ We don't know for certain where or how or when he died. There's a strong possibility that he was killed for his faith in Jesus in Alexandria, Egypt. Roman Catholic tradition says his bones were found and placed in Salerno, Italy, on the southwest coast near the toe of the boot. A beautiful cathedral was erected there in his memory.

We know that Matthew spent about fifteen years in Jerusalem after Jesus' ascension. After that, he made several trips abroad to tell about Jesus, but they didn't make it into the book of Acts like the journeys of Paul. As he related his first person

¹ Mostly taken from *The Search for the Twelve Apostles*, by William Steuart McBirnie.

accounts of Jesus' life and ministry, others must have encouraged him to write them down. Apparently by that time, the Gospel of Mark was also in circulation.

Matthew deeply cared about his own people, the Jews, and wanted them to believe that their future was not tied to either opposition to the Romans, like his brother James had believed, or cooperation with the Romans, as he had thought. Their hope was in a different kind of king and kingdom. When Matthew traveled, he often sought out kings and authorities. He traveled to Persia and either to Ethiopia as we know it or a place in Asia by the same name.

In life and in death, Matthew gave his life for the truth of the Easter story. He never went back to collecting taxes or pursuing the status and wealth of this world. He believed that Sunday morning was exciting, and he believed it is true. He also believed it mattered.

I think it's remarkable that he and twelve others, if you include the Apostle Paul, never, ever retracted this story. None of them did. 100% of those who met the risen Jesus Christ insisted that it was true. So why did Jesus only appear to his friends and not his enemies? Because at the end of the day, this is about faith. It is about what the writer of Hebrews calls "the evidence of things not seen."

With my diverse audience, one of the freeing things for me is that it's not my job to convert you. If you walk out of here unconvinced, it's not my fault. If you leave here with a new or renewed faith in this Jesus, I don't get the credit. The Holy Spirit is the one who changes lives. I realized a long time ago I don't have to hit an Easter home run.

You may say, "Well, what if I have doubts about this resurrection thing – about Jesus or about me?" Fear and joy remain a part of every Christian's journey. If you imagine an intellectually or relationally or physically trouble-free life, it's not a Gospel-based life. I have my moments of both fear and joy, but as a pastor who's turning 65 this year, I've never doubted what Matthew writes has been worth the investment of my life. It's been my honor to preach this gospel and my joy to see lives transformed by this gospel. I would do it all again.

Today I'd like to invite you to consider what might be your next step in following after this risen Jesus. How has the Holy Spirit connected Matthew's version of the Easter story to your story? Just like he went to meet those two women on that Sunday morning, he's come to meet you on this one. Amen.