

Holy Week in Biblical Perspective
Easter Sunday – Sunrise Service
“Fear and Great Joy”
Matthew 28:1–5
Pastor Bruce Stallings
April 9, 2023 • Sunday Sunrise Sermon

We will be looking at Matthew's version of the events that unfold on this day. We've been walking through the events of Holy Week and have had the wonderful opportunity to worship together throughout this week. To put this resurrection day in context, I want to back up to where we departed on Good Friday. At the conclusion of the Good Friday sermon, our pastor told us that they took the body of Jesus, they laid Him in a new tomb and rolled a great rock in front of it. To set up Matthew 28, I want to read what Matthew says took place at the conclusion on Good Friday.

Matthew 27:57-61 says [57] *When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. [58] He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. [59] And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud [60] and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away. [61] Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.* From this text we see that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there watching them take the body of Jesus and lay Him in the tomb.

Matthew goes on to tell us in Matthew 27:62-66, [62] *The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate [63] and said, “Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while He was still alive, ‘After three days I will rise.’ [64] Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples go and steal Him away and tell the people, ‘He has risen from the dead,’ and the last fraud will be worse than the first.” [65] Pilate said to them, “You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can.” [66] So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.*

Then we come to Matthew 28 on this resurrection Sunday morning, the dawn of the first day. Matthew 28:1-15 says [1] *Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. [2] And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. [3] His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. [4] And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. [5] But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. [6] He is not here, for He has risen, as He said. Come, see the place where He lay. [7] Then go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead, and behold, He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see Him. See, I have told you.” [8] So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell His disciples. [9] And behold, Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him. [10] Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell My brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me.”*

[11] *While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. [12] And when they had assembled with the elders and*

taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers [13] and said, "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.' [14] And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." [15] So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

It's an interesting statement that gets made of the women – fear and great joy. What an interesting couplet that is used to describe the women as they left. As you read the story, there's a lot of fear that gets expressed out of Matthew's account. There are really two different groups. There is the fear in the guards. They've been given a task that one really shouldn't be able to mess it up. They were to guard the tomb of a dead man. How could you mess that up? That this should be an easy assignment to take care of and it's gone well, to a certain degree so far. Their expectation would be that someone would come to get His body. That was what they were afraid would happen – like His disciples coming to try to steal what the body of Jesus.

Matthew tells us that when the angel appears that his appearance was like lightning and his clothing was white as snow, and for fear of him, the guards trembled and became like dead men. Literally, they were paralyzed. The guards, upon experiencing the angel that they came down, they were literally terrified. They physically trembled, were terrified of this angel and became like dead men. They were incapable of moving. They were literally in shock for fear of this angel. Not only did their initial fear cause them to physically tremble and to become like dead men, but at some point, I would guess that it was when the angel left at some point, they were actually able to get up and some of them go back to their authorities.

Some of them, I would suggest now from fear of the angel now to fear of man for they're afraid of their authorities because they failed in this task that you really shouldn't be able to fail. They're afraid of the people for no one is going to believe us if we actually tell them what just happened. So they are captivated by their fears – fears of the angel, fears of man, fears of their authority. But not only were they captivated by their fear, but out of their fear and their greed, they then go tell a lie. They then take a sufficient sum of money but we're not told how much, but that it was just sufficient. Sufficient for what? Sufficient to declare that you didn't see, what you saw – sufficient to declare that the thing that you never thought you'd ever see in your life, an angel that came down from heaven and the body of Jesus to be raised from the dead. Sufficient for you to lie about that to people, hoping upon hope that this One who rose from the dead wouldn't reveal Himself to anyone – wouldn't prove you out to be the liar and the greedy person that you are.

Also, notice the women are afraid. As the women come to the tomb that it says that the angel turns to the women and tells them, 'Do not be afraid.' They come and they're afraid. They see the fear as well. My first inclination when I read about the fear of the women as it relates to the angels, I would assume that was probably more of a reverent fear. Maybe this is more like the fear of the Lord – the reverent fear of the Lord. Let me save you some time and study, it's not. The fear the women had is the same word used to describe the fear of the guards who were like dead men. When the women look at this and when they see the angel, they were afraid. As a matter of fact, Mark 16:8 tells us that the women fled the tomb for trembling and astonishment had seized them, for they were afraid.

Even though the women experienced the same fear as the guards did, there are two things I want to point out to you that I think are pretty interesting that jump off of these pages. The first one is the angel never told the guards, 'do not be afraid' because the guards had every reason to fear. So, the angel doesn't give any words of hope or reassurance to the guards. As a

matter of fact, if you go through the Bible and see the many times there's an angelic appearance, almost without exception and there are exceptions like this one, every time an angel appears they say 'Do not be afraid.' Luke 1 gives us the account of Zechariah and Elizabeth and when Zechariah was in the temple, he encountered an angel and became troubled and fearful. The angel says to him, "*Do not be afraid.* Your prayer has been heard. Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son and you shall call his name John."

When Mary the mother of Jesus encounters the angel also in Luke 1 and Matthew 1, the angel says to her, "Do not be afraid for you have found favor with God." Joseph, even in a dream, is told by the angel "Do not fear (Matthew 1:20)." The shepherds who are out keeping watch at the advent of Jesus as an angel of the Lord appears to them and the glory of the Lord shown around them, and they were filled with great fear. The angel says to them, 'Fear not for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people (Luke 2:10).' It almost seems like that any time an angel appears, they're instructed to say, 'Do not be afraid.'

I think, angel say, 'do not be afraid' because we can't fathom angels. If we were to actually experience an angel, not only in their power and in their majesty, but in their holiness, I believe they would say to us, 'Do not be afraid.' But the angel does not say that to the guards. The statement, 'Do not be afraid' isn't necessarily a correction or a rebuke and of course, there would be fear in man to experience something so much greater and bigger and be overwhelmed at something that they experience in their life. The statement, 'Do not be afraid' is a statement revealing the favor of the Lord. It's a statement that comes from the grace of God. Because what is it then, that He can say to His chosen servants, as He can say to Mary, Joseph, the shepherds out in the field or the women in Matthew 28 but that 'you have the favor of the Lord upon you.' It's going to be okay, but for the guards, it's not going to be okay and they should fear now, but prayerfully, hopefully, that very real fear will be used by God to draw them on to Him. But apart from that, that's true legitimate fear, and the fear of an angel now will pale in comparison to the fear of the pending judgment before the before the Lord.

The second thing I would point out to you is that not only did the guards not get told, 'do not be afraid,' but they didn't get what the women got. It says that the women departed the tomb quickly with fear and great joy. That fear the women had was that trembling fear, but they had fear and great joy. The guards just left with fear. They didn't leave with the great joy. Where does the great joy come from? The great joy comes from truth and there's only great joy found in truth. The world has no great joy to offer, but the great joy comes from the truth that the angel, the messenger of the Lord, communicates. The angel basically said to them, "I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. You saw Him crucified. You two ladies, saw them put His dead body in this very tomb. He's not here. He is risen as He said. Come see the place where He. He is not there anymore. Then go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead and behold He is going before you to Galilee and there you will see Him."

Can you imagine that? What gives you great joy? The One you saw crucified, the One you saw laid in that tomb is not there. That tomb is empty. Not only has He risen from that tomb, has He risen from the dead, but you're going to see Him. He is alive and you are going to see Him yet again for the angel declares it as the angel says 'See, I have told you.' That good news that they received from the angel gives them great joy. Now, that should sound familiar to you – good news of great joy. This is what the angel said to the shepherds in Luke 2:10 – do not be afraid for I bring you good news of great joy. The advent of Jesus is good news of great joy. The resurrection of Jesus is good news of great joy.

Interestingly, this great joy that they experience for now they serve a risen Savior, the truth of the empty tomb and the promise that they are about to see Jesus again, didn't remove their fear. I would have thought the declaration of truth and them seeing the empty tomb would have removed their fear. You might be thinking why would I say that? It is because after the angel tells them this good news of great joy, when they leave the empty tomb, they leave with fear. As they go on their way, they see Jesus Himself. What's the first thing that Jesus says to them? It is 'Greetings. Do not be afraid.' The truth of the situation that the angel pointed out to them in the empty tomb, the evidence even of that, did not get rid of their fear.

Before any of us condemn the women for not overcoming fear when they're told not to be afraid, you might not have to confess this, but I would. I still live with that dichotomy. I still live with that seeming contradiction – fear and yet great joy. I've been told the truth. The Holy Spirit has allowed me to understand the good news of the Gospel, the reality of a risen Savior and that the power of the resurrection is more powerful than anything in my life, but I could not stand before you and say, 'and therefore I never have any fear.'

I have read the passage in Philippians 4 that says 'Do not be anxious for anything' and I've been anxious about being anxious. I've been concerned that I have fear and I know I'm not supposed to have fear, but 'God, I really, really, really do have fear. Would you remove that fear from me?' My father, who's gone home to be with the Lord was an engineer. I would say he was an engineer by birth. He was an engineer by education, and he was an engineer by trade. If you look up engineer in the encyclopedia, his picture is right there with graph paper, just kidding but it seems his picture should be there. I like to say that my dad lovingly engineered me. When I was afraid, I always knew what my dad would do to keep me from being afraid. Being an engineer, he would tell me factually why it was illogical to be afraid. It never worked even though he was right. He was a brilliant man.

So, I can remember when I was a little boy, we were living in Huntsville and multiple tornadoes came through that area in the early to mid 1970s. It was one of the worst nights of tornadoes really across our country. My brother, two sisters and myself are in a little bitty bathroom and I'm literally tucked underneath the toilet. We have mattresses also in the bathroom as my dad is explaining to me how tornadoes develop and the percentage chance of the predictability of a tornado around the world actually hitting our house. All that mattered to me was that I could still see my dad. Honestly, it really didn't matter what he was saying, it was just his presence is what helped my fear. Then you grow up, have kids of your own and they get scared. Then you try to explain to them why they shouldn't be afraid and it doesn't work on them either. The only thing that stills their fear is your presence. As a dad, you know you're not in control. They're finding some level of peace in your presence, and you can't deliver. Now you have fear as a dad, but the presence of the Lord is what casts out our fear.

When the women then come to Jesus, now they literally meet Jesus. It's His presence with them – His promise to be with them and His presence with them. Deuteronomy 31:8 says [8] *It is the LORD who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.* Psalm 23:4a says [4] *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.* What is it that keeps me from fearing? It is the presence of the Lord. Isaiah 41:10 says [10] *fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.*

A few nights before Jesus' death, what did Jesus tell the disciples? Jesus said in John 14:25-27, [25] "These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. [26] But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. [27] Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."

The purpose of the angels communicating to the women the truth, the good news of great joy and the purpose of Jesus greeting the women, saying 'do not be afraid' and expressing His presence to them, is not simply so that they wouldn't be afraid. It wasn't the mission of the angel nor the mission of even the Lord to keep them from being afraid. It's a blessing, but that's not the purpose. When the angel told the women not to be afraid, it was because the angel had something for the women to do. When Jesus told the women not to be afraid, it was because Jesus had something He needed the women to do. When Jesus tells us not to be afraid, it's not just so that we won't be afraid. It's because He has something that He wants us to do. The angel said, 'Do not be afraid. Come and see the empty tomb. He's risen. He's not here.' What was it the angel had for the women to do? 'Now go and tell the disciples.' What did Jesus say to the women? "Greetings. Do not be afraid, but go and tell the disciples that tomb is empty. Go and tell the disciples that I rose from the grave exactly the way that I said." Go and tell others.

So as God would come before us today, He would say to us, "Come and see, come and worship. Come and see the empty tomb. Proclaim the truth that that tomb is empty. Proclaim the truth that we serve a risen Savior. Now go and tell the world. Go and tell your family, your neighbor, your friend." As our theme of evangelism this year has been, go and be an Andrew. Andrew is one who invited others to come and see Jesus. Once Andrew came and saw and engaged with Jesus, then he said to others, "Come and see the Savior." Now go and tell others about the Lord.

Just as we're commanded to go and tell the truth of the Gospel to people, do you know what can happen when we do that? Here comes fear again. Sometimes a family member or friend, sometimes a coworker, especially when we've neglected to tell them about Jesus for some period of time and now all of a sudden, we're going to insert Jesus into the conversation, then fear comes again. I'm reminded of what the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision from Acts 18:9-10a, [9] *And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, [10a] for I am with you."* I often remind myself of that when I feel that fear of sharing Christ with someone else – do not be afraid, Bruce. Go on speaking. Why? Because I am with you. I'll never leave you nor forsake you.

So just in terms of application for us, here is your takeaway from this message. It is the reality of the empty tomb. It is the truth declared to us. Acknowledge your fear before the Lord. We live in a lost, broken and messed up world and it can get really scary. There can be fear from all sides. We can be afraid of what the world might do to us. We can be afraid of what experiences we might have to suffer through. We can even be afraid that we'll let the Lord down. We can be afraid of the world and we can be afraid of the Lord. Satan just wants to cause that fear to grow in us and yet praise the Lord for by grace God says to His children, "Do not be afraid because I am with you. I'll never leave you. I'll never forsake you."

Here is the Truth. Come and see. The tomb is empty. Jesus is risen from the dead. The Scriptures declare it and history declares it. Our changed lives declare it. Don't be fearful to share that with other people, to tell them, 'Come and see the Lord. Come and see the empty tomb. Come and hear the Good News of great joy.' I would encourage you today to go and tell

so that you walk away with fear? Sure, but you walk away with fear and with great joy and that's the great joy that we share with others. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, I do thank You so much for Your Word. Thank You for truth. Thank You for Your Holy Spirit using truth in our hearts and minds. Lord, thank You for opening our hearts and minds to understand, to receive, and to embrace truth before You and before all men. Lord, we acknowledge that we have fear – fear of You, Lord, fear of holiness. We have fear of man. We have fear of the world. Lord, we lay that before You, and we ask that Your presence would cast out that fear from us, that Your presence would give us Your peace. Thank You for Your Holy Spirit that You have given to us as our Helper, our Comforter, and Guide. Lord, I ask that as You have by Your Holy Spirit, drawn us to You to come and see, as You have by Your Holy Spirit revealed the Good News of great joy to us, allow us, instruct us, and compel us to go and tell others so they too can come and see You. Lord, we worship You this day our risen Savior, Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.