

Matthew 28:1-10
Tah Dah!
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Extraordinary...unprecedented. These are words that are being used a lot these days. It seems as though every time we turn around, we are being told that what we are facing is unprecedented. And for most all of us that statement is entirely true; none of us has faced an event of this magnitude that is literally impacting every single person's life.

For us, this is a moment unlike any other, but it is not unprecedented over the course of human history. Even though we have never faced this foe, people in various seasons and times in history have, faced adversaries, whether they be biological, or what the Apostle Paul called the powers and principalities. Throughout history we have faced super-charged, opponents that surround us with the power and reality of death in very dramatic ways.

To that end, what we are here today, gathered online to be reminded of is an event, a reality, a promise that is exceedingly and incomparably more extraordinary—one that is truly unprecedented.

As grim a moment as we are facing, we gather to hear once again of a hope that far surpasses any evil and darkness that we may face. To this moment the scripture presents God's response to the struggles and the questions that questions we are facing. And it begins, as Matthew writes, toward the dawn of the first day.

Two of Jesus' disciples Mary and Mary Magdalene, were going to the tomb where just two days before Jesus their rabbi, their master, and friend was buried. **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. ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow.**

This was such a cosmic and dramatic scene that the Roman guards, who were stationed to guard the tomb from robbers, did the only thing they could think of in the moment—they fell down and pretended to be dead.

But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he^[a] lay.

For such a dramatic moment in time in which we find ourselves, Matthew's Gospel offers an equally dramatic depiction of God's response. I love how much Matthew describes how the natural world heaves and breaks and bursts open in this moment of resurrection, this turning point in human history. There's lighting, things shake violently, stones break, and angels are present. For moments when we see the immense power of death and evil in the world, I don't know about you, but what I want in a moment like this is to hear and know that God still moves in power, with a might hand and an outstretched arm. I need to hear that the one who formed the cosmos, who made the mountains rise from the colliding and driving of the plates, the God who knows the depths of the oceans, and the expanse of the stars is the God we encounter on Easter. This is why Matthew's description of Easter morning feels so apt.

This isn't gentle Jesus, casually strolling out of the tomb, and heading to brunch with his friends. This is the God who thunders in the heavens, overturning the cosmic powers that bind and break his beloved creation, this is the God who emerges from the tomb the firstborn of new creation, this is the picture we get of the scene that the disciples encountered.

But it is good for us to be reminded this Easter morning what God is doing.

Ken Davis tells a story about a woman who looks out into her backyard and sees their German Shepherd dog with the neighbor's rabbit in its mouth, shaking it. They didn't get along with the neighbor so this was disaster. She grabs a broom, runs out, and starts whacking the dog until it throws the very, very dead rabbit onto the ground and runs away. She goes over and picks up the rabbit, then panics. She doesn't know what to do. She takes it inside the house and gives it a bath. She combs its fur and blow dries it to its original fluffiness. When the rabbit is looking good, she sneaks into the neighbor's yard with it, puts it in its cage, and scurries home. About an hour later she hears screams coming from next door. Casually she walks out into the backyard and says, "Oh, what's wrong?" The neighbor is screaming hysterically, "Our rabbit! Our rabbit! He died two weeks ago. We buried him, and now he's back! It's a miracle!"

Jesus didn't rise from the dead just to fluff up dead rabbits. The author of Hebrews puts it this way in chapter 2 verse 14 when he says **through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death**. On that first Easter morning as the earth shook, what God was responding to was the very event of death itself.

That phrase the power of death refers to literal death, which is an enemy of God's good creation. It is the very antithesis of what was formed and fashioned in the story of the Garden—the very most unnatural thing in God's world. The power of death is that thing that robs you of the physical life of your loved ones, but it is also the thing that robs you of your emotional and spiritual life. Tell me, do you know what it is like to feel like you are dying emotionally, or to feel so far from God that it is like you are withering up spiritually?

I remember, when I was a child, the power of death was when the baseball season ended, which also coincided with summer vacation ending and having to go back to school. This was doubly difficult, not only did I not get to do the thing in life I loved most, which was play baseball with my friends, but I now had to go and be someplace I didn't want to be. I say this in jest, but beneath it is a truth that is that the power of death, also, is being someplace in life where you don't want to be.

This experience, the power of death is also an emotional and spiritual reality. And I know that right now we are being faced with this in every facet of its existence. Death is coming at us guns blazing. We can see the physical destruction, and it is surreal, it is terrifying, it is unconscionable. But I know for certain also that this call to isolate and distance ourselves from one another is hurting us in ways that bring emotional woundedness. And as wonderful a thing as YouTube and Zoom are, they are not a substitute for the reality of an embrace of our loved ones. My mom and dad are struggling right now—not because they can't come see me...but because they can't come and hold Christian, Annie, and Conner! I was talking with my brother in law John, the other day, and I could hear in his voice the struggle he and Melissa were facing, not being able to be with us, with their family.

And this is something that is entirely new to many of us as a result of this experience of Covid, but hear me when I tell you this, for those who live alone, or who have become acquainted with

loneliness because they don't have family or friends or people who care about them or to care about, it is a death.

The point is that we all know deep down that there is something wrong, something is here in our world that shouldn't be here. This is unnatural. When Jesus was taken away so abruptly and so violently it was wrong. There are times when someone says, death is just a part of life, and to that there is something deep in our spirit that wants cry out "NO" this is not a part of life, this is not the way it's supposed to be, death is cruel and evil.

Now the view of the authors of the New Testament was that death was a power in the hands of the enemy. Look at how Hebrews continues. **Through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.** Now it's easy for modern people to dismiss this idea of the devil, like the image of a man in a red suit with a pitchfork, as something we modern people no longer believe in. And since the enlightenment we have learned a lot about the world and reality through scientific inquiry, and experimentation that is repeatable and verifies what is objectively real, and that has been a great thing for us as a culture.

And yet, after World War II it was the sober-minded secularists, even atheists who began to second guess their disbelief in the power of evil in light of the horrendous events perpetrated by the Nazis. You know the events, and there were many who thought, maybe it was a mistake to stop believing in the devil.

And this question of the presence of an enemy is something we can ask in the face of big events, like the one we're facing now, but we can also ask it of those little experiences the plague our emotions and our relationships. Maybe there is something to this notion of a spiritual malevolence which isn't supposed to be here. When the New Testament Authors asked: Why is the world so broken? The answer is because there is an enemy at large.

These are the questions that Mary and Mary Magdalene, and all of Jesus' disciples had spent the last two days asking of this world that had taken their lord and master away from them. That as they watched just days before as Jesus, with each step on his journey, Jesus was engaging in a battle with the enemy, evil and the devil, what they were seeing was this cosmic and reality altering battle taking place. So that when it says in Hebrews 2 that through the cross, he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is the devil, Jesus was rendering death disarmed. The word in Greek for destroy means that it has been disarmed, it's still present, but its weapons have been reduced, it's been rendered inoperative. We can still give it power by our insecurity or disbelief, but as a force, it's weapons have been removed. Because of Jesus' death, death has been struck with a mortal blow.

When the Marys came to the tomb and encountered the angel and were gripped with fear, he said to them: **"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^[a] lay.**

The resurrection of Jesus disarms, it nullifies the power of death, it renders the devil ultimately toothless in the face of the risen Jesus. And as a result, it also offers you and me the promise of insurmountable hope when we face hard times. How does Jesus do this? How does his death on the cross defeat the powers of evil?

First

When Jesus gave his life on the cross he made the payment required past present future, to free people from their prisons. Now for those who have already chosen to follow Jesus you understand this reality of the sin that binds us, as if we were in prison. But if you are not a religious person and find yourself listening to this, do you know the experience of going in a direction that makes you feel like you are a prisoner in your own decisions? Do you know that feeling? Carrying that regret and shame for what's in your past?

In this moment Jesus pays the ransom for your life, Jesus releases you from the bond held on your life. Colossians 2 says: **God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, ¹⁴erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross.** And in doing this he renders the verdict against us null and void.

Second

Then on Easter Sunday there is a second way in which the power of evil is defeated. When Jesus died on Friday night the powers of evil believed they had won their greatest victory. Then on Sunday when they came to the tomb and found the stone rolled away and Jesus' physical body resurrected, the question "death where is your victory, where is your sting?" was answered: nowhere, because Jesus defeated the power of death and evil by rising to new life. If you trust yourself to Jesus, though death will come for us, it will not be the end, that too will be overturned by the resurrection of Jesus. Death is no longer the end.

Third

When Jesus arose, he promised to give his disciples his presence in the holy spirit. That presence makes us alive daily, filled with the power and promises of God that each and every day strengthen and enable us to move out into a world so full of fear and uncertainty over the prospect of death and makes us to be fearless, powerful, agents of God's love and generosity and hope, because we know that there is nothing that can touch us because the Spirit of him who raised Christ Jesus from the dead lives now in you and in me. This is also the power of Easter, and the way in which God defeats the powers of evil and darkness and the devil.

Now there's a final turn in this Easter story that the angel says to the disciples gathered at the tomb. The first thing the angel does is tell them to come and see this thing that had happened, this new reality that now defined their lives. This is what the author of Hebrews describes in the ways that Jesus' resurrection defeats the power of evil. But then Matthew and Hebrews give us the turn. In Hebrews it says through **Jesus death God frees those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.**

Those who live bound by the fear of what is to come are now liberated from those bonds, and freed to move forward in joy and in hope that even though there is still much that causes us to worry, we know the good news that actually defines reality—the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

In Matthew we're told that the angel instructed them: **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.**

All around us are stories of people who, at one time, were held in the grips of fear, of addiction, of the belief that their life didn't matter or that there was no hope for them—and there continues to be as well. But in each one of them/you, even now as I speak over the YouTubes on the world wide webs, are stories of people who have been transformed because when they came to the tombs of their own making, expecting to find Jesus making them more comfortable, didn't find him at all. Jesus didn't spend much time in his own tomb and he's not going to get comfortable in ours. Jesus is already on the way to Galilee. Galilee is home, Galilee is the place where we are free and live unafraid in the power of the Holy Spirit. That is where he is inviting you and me to follow.

Jesus rose from the dead for you, so that you would know the power of death defeated and disarmed in your life, and then to move forward with that reality inviting others to go with you to Galilee, home to the place where we are with Jesus.

And I love the way this scene closes. After the angel instructs them to go to Galilee where they will meet Jesus it says that Jesus met up with them on the way, and said, simply, "Greetings." The Greek word here is not a formal greeting like Peace be with you, or rejoice, but simply "hi."

New Testament commentator Dale Bruner tells the story of a pastor friend who was giving a children's sermon and he asked the kids what Jesus first words to his disciples after he was raised from the dead were? And before he could give the answer, a little girl waved her hands eagerly and calling on her she said I know, tah dah!

I tell you brothers and sisters we shall not all sleep, but we will be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: death is swallowed up in victory. Death where is your victory? Death where is your sting? Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Brothers and sisters, Christ is risen. He is risen indeed! Amen.

And let's pray