

THROUGH THE BIBLE STUDY

MATTHEW 27:55 - 28:20

In America when a businessman retires from corporate life he's usually awarded a set of custom-fitted golf clubs, or a world-wind vacation.

But in China when a man retires he's awarded a much more practical gift - *a custom-sized coffin*. Obviously, the Chinese grasp the inevitability of death.

Some American corporations award their retirees with gold watches.

Perhaps this is a more appropriate memento for it reminds the person of how little time they have left. None of us are immortal. Unless the Lord returns in the near future each of us here tonight has an appointment with the grim reaper.

I read of woman who was dying of cancer and had only a few months to live.

She explained to her daughter that by the time the leaves had fallen from the oak tree in the front yard they'd no longer be together. One day the woman looked outside and saw her little girl with a ball of twine, tying leaves back onto the tree.

Many people are afraid of death and refuse to accept its inevitability.

Hebrews 2:14 tells us the devil has used the fear of death to kept us in bondage all of our lives. Death brings *fear and futility*. We build our lives looking over our shoulders knowing that one day all that we've built will be taken away.

Death breeds frustration.

But Jesus came to destroy death and set us free from its *fear and futility*.

Jesus rose from the dead to give us hope, and assurance, and confidence that death is not the *end of anything* – it's actually the *beginning of everything*.

Death may be the *Earth's backdoor* - but its *Heaven's front door*.

Author Max Lucado describes an experience from his childhood...

He and his friends had gone to a vacant lot and dug out a long tunnel. When the construction was complete Max's brother volunteered to test the tunnel.

Max describes the long, torturous, nail-biting time it took for his brother to travel from one end of the tunnel to the other. Would he make it? Would the tunnel hold or collapse? The kids held their breath for what seemed like hours until suddenly the brother emerged from the other end. The vacant lot erupted in a celebration.

Suddenly the kids were free to follow. They knew the coast was *clear* and there was nothing to *fear*. It's easier to enter a tunnel when you know where it ends.

For three days humanity held its collective breath as Jesus entered death's long tunnel. *Would He emerge or be trapped?* Tonight, we discover the joy the disciples experienced when Jesus' head popped out of the other end of the tunnel!

Jesus removed the fear and futility from death. He de-clawed the lion.

He stripped death of its power to generate fear - and steal joy - and cloud our future. The resurrection of Jesus gives us hope and assurance. It takes our lives out from under the shadow of death and allows us to live in the light of eternity.

Matthew 28 is the most important chapter in the Bible.

It records the foundation of our faith - the resurrection of Jesus. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:14, "If Christ is not risen, then our preaching is vain and your faith is also vain." If Jesus remained in the clutches of death Christianity is no different from any other religion. It's reduced to empty speculation – a vain philosophy.

But if Jesus rose from the dead - then He is God's chosen – then He can forgive our sin – and He can deliver on God's promise of eternal life.

Matthew's account of the resurrection of Jesus begins with His burial...

Chapter 27:55, "And many women who followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to Him, were there looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's sons."

It's interesting these women were *last to leave the cross* and *first to arrive at the empty tomb*. Men can learn a little about devotion and commitment from women.

Apparently, a whole sorority of women from Galilee followed Jesus, but Matthew mentions three whose lives had been

transformed by Him.

The first was **Mary Magdalene** – from whom Jesus cast out seven demons.

The second was **Mary His mother** – after pledging to God her womb, and submitting to the birth of His Son - she gave to Jesus her whole life.

And third was **Salome**, Zebedee's wife, and the mother of James and John.

Remember Salome was the woman who asked Jesus if her sons could sit on his right hand and his left hand. She was thinking of positions of honor.

Jesus responded, "**You do not know what you ask.**"

Imagine Salome now. She's looking at the cross, with the two thieves crucified on Jesus' right hand and left. Truly, she hadn't known what she was asking...

"Now when evening had come, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus." John 19:38 says that Joseph of Arimathea had been a secret disciple of Jesus. He feared the Jews.

Yet now the crucifixion brings this secret disciple out of the closet.

"This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate commanded the body to be given to him." Of note, all four Gospel writers mention the involvement of Joseph. They all recognized the importance of his role.

Extra-biblical sources say the Jews became angry at Joseph, and arrested him. Jesus delivered him from prison.

Joseph later testified of Jesus to the chief priests.

Legends involving Joseph abound... One suggests he became rich trading in medals with the people of the island of Britannia – the land of tin... Supposedly, following the resurrection Joseph led a missionary expedition to Great Britain.

In the Middle Ages Joseph became associated with the Holy Grail – the cup or chalice that Jesus drank from the night before He was crucified.

Another legend suggests when the Roman soldier thrust his spear into Jesus' side - Joseph used the grail to gather Jesus' sweat and blood. Supposedly, later Joseph took the cup on his voyage to Britain, and hid it in the bottom of a well.

There's another legend... When Joseph got home his wife asked, "Honey, do you realize this is costly? We'll lose lots of money giving away a brand new tomb."

Joseph answered, "*No we won't, Jesus only needs it for the weekend.*"

Verse 59 "When Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his new tomb which he had hewn out of the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the door of the tomb, and departed."

And Mary Magdalene was there, and the other Mary, sitting opposite the tomb." Their emotions were still reeling... They were grieving and mourning their loss...

"On the next day, which followed the Day of Preparation, the

chief priests and Pharisees gathered together to Pilate, saying, "Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise.'

Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night and steal Him away, and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead.' So the last deception will be worse than the first."

I'm sure the priests went home the night of Jesus' crucifixion with the smug assurance their problems were over. They'd silenced their chief critic forever!

But by the next day they were having second thoughts. Someone recalled that Jesus had promised, "After three days I will rise." They started to feel uneasy...

That's when the Jews approach Pilate and demand a guard be posted, lest the disciples steal Jesus' body, and foster the hoax that He'd risen from the dead...

It's amazing how this fabrication is still around today... *The disciples stole the body of Jesus and fostered this gigantic, elaborate hoax on a gullible humanity.*

Obviously, if that's your belief you haven't done your homework.

The Jews already thought of that possibility and took steps to insure that it didn't happen. They had Pilate seal the tomb and set a guard of trained Roman soldiers.

"Pilate said to them, "You have a guard; go your way, make it as secure as you know how." So they went and made the tomb secure, sealing the stone and setting the guard." A

Roman seal and Roman soldiers were plenty to scare off a band of already frightened and cowardly disciples... The seal placed on the stone was a waxed Roman insignia. To break the seal was a crime punishable by death.

The Roman soldiers were trained killers looking for a reason to slaughter Jews.

No way were the chicken-little disciples going to risk death – by seal or soldier - just to foster a hoax from which they would never prosper. Besides, never could the timid disciples overpower a battalion of special-ops Roman soldiers ...

Hey, the disciples had nothing to do with what happened the next day...

Chapter 28, “**Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn...**” Have you ever asked why Christians worship on Sunday morning?

Why not Friday night? Tuesday afternoon? Every other Thursday? We worship Jesus on Sunday AM due to what happened on a Sunday AM 1,976 years ago.

Matthew notes “**as the first day of the week began to dawn...**” – but trust me, more was dawning than a new day - it would be *the first day of a new era*.

After this day the world would never be the same.

“Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb.”

Mary Magdalene and Mary from Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, are the first people to the tomb on

Sunday morning. After Jesus' body was taken from the cross His burial preparations had been rushed. A special Sabbath started at sundown. The women had been unable to properly anoint the body for burial.

Now they come to finish the job. They hope the Romans will move the stone.

Even though Jesus taught His disciples that He would be crucified and rise the third day – the possibility of a literal resurrection had never crossed their minds.

Author Kent Hughes calls these ladies "[Saturday's Children.](#)"

Saturday's Kids are depressed about life. They're overwhelmed with worry and overcome with fear. They have no hope. Their relationships are dying - their outlook is dim - their lives are ruled by sorrow and, sulking, and sadness.

But one event transformed "[Saturday's Children](#)" into "[Sunday's Children](#)" - a whole new breed of human beings. Suddenly their hearts burst with joy. Hope invaded their lives. Their relationships and outlook took on new meaning.

The disciples are about to become resurrection people. In the future they'll be *persecuted and plundered* but nothing will get them down. They'll remember the empty tomb and power of Jesus – and their ability to transform sorrows into joy.

[A risen Savior specializes in turning setbacks into comebacks - sadness into gladness - the spices of death into the spice of life - Saturdays into Sundays.](#)

Verse 2 **“And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an**

angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it. His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow.”

On my first trip to Israel I visited a place called [the King's Tomb](#). Its featured attraction is an example of how a stone was rolled over the mouth of a grave.

A channel is cut in the rock in front of the grave's opening. The stone is placed at the top of the channel and wedged in place. When it comes time to roll the stone in place the wedge was kicked out, and gravity rolls the stone in front of the tomb.

The Gospels are consistent with this system. In Mark 16 the Greek word translated "rolled" means *"to roll up a slope or incline."*

When the stone was rolled back from the mouth of the tomb it was not only rolled back – but pushed up a hill. John says the stone was *"taken away."* The word John uses is the Greek word *"airo"* which means *"to pick up and carry."*

Apparently, the stone was blown off the tomb's mouth, and up the incline.

Imagine, a two-ton stone caught air - it *"airo-ed"* off the mouth of the tomb.

One other point, we know from other post-resurrection passages that Jesus possessed a glorified body free that was able to walk through walls.

He was not bound by the laws of nature. He could walk through the rock.

The stone was removed not to let Jesus out – but to let the disciples and ultimately the world in - to examine the evidence that Jesus was alive.

Verse 4 “**And the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men...**”

Experienced, battle-tested warriors quiver in their boots before this angel.

Remember in the OT, when King Hezekiah was surrounded by the Assyrian army. God sent a single angel - who in one night - slaughtered 185,000 troops.

Angels are not plumb little babies flapping their wings. They're mighty warriors.

Matthew mentions only one angel. Luke tells us there were actually two.

I like what Hughes suggests, “(These two angels were) probably only those who elected to be seen. Many more, perhaps thousands more, watched, for as Peter says, **'ANGELS LONG TO LOOK INTO THESE THINGS...'**”

Angels marvel at the salvation orchestrated by Jesus. There may've been a million, billion spiritual on-lookers surrounding and peering at the empty tomb.

“But the angel answered and said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified.”

Recall when the angels appeared to the shepherds at the birth of Jesus their first words were, **“Do not be afraid.”**

Here at His resurrection they communicate the same message. Jesus came into the world to end the *tyranny of*

fear - and replace it with the *triumph of faith*.

The angel announces and invites... “**He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay.**” Jesus is risen - *just as He said*...

Notice the past tense. “**where the Lord lay** - not *lies*.” He is alive. His body no longer lies on a cold, stone slab - Jesus is out, and about, and on the move.

In 1885 when British General Gordon discovered the tomb near Skull Hill he took a soil sample. He had it analyzed for traces of decomposition. When the results came back negative he concluded the tomb he’d discovered was quite possibly the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea - and the empty tomb of Jesus.

Jesus is the only person to secure a tomb on a time-share program. He didn't need to *buy*, but *borrow* a tomb. He signed up for one weekend in 32 AD – just a three night stay. Jesus rose from the dead, never to die again. Today, He lives!

I love what the angel told the women, “**Come, see the place where the Lord lay...**” In other words, “**Don't take my word for it. Examine the evidence.**”

This is what Paul told King Agrippa 30 years later. In Acts 26 he challenges him, “**The king... knows these things... none of these things escape his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner...**” The resurrection is a verifiable fact.

Understand at its origin, Christianity didn't rely on philosophical argument or metaphysical mumbo-jumbo – it was founded on a historical, verifiable, actual event – an

event that occurred in time and space – the resurrection of Jesus!

Christianity was founded on an event that can be proven true or false.

Secular historian, Thomas Arnold, once wrote of Jesus' death and resurrection, "I have for many years studied the histories of other times... and I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better and fuller evidence..."

Jesus rose. The stone rolled back. An angel invites *advocate and adversary* alike to look inside the tomb and see for themselves... examine the evidence.

If He isn't alive, then *junk* Christianity as *bunk*. But if He's risen, He deserves your total allegiance. All Christianity hangs on the truth of the resurrection.

Verse 7 "And go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and indeed He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him. Behold, I have told you." Notice the sequence here - "come and see" then "go and tell."

You're not ready to proclaim the truth of Christianity until you've seen, tasted, experienced for yourself. Come and examine, understand the death and resurrection of Jesus - then go out and proclaim it to the world.

"So they went out quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to bring His disciples word." The women are still full of fear, but now of a different kind...

This is a good fear. Not a frightening fear, but a purifying

fear – a reverence.

Notice God didn't entrust the news of the resurrection to a 60 Minutes News Crew, or a professional journalist, or a polished scholar, or a bold preacher.

No, He entrusted the good news to two women both named Mary.

I heard someone say the reason God entrusted the news of the resurrection to two ladies is that he knew it would be impossible for two women to stay quiet for very long. God wanted to insure the news would be spread far and wide.

I have a different theory...

Notice these two Marys were not just *first to the empty tomb*, but *last to leave the cross*. We read earlier they accompanied the body of Jesus to the tomb with Joseph of Arimathea. They shared longer and deeper in His sorrows, therefore they're given the privilege of sharing first in His power and resurrection.

There's a lesson here... Believers who take on the *burdens of Jesus* are those who share most in the *blessings of Jesus*. Power is granted those who know His *passion*. This is why Paul explains his desire in Philippians 3:10, “to know Christ and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings.”

“And as they went to tell His disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, “Rejoice!” So they came and held Him by the feet and worshiped Him.”

Jesus commanded these women “rejoice!” or “take joy.” He

was alive and would be with them forevermore. They are to squeeze joy from that truth.

Understand when Jesus died the disciples' misconceptions died with Him. Their dreams of a *political kingdom* and *material prosperity* were shattered on the cross.

Now Jesus tells them He has plans that far exceed their expectations.

Jesus is building a spiritual kingdom. He'll pour out spiritual, eternal riches on those who fall at His feet and trust in Him. There's still great reason to rejoice.

And this is how Jesus works in our lives.

He shatters our selfish dreams and ambitions. He *sorrows us to salvage us*.

When we abandon our plans He resurrects new hope - shows us His purpose - enthuses us with new possibilities. There is a greater reason to rejoice.

"Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me." Notice He calls the disciples, "My brethren."

Can you imagine the relief it was to the disciples to hear these words. Even after their denial and betrayal Jesus still considers them His brothers.

He's forgiven them completely! He loves them still.

Rather than condemn them, Jesus wants to *restore* them. Perhaps, you're a *fallen follower* and you're uneasy about meeting Jesus – *do not be afraid!*

Saturday's children walk around with grim faces. They've got no reason to rejoice. Life is bleak and burdensome. The guilt is unbearable. But Sunday's kids have a bounce in their step - a smile on their face. Their outlook is bright and their future is rosy. They know their sin is forgiven, and they're accepted by God.

Jesus is alive, and wants to live in you! Are you a child of Saturday or Sunday?

Verse 11 "Now while they were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened.

When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers (It was a bribe - hush money), saying, "Tell them, 'His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.'

"And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will appease him and make you secure." Here's the first attempt at denying the resurrection. The Jewish leaders buy-off the Roman soldiers. *Say you dozed off and the disciples stole the body.*

It was preposterous, but the best lie they could concoct at the moment.

There were several reasons why their argument was so unconvincing.

First, was the obvious contradiction - if the Roman guards were sound asleep how did they know it was the disciples that stole the body of Jesus?

Second, a Roman guard would never have fallen asleep on duty. Such an act would've been punishable by execution.

The soldiers loved life more than a nap.

Third, who would believe the cowardly, frightened fisherman could muster the courage to take on a group of professional soldiers who were trained killers?

This was a lame attempt on the part of the Jews to discredit the resurrection.

Actually, it would've been very simple for the Jews to kill Christianity - to shoot it down before it ever got off the ground - all they had to do was produce the corpse!

But they couldn't - and they knew it - because Jesus was alive!

“So they took the money and did as they were instructed; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day.” It was commonly reported, but apparently, didn't influence very many people. On the day of Pentecost thousands of Jews came to faith in Jesus – even many of the priests.

All Jerusalem had been swayed with the truth of the resurrection.

Verse 16 “Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them.” Which mountain we're not sure.

If you've been to the top of Mount Arbel – you might assume it was there.

In 1 Corinthians 15:6 Paul tells us that over 500 people at one time and in one place saw the risen Lord Jesus. The

mass sighting probably occurred in Galilee.

Here's proof the resurrection wasn't just a hallucination. A few people with the right conditioning might hallucinate together – but not 500 folks at the same time.

Verse 17 “When (the eleven disciples) saw (Jesus), they worshiped Him; but some doubted.” Despite the evidence before them, the resurrection was so shocking – at first some of the disciples didn't believe their own eyes.

“And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...”

The word “go” is actually used as a participle - the implied meaning is “as you go.” The idea is “as you go into the world, and go about your daily responsibilities and activities, reach out to people around you and make disciples.”

Lifestyle evangelism is what Jesus commands of us.

Being a missionary is not selling your house and moving to a foreign country.

Start at home! Influence the people at work - invite a neighbor over for dinner - build a bridge - nurture a relationship... as you go make disciples.

And how do we influence... “Teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you...” Verses 19-20 are what we call “The Great Commission.”

And notice three features of this commission – its target,

task, trust.

Notice its **target**. Our job is to go to all nations - not just our nation - not just nations in close proximity that share our culture and speak our language.

Collectively, as the church, we're to go into all nations.

And here's what excites me about living in Atlanta, Georgia. Rather than us fly over the world, God is bringing people from all nations to us. Atlanta has become an international melting pot – and it's our opportunity to share the Gospel.

Notice also the **task** of this commission. We're to make disciples. That doesn't just mean leading people to Jesus. You can do a good job presenting the Gospel - and leading a person in the sinner's prayer – and even getting them baptized.

But our responsibility doesn't end there... You've made a convert - yet there's much more involved in making a disciple. When a person comes to Jesus our job isn't done. We're just getting started. We need to teach them all things that Jesus commanded. Our job is not over until *new Christians* become *mature Christians*.

Finally, notice the **trust** involved in the Great Commission.

Notice how Jesus words this in verses 18-19, “**All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore...**” The implication is that Jesus has passed on that authority to us. He's entrusted us with the power for the task.

Whenever I read the Great Commission my first response is

"Who me?"

I'm so conscience of my inadequacies and frailties.

My **target** seems so limited and narrow... I'm not sure I'm up to the **task** - *making disciples*? I'm having a hard enough time just being a disciple.

Yet here's where we can't hide behind our *inabilities* – for all God requires is *availability*. He has given to you and me all authority to speak in His name.

Remember, nobody here tonight is any more unworthy or inadequate than the disciples were at this point. They had just failed the Lord miserably.

I'm sure they were also thinking, *"You can't mean me?"* But *He did mean them and He does mean you!* Jesus has given us the right, and privilege, and authority to speak for Him. Each of us can teach, disciple, and even baptize in His name.

Early in the history of our church we went to a Baptist Church and asked to use their baptismal pool. People had gotten saved at CC and needed to be baptized.

But I had not been formally ordained and this seemed to bother the pastor. In his mind I had no right baptizing anyone unless I'd been officially ordained.

I asked him, *"Does the Great Commission apply to just the pastor or everyone in the church?"* He said, *"Of course, everyone."* I had him, *"Well then, if everyone is to make disciples – then why shouldn't everyone be able to baptize?"*

God has entrusted us all with tremendous authority. He's called us to be His ambassador, His official representative. I

have no more authority than you do.

We've all been given full authority and power to fulfill the Great Commission.

And Matthew ends, verse 20, "And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen." Here is the genius of Christianity - Jesus bursts out the tomb to make His home in our hearts. Colossians 1:27, "Christ in you, the hope of glory."

Here's a verse that should bother you the next time you board an plane. Jesus says, "Lo, I am with you always..." That's low – not high – *and that's just a joke.*

Seriously, this is a **precious promise** - no matter where we go we can count on Jesus to go with us. But this can also be a **precarious problem** - if we go someplace we shouldn't - it means were dragging Jesus along with us.

Next time you rent a video or go to a movie make sure it's a show Jesus won't mind watching - for whether you realize it or not you're taking Him with you.

For me, the promises of Jesus' constant companionship - that everyday and everywhere I can experience His in my life... *this why I get up in the morning.*

The only way I can face a new day is in knowing I don't have to face it alone.

Jesus promised... "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Let me close with a poem by Lois Cheney... It sums up tonight's study.

Once upon a time there was a God who so loved the world that He gave His Son, His only Son. And they took that Son and they hung Him on a cross.

And that Son died and they buried the Son - sealed Him up tight.

But God said, 'Oh no you don't' and He rolled back the rock. He unsealed His Son and His Son came out - came out walking and breathing and He was alive.

And He's alive today and He walks around and He stalks around - breathing life and life... But every morning, just before dawn, for thousands of years little grim people - preachers and bankers and storekeepers and students - sneak up to the grave and roll back the stone to seal it up tight.

And every morning God roars, 'Oh no you don't!', and He flings back the stone.

And out walks Jesus all over again - out stalks the grinning, striding Jesus.

Tight-lipped little people hover all day around the tomb and cover it with incense. And bow before the tomb, and walk before it, and sigh before it - and pray to it, and sing to it, and weep to it, and lean on it...

And no one notices, or at least they pretend not to notice, the living, breathing, walking, talking Jesus - out on the edge, calling, 'Hey!', 'Hey you!'"

Here's what she's saying, people can get caught up in the material matters of life – even religion – and miss out on

sensing the presence of the risen Lord.

Jesus said, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”