

Easter Hope
Matthew 28:1-7
Pastor John Miller

I want to begin by reading Matthew 28:1-4. Matthew says, “Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb. 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. And the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men.”

The darkest hours in the history of mankind is now past, on Friday and Saturday, and Jesus has been crucified. His body is laying in Joseph’s tomb. But as Sunday begins to dawn, very early in the morning, the women who were last at the cross, were now first at the tomb. The brightest day in history is now beginning to dawn. It was the day that would bring an end to all darkness and bring light, life and eternal hope. It was the day that Jesus Christ rose from the grave, forever conquering Satan, sin and death.

The story tells us that “there was a great earthquake,” verse 2. Also, there was “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. And the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men.”

Now there was no mortal eye that witnessed this resurrection of Jesus that morning, but by the Holy Spirit’s inspiration, Matthew records what took place. As some disciples met with Jesus for 40 days after the Resurrection, no doubt that some of the information came to them, as they described what took place.

Matthew tells us that the Sabbath was past, “as the first day of the week began to dawn.” Jesus Christ was crucified on Friday, and since the Sabbath began on Friday afternoon at sundown, Jesus’ body was already prepped, and His body had been laid in the grave.

Can you imagine what the disciples and followers of Jesus must have felt that Friday night and that Saturday Sabbath as they realized that all their hopes were gone? Their expectations, the miracles they saw, the words that they heard from His lips were all in vain; Jesus Christ was now dead.

Jesus had prophesied and spoken of His death, but it kind of went in one ear and out the other; they really didn’t understand it, they didn’t receive it and didn’t comprehend it. Their idea of the Messiah was that He would come to rule and to reign and set up His kingdom on earth. So when Jesus was crucified, their hopes were dashed. They were devastated.

So we move from the difficult, sad Saturday, verse 1, to the coming Sunday. What a glorious day that was! As the day began to dawn, Mark tells us that the women were on their way to the

sepulcher to finish preparing His body; they had hurriedly started the process on Friday before the Sabbath began. As they were discussing who would roll away the stone when they got there, they had the pleasant surprise that the stone was already rolled away. Then they had the second surprise when they went into the sepulcher: there were two angels there. One was at the head and one at the feet where the body of Jesus had lain. The grave clothes were there, but Jesus' body was gone.

It is a picture, I think, of the Old Testament Ark of the Covenant. The angels were over the Ark on the mercy seat. God met us in the death of Jesus Christ. So the Crucifixion was pictured there on the mercy seat, with the angels at the head and feet of where the body of Jesus had lain.

Matthew tells us that "There was a great earthquake," the stone was rolled back and an angel "sat on it." The stone was rolled away not so Jesus could get out, but so the women and the disciples could get in and see that Jesus's body had disappeared.

What I want to focus on is verses 5-7, which is the angel's message. The women arrive at the tomb that first Easter to find the stone rolled away. They find the angels in the tomb, "But the angel answered and said to the women, 'Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for He is risen as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. 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.'"

I want to use as my Easter message today this first Easter message ever preached. It was preached not by a pastor in a church or online, obviously, but it was preached by the angel himself in the tomb that first Easter morning. His message has three points. The first point is "Do not be afraid," verse 5. The second point is "Come see," verse 6; and the third point is "Go... and tell," verse 7. As every good sermon should have three main points, this one had three main points.

Let's look, first, at "Do not be afraid," verse 5 and the first part of verse 6. "The angel answered and said to the women..."—here are his words and our Easter message—"... 'Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for He is risen as He said.'"

The message of Easter and the message for us today is that we do not need to fear or be afraid. There are so many people in fear right now. Maybe you are afraid of getting sick or of getting the corona virus. Maybe you are in fear of losing your job, or maybe you're fearful because you've lost your job and you don't know how you're going to pay the mortgage or pay the rent or buy the groceries. There are all these fears that are wracking us. Many people live in constant fear and with phobias. But the angel's message—and the message to our hearts today—is that we need not be afraid.

The angel gives us, in this passage, two reasons why we don't need to be afraid. The first reason is because Jesus died. In verse 5, the angel says, "I know that you seek Jesus who

was crucified.” The fact that Jesus was crucified is really another way of saying that He died. Crucifixion led to death. No one was crucified who didn’t die as a result, sometimes within hours. So it was another way of saying that Jesus died on the Cross. This is a reference to the Cross of Christ.

I believe that the three greatest events in human history are the Incarnation, which we celebrate at Christmas when Jesus Christ became man through the womb of the Virgin Mary; the Crucifixion, when Jesus died on the Cross for mankind’s sin; and the Resurrection, when Jesus, the God-man, rose victoriously from the dead.

The Cross means that Jesus, the Son of God, died for our sins. 1 Corinthians 15:3 says, “Christ died for our sins.” A lot of us are familiar with the Cross; we know that Jesus died on the Cross. But we don’t stop to ask who He was and why He died. Jesus was God in the flesh, the Son of God. The reason He died on the Cross was to take our sin and pay its penalty. One word that best describes the Cross of Christ is “substitution.” He took our place; He died in our stead. Our sins were laid upon the Son of God when He died on that Cross. Then Jesus gave us His righteousness. When He died on the Cross, He cried, “It is finished” or “Tatelestai.” So He died for our sins, and we do not have to fear. We are free from sin’s penalty and sin’s power.

The second reason the angel gave us why we don’t have to be afraid, in verse 6, is because Jesus rose from the dead. Notice the angel said, “He is not here, for He is risen, as He said.” Jesus Christ died for our sins, and Jesus rose on the third day for our justification. That’s the good news; that’s the Gospel. In a world filled with bad news and fears, we have the good news that Jesus died for our sins. We can be forgiven. We can be free. We have the good news today that Jesus rose from the dead, and we can be righteous; we can have the righteousness of Christ imputed to us.

Now you might ask the question, “How do we know that Jesus rose from the dead?” Let me give you a few reasons why we know that Jesus rose from the dead. First, because He said He would. Notice in the passage, it says, “as He said.” Jesus said over and over again that He would be crucified and that three days later He would rise from the dead. He actually said to a group of sceptics that “No sign will be given it [an adulterous generation] except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” So Jesus is speaking of His death. And as Jonah came out of the whale, so would Jesus be resurrected. The Bible also says in John 2:19, where Jesus is speaking, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

The second reason we know that Jesus rose from the dead is because the tomb was empty. Verse 6 says, “He is not here.” Jesus predicted He would rise from the dead, and when they went into the tomb on that Easter morning, Jesus was gone. Praise God, He is risen! The grave cloths were still lying in the shape of His body, so He actually passed right through them.

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ was a physical, bodily resurrection. It wasn’t a spiritual

resurrection. It wasn't a mystical resurrection. It was an actual, physical resurrection; His physical body was metamorphosized. Jesus came out of the grave in an immortal, eternal body. What a glorious truth that is!

Reason number three is that Jesus was seen alive. It's called the "post-Resurrection appearances of Jesus." For a period of 40 days after His Resurrection, Jesus appeared, disappeared and then reappeared. His disciples met with Him. Acts 1:3 says, "He also presented Himself alive...by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days."

One of my favorite appearances is when Jesus appeared in the upper room when His disciples were gathered together. They were still fearful and had misunderstood what had taken place. Thomas, who we call the apostle "doubting Thomas," said, "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe." Then at that very moment, Jesus appeared in the room, with the doors closed and locked. Jesus then said to Thomas, "Do not be unbelieving, but believing." Thomas then saw Jesus, fell to his knees and said, "My Lord and my God!" Thomas saw and was convinced that Jesus Christ had risen from the dead.

Reason number four that we know Jesus rose from the dead is the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, as well as many other conversions. Saul was a proud, Jewish Pharisee, righteous in his own religion. In Acts 9, he was on his way to Damascus from Jerusalem. He was going to arrest Christians and have them imprisoned. He was persecuting and killing them. It said that at midday, noon, by a bright light, that shone "brighter than the sun," Saul was stricken down to the earth. He then heard an audible voice that said, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads." Then Saul said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then a voice came audibly from heaven saying, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Then Saul immediately turned to Jesus, who he had been persecuting, and trusted Him as his Lord and Savior. Now we know him today as the apostle Paul, who spread Christianity around the whole Roman empire, and left us so much of the New Testament to instruct us in the Christian life.

The last reason why we know that Jesus Christ rose from the dead is the lives that Jesus is still changing today. Jesus was crucified, He was buried, He rose and He ascended and is exalted "at the right hand of God the Father." He still lives right now to come into your heart, if you'll invite Him in and allow Him to make your heart His home. He will change your life. The Bible says, "If anyone is in Christ..."—that is, becomes a Christian—"...he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." Jesus Christ can come into your heart and forgive your sins. He can make you brand new.

So because of the death and Resurrection of Jesus, we need not be afraid in life, in death and for where we will spend eternity. The Easter message is a message of hope, because we don't need to be afraid to live, because we are not afraid to die. We're not afraid beyond the grave; we know that we will go to be with the Lord. That's why we have the statement, "Do not be afraid."

The second point in the angel's sermon is in verse 6. He said, "Come see the place where the Lord lay." I like that. This is an invitation. First there is a command—"Do not be afraid." Then, secondly, there is an invitation—"Come, see the place where the Lord lay." This means "to look and see with regard to the mind." The very word "see" means "to look upon with understanding and comprehension." Come, see and think about the implications: that Christ has risen from the dead.

What does Christ's Resurrection mean? Let me mention six things that it means. Number one, it means that we can have His pardon. In 1 Corinthians 15:17, Paul says, "If Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!" The implication is that Christ is risen, and we are not in our sins. The bedrock of Christianity is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. If you have the Incarnation and the Crucifixion but no Resurrection, you'd have no living Christ. And if you have no living Christ, you have no living Savior; a dead man can save no one.

But our sins can be forgiven. Know this at Easter: you can be forgiven. Many of you have already trusted Christ; you know Him as your personal Lord and Savior, and you know the joy of sins forgiven.

When a lame man was brought to Jesus, the friends who bore him wanted him healed. But the first thing that Jesus said to the lame man was, "Your sins are forgiven you." Some of the religious Pharisees and Jews standing nearby murmured and complained and said to themselves, "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" That is true; no one can forgive sins but God. So Jesus said, "That you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins," He turned to the lame man and said, "Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house." And immediately that man was healed. He took up his bed and walked out of the house. So Jesus can pardon and forgive our sins.

Do you know the risen Savior and have assurance that your sins are forgiven?

The second benefit or blessing as a result of the Resurrection is that we can have his power. In Ephesians 1:19-20, Paul prayed that they would understand "what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead." So we have His pardon, and we have His power.

Maybe there are sins that have you bound. They are controlling your life. Maybe it's unforgiveness, pride, jealousy or hatred. Jesus Christ can set you free. Do you know the freedom and liberty that comes from Christ? The Bible says, "Who the Son sets free is free indeed."

The third benefit or blessing of the Resurrection is that we have His purpose. I like this. In 1 Corinthians 15:19, Paul says, "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable." In the Old Testament, there was a wealthy king named Solomon. He had everything he could ever want. He said, "Whatever my eyes desired, I did not keep from them."

But his conclusion was that it was all emptiness. All is “vanity and vexation of spirit.” The truth is that money and things can’t buy happiness. Even as wonderful as our human relationships are, they can’t always bring us happiness.

There is only one thing that will: that is the God who created you. He made you for Himself. The soul is restless until it finds its rest in God. Until you’ve come to know Christ, you’ll never find fulfillment and true happiness.

Jesus can give you real purpose and meaning. It’s not just being born, it’s not just getting married, it’s not just having children, and then dying, but He gives you purpose in life. And there is purpose beyond the grave. Jesus can give it to you at Easter.

Fourthly, we have His presence. In Hebrews 13:5, the writer of Hebrews tells us, “For He himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’” Nowhere in Matthew, Mark, Luke or John do we have that recorded. Nowhere else in the Bible do we have it recorded that Jesus said those words. But the writer of Hebrews—we’re not sure who the human author is—actually tells us, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that Jesus made that promise: “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” After His Resurrection, Jesus said these words before He ascended to heaven: “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

So you never need to be alone. Maybe you are alone in your home right now, under quarantine or lockdown. You feel that you can’t go out, and you have no contact with others. But guess who is with you in your home right now? Jesus Christ. And I promise you He won’t give you the corona virus. He has promised to “never leave you nor forsake you.” Read Romans 8, where it says that “Nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth...shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Jesus Christ promised that “neither death nor life” could separate us from Him. Because Jesus lives, I am never alone.

Fifthly, we have His pattern. This is the Easter message. 1 Corinthians 15:20 say, “But now Christ is risen from the dead and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” or “have died.” Easter means that when the Christian dies, he is simply sleeping. His soul has gone to be with the Lord. The Bible says, “To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.” The Bible says that our bodies are sleeping, waiting for their resurrection, when the Lord will come to take us home. Jesus’ Resurrection is the prototype or forerunner.

The firstfruits were the gathering in of the first part of the harvest. They would take some of the harvest and reap the grain or wheat and dedicate it to God. So it was a foretaste or picture of what was to follow—the greater harvest. So Jesus was the first of a long line of people who will be resurrected.

When Paul wrote to the sorrowing believers in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14, 16-17, he said, “I do not want you to be ignorant...concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will

bring with Him those who sleep..."—or "have died"—"...in Jesus." So when Jesus "will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God...the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord." We'll be together forever with the Lord.

So our loved ones who died in Christ are only sleeping; their bodies are waiting for their resurrection. Their souls or spirits will come with Him, and our bodies will meet Him in the air. Easter means that my loved ones, my family members, my friends, who die in the Lord, will be reunited with me. You'll see your father and your mother, your grandparents, your children again; we'll be reunited. There is hope. Jesus conquered death and the grave. He rose from the dead. We don't need to be afraid. What a blessed thing that is. So we have His pattern.

Lastly, and sixthly, we have His promise. In John 14:27, 1-3, Jesus said, "Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid." He also said, "You believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house..."—that's heaven—"...are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you." Then He makes this promise: "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also." That is His promise.

Easter means that He is coming back. He came to die, and He went back to heaven. He is now waiting, as He prepares this place, to come again to take us home to be with Him. Heaven is a real, prepared place. And Jesus will come again for us.

Are you waiting and looking for and ready for the Lord's return? Have you trusted Him? I believe that at any moment, Christ could come again. When He does, "The dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." We will have a family reunion in heaven.

The angel said, "Do not be afraid...He is risen...Come to see the place where the Lord lay." So we can be forgiven. We have a promise of a home in heaven. We have a pardon for our sins and the power to live in victory with purpose in life.

And then the third point of the angel's message, in verse 7, is, "Go...and tell." It says, "And go quickly and tell His disciples..."—what were they to tell?—"...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." They were to go to tell that Jesus was risen from the dead.

This is the good news. In a world filled with bad news right now, we have a good-news message. We can go out to tell others. We don't need to be afraid, because our sins can be forgiven. Jesus died for them on the Cross. Jesus conquered death, so we don't need to be afraid of death. We don't need to be afraid of eternity, because Christ is building us a place in heaven.

Jesus is able to be the object of our faith; He died, He rose, He lives. Go tell others the good

news. Number one, Jesus is the object of our faith. In Ephesians 2:8-9, the apostle Paul tells us, "By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." So Jesus saves us by His grace when we trust in Him through faith.

Have you put your faith and trust in Jesus? Have you trusted in Him, and in Him alone?

Secondly, Jesus is the source of our hope. There is hope in no other thing or person than in Jesus Christ. You can't hope in religion. You can't hope in your good works. You certainly can't hope in the government right now; they're not going to really help you. But we can hope in Christ; He died and rose to bring us hope.

Thirdly, Jesus is the proof of God's love. One of the greatest verses in the Bible is John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." That's the hope that we have today in Jesus Christ—that God gave His Son, and if we believe in Him, we'll never perish but have everlasting life.

My questions to you are, "Do you have the hope of heaven in your heart today? Has He dispelled your fears? Do you understand that He died for you and rose for you and lives for you? Do you know the good news that Jesus Christ died for your sins and rose from the dead so that you can have a home in heaven?"

You ask, "Well, what do I need to do?" Number one, you need to realize that you are a sinner. The Bible says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. There is none righteous; no, not one." You might be living a moral life. You might be religious. But we've all sinned; we've all disobeyed God and broken His commandments.

The second thing you need to do is to repent of your sins. That means that you need to turn around. Repentance means to leave the sins you loved before. It means to turn from them and follow Christ.

The third thing you need to do is to receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. John 1:12 says, "But as many as receive Him..."—that is, Jesus—"...to them He gave the right..."—or "the authority"—"...to become children of God, to those who believe in His name."

Have you believed on Jesus Christ? Have you been born again? Do you know that your sins have been forgiven? Do you know that when you die, you're going to go to heaven?

The Bible teaches that life is short. The Bible says, "For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away." So life is brief.

Secondly, the Bible teaches the certainty of death. The Bible says, "What man can live and not see death? Can he deliver his life from the power of the grave?" Life is short, and death is certain. But the Bible says, "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom."

The wisest thing you can do is to be ready to die; to know that your sins are forgiven, to know that you have trusted Jesus Christ. Jesus is our hope.