

# EASTER SUNDAY

Jesus is not a myth or legend. Jesus is not an ethereal religious figure. Jesus walked the earth at a specific time and place. There's never been another like Him. As we follow the life of Jesus of Nazareth through the Gospel of Matthew, we find our faith in Jesus rooted in the life of Jesus. Meet Jesus. Knowing this man will change your life.

## EASTER SUNDAY • Matthew 28:1-9 • Tim McConnell • April 12, 2020

Every year around this time, preachers around the world ask themselves, how can I get my people to take the resurrection seriously? How can I get a people so insulated, so protected, so unacquainted with mortality to think about life and death? Then cold and flu season came around. COVID-19 has changed the world. Changed each and every one of us. We changed the way we greet each other, changed the way we do church, how we meet, how we work, how we wash our hands. My fifth-grader asked, "Dad, with coronavirus around, if you drop the soap, is the soap dirty or is the floor clean?" We all have to ask the big, existential questions! We are all epidemiologists now. But we recognize how terrible it is. Many Coloradoans have lost their lives. We pray for the virus to end, and lives to be saved. We are hopeful that the changes we have made will not only halt COVID-19 but also lessen the threat of flu that takes 600 Colorado lives every year. It forced us all to stop, take the measure of our lives, and recognize that we are fragile, mortal beings. Every day is a gift.

But today is Easter. Around the world Christians celebrate again. As we have during good times and bad, during war, during peace, during famines, during plagues, from Roman catacombs and from WWII bunkers, we celebrate Easter. Jesus is risen from the dead. That's what we say, in fact. "Christ is risen!" one person says. Then we reply, "He is risen indeed!" It's a tradition that goes back so far into history we don't know where it started, but every branch of Christianity does it. Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, all around the world. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Let's try it. Say it to the person next to you. If you are alone, say it with me. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Shout it from the rooftops. It's almost like we need to remind ourselves. Like we sort of forget it, or we sort of stop believing it. Christ is risen, right? He rose from the dead right? I wasn't just imagining that was I? Christ is out of the tomb and walking around again, right? Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed.

We've been looking at the life of Jesus, studying His life with the historian's eye. Kind of like, if you were a reporter watching the life of Jesus, what would you write down? What happened? We wanted to do this because a report came out from a

Barna research survey in the United Kingdom a few years ago where people were asked if Jesus was an actual figure in history, or just a myth or legend. 23 percent said He was a myth. 17 percent said they didn't know. But Jesus was a man in history; He was a real person. Today we talk about something that happened very publicly in history. Jesus of Nazareth died. We have historical record of this. More than we would have of most people, even famous people, from that time. Jesus was arrested, brutally beaten and publicly executed outside the walls of Jerusalem under the leadership of Pontius Pilate. Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried." This is the part of the Apostle's Creed that could have a footnote to a Roman historian. Tacitus, a Roman Senator who wrote the Annals of Roman History in 110 AD, wrote about how Nero falsely blamed a religious sect called Christians for starting a fire in Rome: "Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate." Jesus was arrested, flogged, and carried His cross through the streets of Jerusalem where He was crucified.

We know He died. But what happened next? Let me catch you up. Jesus was born into the mess, just like us. Jesus bent down and was baptized in the Jordan River. He didn't need to repent and be baptized, but He took our place, our need to be redeemed, on Himself. He talked about the Kingdom of God, a place where we are whole and at home with God. He didn't just talk about it, He enacted it, with healings and demonstrations. He claimed the authority to forgive sins. Something only God can do. He claimed authority over the Sabbath. He claimed authority over the Mosaic Law, the Scriptures. He did and said things as though He had the authority of God in His own voice. He came to Jerusalem and stood fearless against powers that were perverting religion for profit. Then He died. He was crucified. They checked to make sure He was dead before they took His body down and handed it off to Joseph of Arimathea--what was left of it anyway, after the whips that flayed His flesh, the crucifixion that pulled His arms out of joint and tore up His hands and feet. We know He died. A reporter on the scene would say that.

Jesus had said He was going to die and that His death would have meaning. He was going to die for a purpose. The night before it happened, He was eating the Passover meal and He took the bread and broke it and said, "This is my body broken for you." My body is going to be broken for you. He took a cup and poured wine in it and said, "This cup is a new covenant, a new promise between you and God, like the rainbow with Noah, this cup is a promise. God will forgive you. God will keep you. God will hold on to you. It's a promise. Sealed when I pour out my blood to seal it. So you can have your sins forgiven." Eat it. Drink it. He said. Take it. Believe it. Receive it. Become it. It's a new life. In a sense, Jesus was saying, "I'm here to be the cure. I'm here to absorb the virus. I'm here to suck out the poison that infects humanity. I'll be sick; you be well. I'll be paralyzed; you walk free. I'll take on the pollution; you breathe in the health. The death I die will be on purpose, for you." And He died. So, it might be true. It might be true, because He died.

Joseph of Arimathea took the body. Usually, they were left to hang and be eaten by birds or tossed in common graves, but Joseph was a leader with influence enough to convince Pilate to release the body. Joseph laid it in a tomb nearby. Are we sure He was dead? The historian needs to ask. But the answer is yes. Romans knew how to kill. The loss of blood, the crucifixion, and the final check with a spear. Jesus was not sleeping. The tomb was sealed shut with guards in place. There were to be no misunderstandings. The movement of Jesus of Nazareth was over. Then something else happened. "After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay'" (Matthew 28:1-6).

There are two different sites in Jerusalem claiming to be the tomb. I'm not saying for sure that's the

very spot. But it's a funny thing, in both of these places people line up and wait for hours, inching forward in the crowds, pushing against each other, all to get the chance to step forward and look at something that isn't there. To look at a place where nothing is! I was reminded of this the other week. I was in Safeway. Of course, the toilet paper aisle was empty, but I was also supposed to get Ramen noodles. Nope. Gone. Four of us stood there, kind of social-distance spaced out, just staring at the place where Ramen noodles are supposed to be. Staring at what isn't there! "He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay." (Matthew 28:6). No body.

But wasn't the resurrection just a hoax? Just some well-meaning people who started a hopeful rumor or something? Here's the thing--anybody could run over and check. Roman officials had an interest in verifying His death. Jewish leaders had an interest in verifying His death. Everyone in power had an interest in verifying His death. They made up stories, but they never located a body or uncovered a plot. And what kind of plot would this be for the disciples anyway? A lie to ruin your life and wreck your family forever? It makes no sense. Nobody stole the body. He wasn't asleep and woke up--remember what His body would look like if that were the case. There is no trick or deception you can construct that actually makes sense. The only thing that makes sense to say, even from a historian's eye, even if you are a reporter on the scene writing down what happened, the only thing that makes sense is that Jesus of Nazareth was dead and buried, then the place where they laid Him was empty, and tens, then hundreds, testified that they saw and spoke and interacted with Him alive again. Resurrection. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Right?

Jesus promised new life. Jesus promised forgiveness of sins. Jesus promised His death would be a meaningful sacrifice to establish a new covenant with God, a new relationship, a new world. He died, so it might be true. He said He would die to make all this happen. He died, so it might be true. But if He rose again, no more "might be true." If He rose again, it is true. God has verified it. God has validated all that Jesus promised by pulling Him back up out of death. The grave is empty. Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed. At some point each one of us

needs to come to terms with what isn't there. Everybody look at no body. See what isn't there. Start to understand what is there. If He died for us; it might be true. If He rose from the dead, it is true. Resurrection. Death does not have the final word.

Straight across the globe, every people, every country, every language, we are all together locked in combat against human mortality. We want to live! We want our loved ones to live! We want our elders to live. We will do, we have resolved, all it takes to stop this virus. We need a cure. In times like this, we can easily feel that God has turned His back on us. God has turned His face away. Like Psalm 13: "How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? Look on me and answer, Lord my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death" (Psalms 13:1-3). Even Jesus felt that. Even Jesus felt that way when He went down into death. Where is your face, Lord? Give light to My eyes. But then, the resurrection.

We need a cure. They say, some say, it's in the blood. In the blood of the survivors are antibodies to fight and win the battle with this virus. That might not be how we beat this medically, but it strikes me this morning. The cure is in the blood. Jesus of Nazareth. He was not a legend. He was not a myth. Jesus came, Jesus lived, Jesus died. Jesus took on the curse of the world, Jesus drew out the poison that leads to death, Jesus soaked up the sinfulness and selfishness and brutal impulse of fallen mankind, took it to the cross and took it down under the earth where it died, and He died with it. Then He rose. Every flower that bursts up through the soil this morning, every little green shoot, every bit of new life, it was just, just a minute ago, stuck in the darkness under the earth, reaching up on the underside of the earth, in the dark, in the cold. Then bursting forth, the stalk like an arm, like a finger, pushes up out of the dark from some strength within, and finds the light. The sun. The life. Resurrection. We will rise again.

## STUDY GUIDE

### JESUS • "He Died and He Rose"

#### Matthew 28:1-9

#### **UP:** UP: Connect with God through Spending Time in His Word

Friends, humanity is being rocked right now by needing to physically distance ourselves from one another. For the Christian, we do this out of love for neighbor. Fight hard to distinguish these two realities: physically distancing and relationally separating.

Now is the time to become the greatest artist you have ever been. Create ways to stay relationally and spiritually tethered to your core circle. We need each other. We are gifts to one another! Make phone calls; text photographs; set up video gatherings. Together, we are the hands and feet of Christ to one another and this city!

Begin your study in prayer. Read and reflect on Matthew 28:1-9.

- 1) Who were the first two people to discover that Jesus was not in the tomb? What is significant about this account socially for first century Palestinian culture?
- 2) How did the guards respond to the angel of the Lord?
- 3) In verses 8 and 9, what emotions are being experienced and why?

#### **OUT:** Connect With the World Around Us (Join God in His Mission)

4 The angel charges Mary and Mary to "go quickly and tell (the Good News)." How might this charge become our own as disciples of the risen and glorified Christ?

5) How might you continue to grow in your ability to carry out this privilege of sharing that in Christ there is life?

6) Ask the Lord to impress upon your heart one person to pray fervently for this week – that they will come to trust Jesus and praise His wonderful name.

#### **IN:** Connect with Each Other

COVID-19: Spend time connecting with your core circle on how you are doing. Pray together.

What are you most grieving in this season? What is your greatest need right now? Who within your social sphere is hurting the most? How might you and your Life Group be the hands and feet of Christ in this situation?