



Roanoke, Virginia
Easter Sunday, April 9, 2023

“He is Raised!”

Part VII of the Sermon Series “Lift High the Cross”

Matthew 28

George C. Anderson

Matthew’s Gospel was written so that we might hear the good news of the Gospel. To hear the good news for us, it is helpful to hear how it was surprising news for those who first heard this story, the Jews and Gentiles of Matthew’s community. Listen to the reading of Matthew 28 and listen for the good news it has to share.

After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ² And suddenly there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵ But the angel said to the women, “**Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.**” ⁸ So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “**Greetings!**” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, “**Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers and sisters to go to Galilee; there they will see me.**”

¹¹ While they were going, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened. ¹² After the priests had assembled with the elders, they devised



a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers, ¹³ telling them, “You must say, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ ¹⁴ 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 is still told among the Judeans to this day.

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him, but they doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

†

So ends the Gospel of Matthew. To read all the chapters of Matthew leading up to this last one, this last chapter is a huge relief. Yes, it is a relief to hear Jesus was raised, but it is even more a relief to hear that this is not like the cyborg in *The Terminator* following through on his threat, “I’ll be back.”

I say that because to read through Matthew’s Gospel is to hear Jesus preach five sermons, each ending with warnings and threats about the cost of disobedience. Even the beautiful and famous Sermon on the Mount ends up with Jesus saying that anyone who doesn’t perfectly obey what he commanded (and let’s not forget, this is the sermon that not only forbids wrong-doing but also wrong-thinking)—anyone who doesn’t perfectly keep his commands will be like a house washed away in a flood.

Then you would have read the events of the last week of Jesus’ life where, everyone except a few women fails him and deserves everything that Jesus warned they would get.

- his faith community condemned him,
- the crowd turned on him,
- the government wrongly sentenced him,
- the centurions charged with keeping order crucified him,
- and perhaps, most disappointingly, his disciples abandoned him
 - with one betraying him
 - and another denying knowing him.

But, in Matthew’s final chapter, we are told that the judgement-moment is a grace-moment. An angel tells the two Marys that Jesus is raised and goes to tell his disciples, and Jesus himself tells the Marys to go tell his family to meet him in Galilee... and *not* because Jesus has a score to settle. The following and the family are being re-formed by faith and forgiveness and there is work yet to do.

Because of the surprise of the last chapter, the cross is now a symbol of reconciliation rather than Rome’s intended symbol of defeat or of revenge because God is vengeful.



Jesus will not abandon those who abandon him. Whatever you might regret, whatever you think you might have done or become that would make you forever unacceptable in God's company, the risen Jesus answers with love and forgiveness. So, meet up with Jesus, for he has a place for you in his company.

†

Here's some more good news that was surprising then. The Jews of Matthew's community were hoping for a resurrection; but of a nation, *not* a person. Many hoped that at the end of time- at the end of history- there would be a raising of the dead. But the resurrection that was

- talked about,
- looked for,
- and longed for

was the resurrection of the nation of Israel. The hope was that Israel would come back with its old borders and with another king in the line of David. The motto could as well have been, "[Israel shall rise again!](#)" Of course, if that were to happen, it would mean the removal of whatever nation had Israel under its thumb. In Jesus day, that nation is Rome. With the resurrection of Israel comes Rome's demise.

On a local and everyday level, the most visible representative of Rome's rule is the *Roman centurion*. Any story that ends well for Israel would end badly for centurions. So, imagine how shocking it is for first century Jews to hear stories where centurions are saved. Look back at chapter 8 of Matthew's Gospel. A centurion comes to Jesus and asks him to help his servant who is paralyzed. Normally, another way to say, "a centurion's request" is "a centurion's command." Jesus says he will come. But this centurion shocks Jesus with his humility and grace. He says,

["Jesus, I'm a centurion. I know that people have to do what I say. But you have a different authority, and it is better than mine. You have a kind of power that is stronger than my kind of power. I'm not worthy enough to have you come to my home. I'm just asking you to say a good word for my servant, that's all."](#)

Jesus is shocked, and praises the centurion's faith. He says a good word and the servant is helped. Jesus then turns to his disciples and says, "[You know, one day, people will come from East and West \(in other words, from around the world\), to sit at the same table as the great patriarchs of Israel- Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob- in the Kingdom of God.](#)" Jesus has not yet arrived at the point to know that the time is *right now*, but he articulates one of those end-of-history hopes that at the end all the dead will be raised and everyone will be equal in God's eyes.

Here's another centurion story. Pilate orders Jesus be crucified, but you know that it is centurions who nail him to the cross, and after whipping, torturing, and mocking him. They are also the ones who stand guard to make sure he dies. And right after Jesus breathes his last, we hear one of them say something. We would expect it to be a gloat in line with other centurions making fun of Jesus as a phony king... the kind of hateful gloat that would come back to haunt Rome if the resurrection was going to be about the nation of Israel. But what the centurion says is something of a confession of faith: "[Surely this man was of God! Surely, this was God's son!](#)"



And then, there is the centurion story found in Acts, which is really the second volume of Luke's Gospel. Peter, the Jewish disciples now forgiven of his denials, is spreading the good news of Jesus' resurrection to other Jews. A centurion named Cornelius summons him to his home. Not daring to disobey, Peter goes. The trip involves an overnight stay enroute. Peter does what is commonly done on warm evenings and sleeps on the roof of the house where he is staying. While asleep, he has a vision of a non-Kosher meal being lowered to him in a sheet and being told by God to eat up because this Gentile food is no longer considered unclean.

With this vision in mind, Peter goes the next day to share the Gospel with the centurion and his family. They all come to faith in Jesus.

In coming to faith, the centurion doesn't stop being Gentile. That's a big deal for us, so think about this. He doesn't stop being a Roman. He doesn't stop being a centurion. To enter the realm of God, he doesn't move from one nation to another, from one race to another, from one people of privilege to another. He enters into a realm where the rule of Law is the rule of love, a realm where

- one's heart is for compassion,
- one's agenda is justice,
- one's motivation is gratitude, and
- one's habit is reconciliation.

Most of us in this sanctuary are used to feeling some kind of daily privilege (whether it be of status, nationality, race, religion, or our superior way of seeing things), so let's remember that most of us in this sanctuary are also Gentiles and thus are the people for whom salvation was to be later, *not now*. We have open to us a realm that was once thought to come only for people like us only at the end of time.

So, let's hear afresh this good news for us. The Realm of God is not going to come when any nation gets its way, or when any political agenda wins out, or when we vote the right people in place or get the right people in power. The kingdom is already here. And we are citizens of this realm of God when we act like it and keep the Law that is not of any nation and are citizens of a kingdom that knows no borders. We are citizens of this realm when

- our heart is for compassion,
- our agenda is justice,
- our motivation is gratitude,
- and our habit is reconciliation.

†

I'll offer one more way in which chapter 28 of Matthew is shocking news then and good news today. It is the surprise that the greatest enemy to be overcome is not Rome, but *death itself*. Kingdoms come and go; nations rise and fall. Death is not defeated at the end of time when all the



dead are raised. Chapter 28 is telling us that death is defeated now, and the power of sin is broken already.

This is new. Yes, there are a couple of stories in the Hebrew Scriptures about individuals brought back to life and there is the New Testament story of Lazarus being brought back to life. We even have modern medical stories of those who are clinically dead being revived. What is new is that *Jesus is raised...* and *stays raised*. Jesus lives in our world right now, and he can be met and followed today where we live.

Can our minds and hearts be large enough to take in that God will never abandon us just as God did not abandon his son?

†

So, to sum up the shocking news then and good news today: The realm of God is not bound by borders or legislated by a government. No, the realm of God is *forever* and *today*. It is Already-News. The realm is known in baptism when all allegiances give way to an allegiance to God that is then shown when

- one's heart is for compassion,
- one's agenda is justice,
- one's motivation is gratitude,
- and one's habit is reconciliation.

May more and more citizens of nations,

- from east and west,
- from high places and low places,

hear and believe the good news

that Jesus is raised,

and then find their place in his right-now-and-eternal kingdom where

- the heart is for compassion,
- the agenda is justice,
- the motivation is gratitude,
- and the habit is reconciliation.

