

## **YOU CAN'T KEEP A GOOD MAN DOWN**

Matthew 28:1-10

What do you do when you don't know what to do? Where do you look for answers when life seems to ask questions that have no answers? Where do you turn when all hope seems lost? What do you do when your dreams turn to nightmares?

Several years ago a matriarch of the church I was pastoring was losing a painful battle to cancer. (As a pastor I have walked through the valley of death more times than I would like to count. It goes with the territory.) She fought valiantly, but it was painfully clear she was losing. Death could come at any moment. Hospice had been called to the house and I stayed in constant contact with the family.

The news came with a mid-morning phone call. I knew the voice on the other hand was a daughter of the matriarch and so I braced myself for the certain news of her passing. Hardly able to speak, the voice on the other end said, "Brother Kevin, he's gone. I can't believe he is gone. What are we going to do?"

Confused, I said, "What? Who's gone? What's happened? Has Mrs. Williamson died?"

"No brother Kevin, it's not mom, it's Johnny. He has been killed."

Johnny was Mrs. Williamson's ten year old great-grandson. That morning, while waiting for his school bus, a dump truck swerved, lost control, and ran over him, killing him instantly. Instead of planning a funeral for someone who had lived a long life, I was now planning a funeral for a young child.

"Kevin," the painful voice cried, "Why did God allow this to happen?"

I had no answer. There was no answer. A few days after Johnny's funeral, I stood beside Mrs. Williamson's casket, and cried. I still had no answer. To this day, I have no answer. The blank stares on some of the family made it clear they had lost hope. How could they pick up the pieces and keep going?

I imagine Jesus' disciples had the same sense of hopelessness as they looked up at Jesus hanging on a cross while blood poured from His hands, feet, and side.

Well, I am sure they felt hopeless, but they did not look up and see Jesus hanging because all but one (John) were scared for their own lives and were hiding while Jesus was dying. Usually, what we do when we don't know what to do is revert back to our most basic animal instinct...self preservation...survival.

But things were about to change. Nothing was ever going to be the same again.

## **You Can't Keep a Good Man Down**

One week earlier, Jesus was treated to a parade fit for a king, or the Super Bowl Champions, or the World Series Champions. By the following Friday the world was dark, the disciples were scared, and Jesus was being tortured. All hope seemed lost. But by early Sunday morning things were incredibly different. Not much had changed. Rome was still in charge. The disciples were still fearful for their own lives, an injustice like nothing in all of history, had still been carried out on an innocent man. But while not much had changed, everything had changed! Jesus was alive and that meant there was hope. Listen to how Matthew tells the story:

*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. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."*

*So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," He said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."<sup>1</sup>*

The way Jews kept time in Jesus' day is different than the way we keep time. For example, if the crucifixion happened today and Jesus would have died on a Friday and then appeared alive on Sunday, we would say He had been dead two days...Saturday and Sunday. However, in Jesus' day, any part of a day was counted as a day. Also, in Judaism, a new day started at 6:00 p.m. in the evening.

Jesus died sometime around 3:00 p.m. Friday afternoon. The Sabbath, Saturday, began at 6:00 p.m. Friday evening. Thus, the three hours Jesus was dead on Friday afternoon would have been counted as day one.

Jesus was in the tomb the entire second day, from 6:00 p.m. Friday to 6:00 p.m. Saturday. The third day, the day on which Jesus rose from the dead, would have begun at 6:00 p.m. Saturday evening. Matthew says the ladies went to the tomb at "dawn" Sunday morning. John says it was so early in the morning it was still dark.<sup>2</sup> Sometime between 6:00 p.m. Saturday evening and 6:00 a.m. Sunday morning, Jesus' resurrection took place.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 28:1-10.

<sup>2</sup> John 20:1.

<sup>3</sup> John says the women went to the tomb "while it was still dark" (John 20:1).

These women, Mary Magdalene and another woman named Mary, were the same women who cried at the foot of the cross while Jesus was dying.<sup>4</sup> It was the custom of the day for family and friends to visit the tombs of loved ones till the third day to make sure the deceased were really dead and to anoint them with oils. The ladies would not have visited the tomb during the Sabbath, so they were anxious to go on Sunday morning and continue the grieving process. In no way were they expecting what they encountered.

Palestine sits on a fault zone<sup>5</sup> and is prone to earthquakes. While the ladies were walking to the tomb a violent earthquake shakes the earth and rolls the stone in front of the entrance to the tomb away.<sup>6</sup> Along with the earthquake, an angel comes down and sits on the stone, terrifying the guards so much that they faint in fear. Usually, tombs were not guarded by Roman soldiers, especially tombs of accused criminals. The religious leaders requested this action out of fear that Jesus' disciples would try to steal the body and claim He had risen from the dead.

There is nothing in the story that suggests the ladies knew there would be guards present, or that they saw these events took place. All Matthew says is that when they arrived at the tomb the angel tells them Jesus is alive and invites them to go into the tomb and look for themselves. Mark describes the angel as a "young man dressed in a

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 27:56. In this verse the "other Mary" is identified as "Mary the mother of James and Joseph." Taking all four Gospels into account, the women who attended to Jesus at the cross and who visited the tomb were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, Salome the mother of James and John, Mary the mother of Jesus, Joanna the wife of Chuza, Suzanne, and several unnamed women.

<sup>5</sup> The "Jordan Valley Rift is part of a large fault zone that stretches northward from the entrance of the Gulf of Aqaba for over 683 miles to the foot of the Taurus range" (Clinton E. Arnold, General Editor. 2002. *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary*, vol. 1. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, p. 185.

<sup>6</sup> It has been widely observed that that the stone was rolled away, not to let Jesus out, but to let the women in.

white robe.”<sup>7</sup> I doubt that this angel had wings. Rather, he looked like a normal person except for how he was dressed.

Convinced Jesus was alive, the ladies hurry to tell the disciples. Somewhere along the way they are greeted by Jesus Himself and immediately fall down to worship Him.

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Sidebar

“Many scholars consider God’s choice of women as the first witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection to be one of the bedrock truths of the resurrection narratives and the historicity of the resurrection itself. It is unlikely that any Jew would have created such a story as fiction, for a variety of reasons. (1) Because of the debated status of a woman in Judaism at the time, there was disagreement among some of the rabbis as to the acceptability of a woman giving testimony in a court of law. This would make it much less likely that a Jew would fictionalize a woman’s testimony in the case of Jesus’ resurrection. (2) The cowardly picture painted of the men hiding away in Jerusalem, while the women boldly carry out their responsibilities to prepare Jesus’ body for burial, would certainly offend the sensibilities of Jewish readers and doubtless would not have been recorded unless it were true. (3) The listing of the names of the women weighs against being fiction, because these women were known in early Christian fellowship and would not have easily been associated with a false account. (4) Jesus’ appearances to these women with debated status lend credibility to the account, because again, they would be unlikely selections for a fictionalized account trying to be understood as believable.

For these reasons and more, the selection of women as the first witnesses yields high credibility to the resurrection narratives and the resurrection itself. It is vitally important for us to build our faith on the solid foundation of the historically verifiable truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” (Clinton E. Arnold, General Editor. 2002. *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, vol. 1. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, p. 188.)

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There are a lot of things that can be said about the resurrection. Chances are you have heard hundreds of sermons about the importance of this event and the historical accuracy of Jesus rising from the dead. There is no need for me to rehash all that and there is nothing new I can add to what has already been written.

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<sup>7</sup> Mark 16:5. Mark also suggests that by the time the ladies got to the grave site, the angel was not sitting on the stone but was inside the tomb.

In my opinion there is only one meaning behind Jesus' resurrection from the dead. There is only one lesson, out of which all other lessons and applications flow. *The resurrection equals hope!* That's it, nothing more and nothing less, everything else that has been preached and written flow out of that one simple truth. Because Jesus is alive there is hope.

Like everything else in our society, Easter has been commercialized. Easter marks the beginning of spring. It's a chance to hunt for eggs filled with candy and to buy new clothes. It's an opportunity to send cards to friends and to eat chocolate. It's a day for families to go to church and then go home for a wonderful Easter lunch. It means a long weekend and possibly a spring vacation. Easter is a wonderful time and I enjoy all those trappings of the secular side of Easter. I don't condemn any of those practices. I simply want to remind us that above and beyond all those things Easter is about hope, and the proper response to the hope we have in Jesus is to stop what we are doing and worship the One who gives us hope, just like the ladies did on that first Easter morning.

## **Hope**

As a pastor I have done my fair share of funerals. They are never easy, but there is a stark contrast between funerals of believers and funerals of non-believers. I have been involved in funerals that seemed more like a party than a death, and I have been involved in funerals that seemed so dark you didn't know if the bereaved would ever overcome their grief. I have been to funerals where there was more laughter than tears and ones where the sorrow was so thick I have been afraid the casket would fall off its

stand because so many people were hanging on it. It's a strange irony that the first three letters in the word funeral spell *fun* when they are anything but that.

I am convinced, however, that the difference in the funerals I have participated in is a difference of hope. Some people have it; others' don't. And when you have experienced hope you have experienced the same thing the ladies experienced on that first Easter morning: "afraid yet filled with joy."<sup>8</sup> Hope doesn't remove you from the present circumstance. Hope helps you see above and beyond the present circumstance. Hope isn't being naïve. Hope is being confident that God is in control even when things are chaotic. Hope isn't living in denial. Hope is living in the reality that God is sovereign. Hope, however, extends before and beyond the grave.

Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ we have hope of a redeemed past.

Have you ever had a dream that was so bad, and so real, when you woke up and realized it was all a dream you felt relieved? Don't you wish real life was like that? Don't you wish you could go back and do things differently? All of us have things in our past that we wish were not there.

Here is the good news: *Because Jesus is alive He can reach back and make our past right.* It's called grace, and it's more than forgiving and forgetting, it's taking our past and turning it around and upside down, using it to make us who we are today. No matter how invaluable, or corrupt, or abusive our past may have been, through Jesus, God forgives it, forgets about it, and uses it to make us valuable and incorruptible. Listen to these words of the Apostle Paul:

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 28:8.

*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose. For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those He predestined, He also called; those He called, He also justified; those He justified, He also glorified.*

*What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all—how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? <sup>36</sup> As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”*

*No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.<sup>9</sup>*

Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ we have hope of a meaningful present.

Jesus told the ladies, “Go and tell My brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see Me.”<sup>10</sup> Though they were afraid, and though Mark says at first they did not tell anyone,<sup>11</sup> eventually they could not hold the news in any longer. Luke says they did tell the disciples that Jesus was alive, but they did not believe them. After all, it made no sense, and women were prone to speak nonsense.<sup>12</sup>

Peter wanted to check the story out for himself and so he runs to the tomb. Eventually all the disciples believe and they all were witnesses of His resurrected body, and the group that once feared for its life, became filled with confidence and changed

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<sup>9</sup> Romans 8:28-39.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 28:10.

<sup>11</sup> Mark 16:8.

<sup>12</sup> Luke 24:11. In Jesus’ day, women had low social standing. Women’s testimonies were not deemed worthy to be used in court. The very fact that Jesus first appeared to women shows His willingness to break with the norms of the day.

their world. They spent the rest of their lives traveling the world, telling others about the resurrected Jesus. As a result of their zeal, most of them died as horrible a death as Jesus did. But none of that mattered. Jesus was alive! Now they had a reason to live. Now their lives made sense. Now there was a purpose for the present.

Once your past is redeemed your present takes on new meaning. You are a child of God! God has a purpose and a plan for your life. There is a reason you are where you are, doing what you are doing. Your life makes sense. Your life has meaning. Today is another day to live for Him. Today is another day to share the love of Christ with those around you. You have been forgiven to forgive. You have been loved to love. You have been redeemed to share redemption with others.

Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ we have hope of a brighter tomorrow.

The Apostle Paul put it this way:

*But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that He raised Christ from the dead. But He did not raise Him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.*

*But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.<sup>13</sup>*

No matter how bad things may be right now, in Christ there is hope for a brighter, and better, tomorrow. "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing

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<sup>13</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:12-22.

with the glory that will be revealed in us.”<sup>14</sup> Just like today, whatever you are facing is temporary. Life is temporary. Things will get better. The sun will shine tomorrow. In Jesus we have eternal, and abundant, life.

The meaning of Easter is hope that compels me to worship the risen Christ. The hope Jesus brings is the hope of a redeemed past, a meaningful present, and a brighter tomorrow.

## **CONCLUSION**

One day a friend of mine, an older gentleman, was asked what he wanted people to say at his funeral. His response was classic. He said, “I want them to say, ‘Look, he’s moving.’”

Have you ever known of someone who died and then came back to life? I am not talking about a near death experience, or an experience of seeing a bright light. I mean dead, dead for a few days, and then they come back to life. Have you ever, in your life time, experienced such a thing?

I have...well, sort of. Let me explain.

It was a Thanksgiving morning. Our neighbor from across the street knocked on our door in a panic. Frantically, she told me that her friend’s teenage daughter was involved in a terrible automobile accident. Her daughter’s friend was in intensive care at a local hospital. Another teenage girl was driving, and she had been killed.

I immediately went to the hospital. The mom was almost inconsolable. Her daughter had tubes running all through her. Things did not look good. The mom was

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<sup>14</sup> Romans 8:18.

also upset about the other girl who had died, but was relieved her daughter had survived. I said I would go to the funeral home to see the other family. Before I left the hospital I had prayer with the girl and her mom.

Two days later, this time late afternoon, my neighbor banged on the door again. There had been a mistake. The girl in the hospital was not her friend's daughter. Her friend's daughter was the girl who had been killed; and the family who thought their daughter was dead was the girl in the hospital, alive and well enough to write her real name on a note pad. It was a bizarre case of mistaken identity. I performed the funeral for the deceased, spoke at a memorial service at the local high school, ministered to the family of the girl who survived, and was interviewed by *Inside Edition*.

It is obvious how the mom felt, who thought her child was alive, only to discover her child had died. But can you imagine how the other family felt? They were at the funeral home, preparing to receive visitors, with no hope of ever talking to their child again, when they learned their daughter was alive! I can't imagine the range of emotions they must have gone through during those few days over the Thanksgiving weekend.

I imagine Jesus' mother went through the same emotions. One day you feel hopeless, and the next day hope is alive. Now, all the past makes sense, the present takes on new meaning, and tomorrow will be better than today. That's the hope Easter brings.

Do you have that hope, or are you still dealing with the pain of the past?

Do you have that hope, or are you barely hanging on, trying to make it through one more day?

Do you have that hope, or are you afraid to face the future?

In Jesus Christ, and through Jesus Christ, there is always hope.