

## Prayer

We praise You this day, Almighty God and Lord of All, for Jesus Christ was raised from the dead not just on the first Easter Day but for all time. We praise You, Jesus, for defeating the powers of death; and we thank you for persisting with Your plan of Salvation until it was complete. Almighty God, what You have done transforms our lives! Jesus Christ, we stand in awe of Your resurrection! Come, Holy Spirit, come! ALLELUIA!

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

- *Worship the Lord for His victory over all evil and death!*
- *Worship the Lord for His awesome power and majesty!*
- *Worship the Lord for the evidence of His faithfulness and love!*
- *Worship the Lord for His creation of New Life in Christ!*
- *Worship the Lord for the evidence that Jesus is alive!*
- *Worship the Lord because He has bought us life in abundance!*

## Meditation

*'The Lord has done great things for us, and we are glad' (Psalm 126:3)*

We are glad because of the love of our God:

Jesus has been raised from the dead!  
Angels have proclaimed the Good News!  
Satan has been roundly defeated!  
Love has won a great victory over sin!  
Mercy is triumphant over judgement!  
Faith has been fully justified!  
Grace has been shown in action!

We are glad because of the love of our God,  
Which has been made known to us in Christ Jesus  
Through His life, His death, and His glorious resurrection!  
It is true! We believe, and we are saved: ALLELUIA!

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## Bible passage - Matthew 28:1-10

<sup>1</sup> After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. <sup>2</sup> Suddenly there was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven, approached, rolled back the stone, and sat on it. <sup>3</sup> His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing was white as snow. <sup>4</sup> The guards were shaken with fear of him and became like dead men.

<sup>5</sup> But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid, for I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. <sup>6</sup> He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come and see the place where He lay. <sup>7</sup> Go quickly then, and tell His disciples "He has risen from the dead, and He is also going ahead of you to Galilee, where you will see Him." Listen, for I have told you.'

<sup>8</sup> So, fearful yet overjoyed, they left the tomb quickly, and ran to tell His disciples. <sup>9</sup> Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' They approached Him, took hold of His feet, and

worshipped Him. <sup>10</sup> Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and they will see me there.'

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## Bible Study

### Review

Thank God for Easter day! Thank God for the resurrection of Jesus Christ! Thank God that Jesus walked the pathway of suffering for us and took on Himself the burden of sin, human wrongdoing and all evil. Thank God that He has made a way for us to be reconciled to God, and we may be confident that we are loved, appreciated and blessed by our Maker both in this life and beyond death for all eternity!

When writing these studies I rarely write personally so that the focus is on the text of Scripture, not me. Today, I make an exception. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the heart of my faith, and I write because He has saved me. In baptism, I have publicly accepted His death and life as my death and life, and every Bible study and devotion I write in this series has its source in Easter day. All I do, and every moment of my time, is my testimony to the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

I know for myself that Christ's victory over all sin and death makes all the difference in the world. It enables me to know that my life has purpose and meaning, and that He will guide me to do His good and perfect will. It means that I have confidence that God is control of my past, present and future, and love's ultimate triumph is never in dispute. It also means that when I look ahead beyond death, I know that He will take me to Himself and keep me in His Glory. I know very well that many people in this world do not want these things or this faith, but they are all I need. If I live for myself, I am to be pitied; but if I live for Him who died for me by faith, and in the light of this revelation, then I am truly fulfilled. This is my testimony, and it is my prayer that you will know these things too. It is a matter of life and death; I urge you to choose life.

The passage for today is truly remarkable. Each Gospel records a significantly different account of what happened and we need to be respectful of the fact that people tend to report the same incident in vastly different ways. For this reason, it is unwise to try and collate a single record of what happened next, and we must let Matthew's account speak to us as it stands.

Our passage describes how two of the women went to attend to the tomb early, most likely as the sun rose. As they arrived, they were met with a thunderous earthquake. This was God's coming to the earth in resurrection power! The women reported that an angel of the Lord came and rolled back the stone in front of the tomb and sat on it (28:2). The awesome sight of the angel was too much for the guards, and they fled (28:4), leaving the two women standing before the angel. The angel's message to the two women is astonishing, but entirely predictable. Jesus had told his disciples that He would rise and go ahead of them to Galilee (17:9, 26:32), so all that was needed was for the disciples to be convinced that Jesus' words were about to come true, despite what had happened.

Matthew says that the two women were *'fearful yet overjoyed'*. It is easy to understand why! They must surely have experienced the most incomprehensible mixture of emotions as they ran to tell the disciples! From their point of view, the most wonderful part of the day must have been what happened next, for Jesus appeared to two women, alive, and they worshipped Him (28:8-10). The message they had to convey was confirmed by the Master Himself! The empty tomb was an important part of the evidence of the resurrection, but for the disciples as a whole, the power of the resurrection would be shown in the fulfilment of Jesus' own words, and their coming meeting with Him in Galilee.

Let each of us who read these words do so with awe, for this is real history. The resurrection is the awesome evidence of God's love for each one of us, and like the first disciples, He calls us to meet with Him now!

### Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Going to the tomb, the angel and the guards (28:1-4)
- The women and the angel (28:5-7)
- Meeting with Jesus on the way to the disciples (28:8-10)

### Going Deeper

#### ***Going to the tomb, the angel and the guards (28:1-4)***

On Good Friday, Jesus was found guilty, was tried, was crucified, died and was buried, and by the end of the day, the Jewish authorities had used a quota of Roman soldiers at their disposal, with the agreement of Pilate, to seal the tomb and place a guard. The following day was a Sabbath; a day of rest on which nothing happened. The Resurrection story begins with the dawn of the first day of the working week after the Sabbath, our Sunday.

The two women, Mary Magdalene and 'the other Mary' (possibly Mary the mother of James and Joseph) went to the tomb early in the morning, but Matthew does not say anything about why they had come, except to 'see the tomb' (28:1). The focus of Matthew's story is on what God had done by His power and authority, and the resurrection of Jesus, not on the details such as the anointing of his body or its position in the tomb.

As they arrived, two things happened which would have scared the wits out of any of us, let alone two disciples in a state of shock at what had happened to Jesus. There was an earthquake, and an angel appeared. Earlier, an earthquake had opened the tombs after Jesus died on the Friday afternoon, so this earthquake signified the continuing work of God after the Sabbath. Then the Angel of the Lord, absent from the story of Jesus' life since his birth (Matt 1&2), removed the stone from the entrance of the tomb despite the presence of the guard. We can hardly imagine the scene, and the guards, soldiers who were usually on ceremonial duty in the Temple, were frightened, as we would say, 'to death'.

The whole fearsome scene reminds us of the prophecies of Daniel. In one of his visions, Daniel saw the coming of 'one like a Son of Man' (7:13), a figure Matthew equates with Jesus, being presented to the 'Ancient of Days' whose appearance was 'white as snow' (7:9). In scripture, the appearance of the angel of the Lord is like the appearance of God Himself, which is why the angel displayed God's glory, demonstrating to all that this work was God's work, and His sitting on the stone symbolised regal authority, magnificence and power. God was present through the Angel at the birth of Jesus (1:20f.), and He was also present through the Angel at the completion of Jesus' earthly life; not at His death, but at His Resurrection.

#### ***The women and the message of the angel (28:5-7)***

Yet within all this resplendent glory, nobody saw Jesus 'rise'. What we have in scriptures are the wonderful stories of the experiences of people who observed what happened and discovered that He has indeed risen. If you read these notes from a few days ago concerning what happened immediately after the death of Jesus (27:51ff), you will find that I hinted at the possibility of 'Resurrection' happening immediately after Jesus' death. Matthew firstly tells us that God the Father opened the tombs of saints immediately after Jesus died (27:52), then he appears cautious about the whole matter in the following verse (27:53) where he says they did not appear in Jerusalem until 'after His Resurrection'. We can either be confused by this apparent discrepancy, or rejoice in the glory of an event so powerful that it stretched the limits of the Gospel writers' faith, memory, and writing skills! Resurrection was and is something that goes far beyond human understanding, and the first disciples were the first of generations who would try to describe the indescribable; led to do so by being touched themselves by the saving power and magnificence of the Resurrection.

The women present at the tomb were clearly as petrified by the whole experience as the soldiers of the Guard; but they were to be witnesses of the work of God, and were able to hear as the angel spoke to them. The women were invited to look into the tomb and see for themselves that the tomb was empty (28:6). It is almost impossible to imagine how they must have felt as they did what they were asked (which we assume) and it is even more extraordinary that Matthew records the most important event in his whole Gospel as being witnessed by two women; theirs would be the primary testimony to God's Resurrection power in Jesus Christ! However well known they may have been to the disciples, they had no legal authority as witnesses within the religious or social structures of the day, and we only know for certain who one of the women was! Yet paradoxically, this makes the whole story sound more truthful. Matthew may have had to swallow a great deal of pride and shed no small amount of his own cultural baggage in order to write this in his Gospel; he proved to be a man of truth as well as Godliness.

The message from the angel (28:5) is the first we know of what has happened to Jesus, though we could well assume that He had been raised from everything Matthew has led us to believe so far. The angel told the women He had a message for the disciples; Jesus had been 'raised from the dead', He was already on His way to Galilee and this is where the disciples should go to see Him (28:7). This confirms what we picked up from Matthew's story earlier, which was that the Resurrection of Jesus may well have happened earlier, for He was already on his way (28:7) by the time the Angel spoke.

The fact that Jesus went to Galilee is also important. Galilee was the place where Jesus' ministry started and it would now be the place where everything would finish. Following the lead of the prophets, Matthew presented the north of Israel as the place where 'light' came from, for example, as in Isaiah 9:1,2, '*... Galilee of the nations; the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light*'. He also saw Jerusalem as a place that had '*slaughtered the prophets*' (Neh. 9:26, see Matt. 21:35, 22:6), and this was where the Saviour had been judged, mocked and slaughtered. In Resurrection power, Jesus left the place that symbolised all

that was wrong about the religious system that was supposed to bring salvation to the world and had failed. By walking to Galilee, Jesus began the walk of the Early Church away from Jerusalem and into the wider Jewish world and eventually into the Gentile world.

### ***Meeting with Jesus on the way to the disciples (28:8-10)***

The women ran to tell the disciples the amazing news of what they had heard and seen, filled with a mixture of fear and great joy. They clearly understood something of the incredible significance of what had happened and it is presumptuous of us to think that the fear and joy they felt was confusion due to the extraordinary events they had witnessed; an opinion that has led some in the past to doubt that the two women did indeed see the risen Christ (28:9). These two emotions of fear and joy are today understood to be two of the most important human emotions, occurring together with a rush of adrenalin through the body. This was something that would have focussed their minds considerably because of the enormity of everything they had seen, and it makes the whole story of what happened more real, and unlikely to be false.

When Jesus suddenly appeared to the women, with a word of greeting that sounds somewhat formal in most Bible translations (frequently, 'greetings') was, in fact, far more casual and closer to 'hello' (see 28:9). The women were already in a heightened sense of awareness, and responded by falling down in obeisance before the risen Lord, taking hold of His feet. Matthew is not at all concerned to report this physical contact, for him, the Risen Lord is real and to be worshipped, and this is all that matters. Jesus' words were stunningly simple, characteristic of all that Matthew had reported of Him in His ministry; coming straight to the point with care and compassion for the individuals before Him. His words were reassuringly the same as the message spoken by the angel of the Lord, giving the women confirmation of what they would have to say later to the disciples. He also added those simple words '*do not fear*', which had been a feature of His early teaching (6:34, 10:31, for example) and this immediately dealt with the more negative of their two feelings. It would have sounded like sweet reassurance to their ears.

Two women had experienced for the first time what countless millions have since come to know and discover to be the very heart of their life and Faith; the presence of the Risen Christ in power and authority. For Matthew, this was enough, and little more needs reporting.

## Application

Easter Day is a source of real joy and eternal thanks. It is the proof that God's love does indeed triumph over Satan and all evil. It is the confirmation we need that death, the ultimate weapon of evil to separate us from our maker, has been defeated. It verifies that God is able and willing to forgive and restore His people; and so much more! There is a great deal to explore within this passage, but we must acknowledge that all of this is central to the history of God's saving in the world. Before Good Friday and Easter, the Bible story always looks forward to what God would do to restore His relationship with people and creation, broken at 'the Fall'. Then, after the great event, and in the books after the Gospels, Scripture proceeds as follows. Firstly, it describes the response of the disciples to the Resurrection leading up to the coming of the Holy Spirit and beyond. Secondly, it tells the story of the preaching of the Gospel, focussed on the death and resurrection of Jesus and the consequences of this for the new people of God, the church.

There has never been another day like Easter day in all history. Christians know that the resurrection is real because they have found that Christ is indeed alive. Other people have either never come across this supreme revelation of God, or they reject it because it has never been adequately explained to them, or because they actively reject it for their own reasons. What no one can do is to dispute the fact that the events of the first Easter day fundamentally changed world history. Whilst others debate the meaning of the resurrection and pour over the details, people of faith accept the power of Easter Day and the revelation of God's love for His Son Jesus, and for all people. Together with Good Friday, the evidence of Jesus' death and resurrection provides us with all we need for faith in the all-sufficient saving power of God.

Yet it is not possible for us to come to the end of the path of discovery that lies after Easter day. Once opened out to the possibilities of God's resurrection power, all things become possible within the will of God. Matthew knew this, and concluded his Gospel not with a long description of 'what happened next', however much we might think we want to know this, but with two pertinent and basic pieces of information. Firstly, he describes the Jewish plan to cover up the story, and exposes it as a fraud. Then, he tells us about the final meeting between Jesus and the disciples, which directed them forwards in God's strength to do His work and spread the Good News of Salvation (28:18-20). We will read about these tomorrow.

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# Discipleship

## **Questions** (for use in groups)

1. Put into your own words what you think happened at the resurrection, and what you believe it means.
2. Does the appearance of angels at the resurrection help you understand what happened? Why do you think they appeared?
3. What more would you like to know about the resurrection, and why do you want to know it?

## **Topics covered by this text**

- *The known facts of the resurrection*
- *The role of the women in the resurrection*
- *The role of the angel in the resurrection*
- *The first appearance of Jesus to the disciples*

## **Personal comments by author**

*It is a great privilege to write about the stories of the resurrection. This one great event in history has changed the world for ever, and as individuals, we must surely stand in awe of the incredible power and significance of what happened on that day. We only have small snapshots into what happened, and these are all from a human perspective and it is easy for some to pick holes in the accounts that have been passed down to us. If we were presented today with a consistent detailed account that was identical in each Gospel, then we would surely face a far more credible charge of 'fix'. As it is, we have a collection of deeply human stories that represent the perspectives of all those who were around at the time. They may differ in significant ways, but they speak of a real and profoundly moving event, and there is absolutely no doubt that what happened that day changed the world for ever.*

## **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *The day of Resurrection is celebrated every Sunday, and we forget too easily that Sunday was chosen as the Christian day of Worship because of this (it is not the Sabbath day!). How then can we best express the joy of Resurrection every Sunday?*
- *Our study today celebrates the greatest day in the church's calendar, yet how does it affect your own life? Try to find a way of expressing the joy of the Risen Lord Jesus in other ways than eating chocolate! For example, say a special grace before your meal.*

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## **Final Prayer**

All praise be to You Lord Jesus Christ. You are our Lord, You are our Saviour, You are the Risen Christ. Bring us back in spirit to the garden tomb from which You were raised, so that we too may experience Resurrection joy and gladness; and may we know more of Your power, Your Salvation and Your Love, both now and in eternity. AMEN