No More Doubting
Matthew:27:62-28:20

As my girls will tell you, one of the joys of having a pastor for a dad, is that you get dragged into endless old churches. We'll be passing through a town or walking through a village, spot an old church and go, 'Let's take a look inside'! Which, as you can imagine, is great fun for teenage girls!

But alongside old churches are their graveyards – and graveyards are fascinating places, aren't they? Because behind each headstone or monument is a story. But of all burial places anywhere, none has told a story like that of Jesus of Nazareth's, has it? Because his tomb doesn't just tell a story about him, it tells a story that everyone of us gets caught up in.

Read Matthew 27:62-28:20

Whose Tomb Was It?
Now, if you know the story of Jesus' death you probably know the answer to that question. Just before today's passage, Matthew tells us that a man named Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish council, took Jesus' dead body and laid it in his own new tomb. So you could say, 'Whose tomb was it? It was Joseph's tomb.' Except that's not the question I'm asking – what I want you to think about this morning is, whose body was laid in this tomb? Whose tomb did this man-made cave, cut out of the rock, with its massive boulder sealing it, become? If they had engraved a name on that rock, as we do on headstones today, what would have been written there? Here lies buried… who?

Look at verse 62, 'The next day, that is after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate.' Now, that's an interesting collection of people to come together on a Sabbath day, isn't it? I mean, the chief priests were Sadduccees, they were the theological liberals, and the social elite. Then there were the Pharisees, the theological conservatives, who considered themselves the people's people, the populists. And then there's Pilate, the gentile Roman governor. And the one thing these very different men had in common was a mutual dislike, a hatred even, for one another.

But it wasn't the only thing. You see, what would persuade these Jewish leaders, who disliked each other, to meet with the representative of the gentile occupying power, who they loathed, on the Passover Sabbath, one of their most holy days? Well, it was the fact that they were also united in their opposition to Jesus. And if you think about it, sadly, things can be the same today, can't they? Because whether from the politically left or right, from the morally conservative or liberal, from the religious or irreligious, there is something about Jesus, the real Jesus, not the Jesus of our imagination, the one we make in our image, who says the nice stuff we like, but the real one, who says the deeply counter-cultural things that he says, that provokes opposition from across the spectrum.

And they come to Pilate, v63, 'and said, "Sir…" In fact, the word Matthew uses for *Sir* there is the word, *kyrie*, which could also be translated *Lord*, and that's a word that elsewhere Matthew reserves for Jesus. So can you see the irony of their interaction with Pilate? The religious leaders have rejected Jesus as their Lord, they've crucified him, but they end up giving that title to Pilate, to the

representative of the foreign occupying power. They exchange their real Lord for a Roman one. You see, the truth is we will always give ourselves to something as our Lord, won't we? And the question isn't whether or not you and I will give our allegiance to something or someone, it's what that thing will be. Something or someone will always take the ultimate place in our lives – whether, as here, that's about wanting power and control, or what others think of us, or our personal comfort. And whatever it is will end up owning us and controlling us. And so if you're here this morning, and you're not yet a Christian, and if Jesus is not your Lord, then think about who or what is. What is it that currently occupies that place of Lord in your life? And what will be the outcome if its rule in your life is left unchallenged?

But then look what they say to Pilate: v63 again, "Sir, we remember how that imposter said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.'" So, what would these men have written on Jesus' headstone? Here lies the body of an imposter, a deceiver, a fraudster. Here lies the body of someone who tried to get you to believe something that wasn't true, who wanted to sell you a lie.

So, imagine you're standing outside Jesus' tomb this morning, is that whose tomb this is? Jesus the imposter? Well, of course, these leaders aren't alone in thinking so. Karl Marx famously said that religion is the opium of the people – that like morphine or heroin it gives people pleasant illusions, that it makes us feel better in the troubles of our now, but robs us of the power to change our now. That ultimately religion deceives. And in that thinking, if Christianity is the drug, then Christ is the dealer. A seller of false hopes and falsehoods. More recently the atheist Richard Dawkins described religion as a virus of the mind that, like any other virus, hurts and harms. And so in that reckoning Jesus would be akin to a doctor who deliberately goes round infecting people – someone who says he's here to help you, but instead he harms you.

Now, we might recoil from the ideas of a Marx or a Dawkins. But if you think about it, you don't need to be that extreme, do you? You only need to think that life is about you, and that the great end in life is about making much of you, you only have to fall in step with the prevailing Western world-view of the meaning of life, to find yourself at cross-purposes with Jesus, to think that he is wrong and you are right.

But that's not the only option Matthew presents us with here. You don't have to believe Jesus was an imposter, or a teacher of something that's wrong or misguided, you could simply think he was a good man, maybe even someone sent from God, who was killed too soon. After all, that's what the two Marys think as they come to the tomb, and the angel who meets them says, v5, "I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified."

And maybe that's what they would have engraved on the rock. Here lies the body of Jesus, a good man, a great man, but a man none the less, a man bounded by time and space, a man crucified and killed. That's whose body lies in this tomb.

But Christianity says something very different from those two options, doesn't it? That Jesus was certainly no imposter or fraudster and that he was so much more than a good man, sent from God, who was killed. And the reason it says so much more is because of what the women found that first Easter Sunday morning.

What Did They Find?

So Pilate says to the religious leaders, v65, "You have a guard of soldiers. Go make [the tomb] as secure as you can." So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.' So, because they think Jesus was a fraud, they think the people they need to worry about are *outside* the tomb. They think the tomb and its contents need to be protected from his followers. But of course, it's not the ones outside the tomb that they should be worrying about. It's the one on the inside. It's the Master, not the followers they should be concerned about. The problem is that no amount of soldiers and stone and sealing wax can contain him.

And Matthew tells us, 28v1, 'Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.' So Matthew is saying, this event happened and here's the day and the time of day it happened - early on the Sunday morning of the Passover weekend. But he's also saying something more, isn't he? Because as these women walk to the tomb as dawn is breaking on the first day of a new week, a new age, a whole new era is about to dawn, and God is about to start making everything new. And he's going to begin by overturning death. By overturning the very thing that blights our lives.

And Matthew says that an angel, shining like lightening, descended from heaven, and rolled back the stone in front of the tomb and, scared out of their skins, the soldiers became like dead men. And how ironic is that! Because the ones who think they're alive, these fit, active young men, act like they're dead, whilst inside the tomb the one who was dead comes alive.

And the women get to the tomb and the angel says to them, v5-6, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here." In other words, you've come to a tomb, to a place of death, looking for a dead man. You've come to sit with and pay your respects to a corpse, but ladies, that's not what you'll find here. That's not whose tomb this is. Verse 6, "He has risen, as he said. Come see the place where he lay." He was no imposter or deceiver when he said he would rise, he's done just as he said; and he's not just a good man whose body you want to pay your respects to. He's alive – come see the place where his body used to lie. Come and see an empty tomb.

Verse 7, "Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead." And of everything that you could say about Christ, or about Christianity, that is the deal breaker isn't it? Because as they leave the tomb, Jesus meets them, and they take hold of his feet and worship him. So this was no spectral illusion, this was no spiritual resurrection. This was physical. This was Jesus, who was crucified, who was killed, whose body was laid in the tomb, and he has risen from the dead. That's what Christianity stands or falls on.

But did this happen? Or is it all make believe? I mean, angels, soldiers falling over, a dead man coming to life. Is it really believable, or instead of *Jesus the Imposter*, or *Jesus the good man crucified*, should it be inscribed above the tomb, here lies Jesus, the man *who the disciples claimed falsely was alive again*? In other words, instead of Jesus being a fraudster, was it the disciples?

Well, if you were perpetrating a fraud, why would you shoot yourself in the foot by having women as witnesses? Why make these two women, Mary and Mary, whose evidence – simply because they were women - everyone knew stood for nothing – why make them your first witnesses? Unless of course that's what happened? And why would the men they ran back to give their lives spreading the message of Jesus' resurrection, if all along they knew they had Jesus' body stashed away in a cupboard somewhere? And if they didn't have the body, why didn't the Jewish or Roman leaders bring it out to stop this troublesome new movement in its tracks? And why would the disciples, men and women, all of them good law-abiding Jews, worship as God a man they knew to be dead? You couldn't make that up, could you? More importantly, you wouldn't, and they wouldn't, and didn't, make it up.

Instead, what happened at dawn, on this Sunday morning 2000 years ago, told them whose empty tomb it really was that they came to, and as a result their lives – and our lives – were changed forever.

Why Does it Matter?
Some 20 or 30 years later when Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, he writes this of Jesus, he 'was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ [Jesus Messiah] our Lord' (Romans 1:4). And that's whose body this tomb contained; that's who greeted the two Marys as they turned away from the empty tomb; that's whose feet they grasped; that's who they knelt in front of and worshipped. The Son of God, the Christ, the Messiah – God's anointed king; the Lord. That's what his resurrection from the dead tells us should be inscribed above his tomb. Here used to lie the body of the Son of God, Jesus Christ our Lord, but whom God raised from the dead.

And it's because that's who he is, and because this event happened, it's because this is who these first disciples met alive again, that it had the impact that it had on their lives, and transformed them. And it's why it can transform our lives too. You see, let me ask you a question: like these women, and the other disciples, have you met him? Have you met the risen Lord Jesus? Now, I don't mean a physical encounter like theirs, but do you live in the good of encountering him? Does the truth of the resurrection of the Son of God, Jesus Christ our Lord, permeate your life?

I mean, look what it did for them. Firstly, they knew an ***awe-filled joy***. The angel says to the two Marys, v5, "Do not be afraid." Then Matthew tells us, v8, 'So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy." Then Jesus met them and said to them, v10, "Do not be afraid." You see, when you know that Jesus has

been raised from the dead, when you know that he loved you enough to go to the cross, and die for your sins, and that God raised him from the dead, proving his sacrifice was enough, and that you are now a forgiven and dearly loved child of God, you can live unafraid. You don't need to live in fear of what might happen, or of your circumstances changing, or of bad things coming your way, because you know that whatever happens, Christ has been raised from the dead, your greatest enemies of sin and death have been conquered. And if God loves you this much, that he would give his son for you and raise him from the dead, you know he will never abandon you.

And so instead of being filled with fear like the soldiers, or reacting out of fear like the leaders, you can be filled with joy like these women, a joy mixed with a very different kind of fear, an awe, a fear of God, not of circumstances, or of life, a deep understanding that he is God and you are not, that you are weak but he is strong, that you are bound by death, but Jesus is the author of life; that you are the creature and he is the Creator. A fear and a wonder that sets you free from every other fear. And that's why the dawning of this first Easter Sunday can mean a new dawn for you, because his resurrection from the dead means a new day can start for you, you can know hope in your present circumstance, you can know that your personal failure and brokenness don't need to define you. That whilst your problems might seem as impenetrable as the rock before this tomb, and that your life seems surrounded by enemy soldiers, you know that Christ's resurrection power at work in your life is far greater. And that brings joy.

Secondly, Matthew tells us in v9, that the two Marys 'took hold of his feet ***and worshipped him***.' Then in v17 he tells us that when the disciples saw him 'they worshipped him.' Now, as I said earlier, if all of us worship something, if something is going to be our Lord, then Christ's resurrection from the dead doesn't just enable us to live fear free, it will also change what or who we worship. You see, when you know what this event says about Jesus, that as Paul says, it declares him to be our Lord, then all this other stuff we're tempted to worship: power, money, success, image, reputation, its hold on us slips as you realise, he's the Lord, he's the one, the only one, worthy of my life and my all.

Thirdly, ***they spread the news***. These two women tell the other disciples and the other disciples go out into the world and tell the world. And whilst the religious leaders start spreading untruths, the disciples are so changed, their fear has been so conquered, that they tell everyone, everywhere, that Christ has been raised from the dead. You see, we all preach something, don't we? Not just with our words, but with our lives, with our priorities, with how we spend our time and our money. Just like you don't get a choice as to whether you worship or not, so you don't get a choice as to whether you preach or not. It's what message your life and your words are going to spread that you get a choice over.

And we could spend our lives spreading the message that having more, and enjoying comfort, or living for my pleasure, or having a great marriage and family, or enjoying career success, or maximising profit, that this is what life is all about. Or we can encounter the risen Jesus and know, 'no, that's not what life is about – he's what life is about, freedom from guilt, forgiveness of sins, abundant

life, life from the dead, fear conquering joy, a deep awe, and right worship: that's what life is about. And like them spend our lives joyfully spreading that message by how we live and what we say. And that's a much better vision to live for than the American or British or French or Swiss or whatever Dream.

But whether it's an awe-filled joy, or life long worship, or living out a resurrection message, it's Jesus' resurrection from the dead that can give you the courage to keep going when you feel like quitting. You see, that's Jesus' parting promise to these disciples and to us, isn't it? Verse 20, "I am with you always, to the end of the age." It's because Christ is risen, it's because death has no hold on him, that whatever you face, however tough things become, he's there; he will never leave you nor forsake you.

And as I finish, I just want you to see something really honest that Matthew writes. Jesus appears again to the disciples, they worship him, but then Matthew adds, v17, 'But some doubted.' Now why does Matthew include that there? If he's trying to persuade you and me to believe this, why does he says, but you know what, some doubted? Well firstly, because it's true, clearly some of them did struggle to comprehend that this was actually all happening, that a man really could be raised from the dead. And maybe that's you. And if it is, that's also why Matthew tells us this. Because you've got to grapple with this. Because we all know the dead don't rise – so if he did rise then it changes everything, it really is life-transforming.

You see, we all live by our beliefs, don't we? And if you doubt that the resurrection happened, what beliefs is that doubt based upon? That there is no God? That God couldn't do this? But how can you be so sure? What leap-in-the-dark faith are you relying on to say this didn't happen? Maybe instead, as one writer puts it, you should doubt your doubts? And look at these men and women, who doubted like you, but became so thoroughly convinced that they turned the world upside down.

But once you move from doubt to faith, when you know deep in your heart, 'you know what, Jesus really did rise from the dead' it becomes the fuel, not for a weak, anaemic kind of religion, but an awe-filled, joy-filled life that can't but help to spread the message: He is Risen.