

# What Difference Does It Make?

April 16, 2017 -- Easter Sunday  
The Rev. Dr. Howard B. Chapman  
Text: **Matthew 28:1-10**

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## SCRIPTURE

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Matthew 28:1-10

After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. 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. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 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." So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of 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."

The Word of the Lord!

Thanks be to God!

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## SERMON

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On Wednesday mornings at around 8:00 you will find a group of pastors gathering over at the Kettle House Bakery on 6<sup>th</sup> Ave., just up the block from the library. Four of us are Presbyterian, but we have a Methodist, a Baptist, a Lutheran, and one lapsed Catholic turned Lutheran. We spend about an hour and a half drinking coffee and talking, and as you all know pastors can talk. I am even willing to confess at times we talk about you, our parishioners, always with great love, of course. But then, fair is fair. When you get together with someone from another congregation, you sometimes talk about your pastors, don't you? I know you do, but always with great love. Eventually we always get around discussing our upcoming sermons for Sunday. That is the reason we are supposed to be meeting.

A week and a half ago, we were all gearing up for Holy Week, talking about the different services coming up, the traditions we have in each of our churches. We have this running joke that for Christmas and Easter we should each bring the sermon we preached the year before and then pass it to the preacher on the right. There are nine of this so if we did this every year it would be ten years before we preached our own sermon again. Now we talk about it, but we do not do this, I assure you. It is just a joke. This is my sermon and not one I got from someone else. But anyway, we were discussing Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday and all the rest when Linda Livingstone, the pastor of Ascension Lutheran said, "Just what difference does the resurrection make? What difference does it make to us that Jesus rose from the dead on Easter morning?"

Her question silenced us all. I know it is hard to believe but 8 pastors suddenly stopped talking and it seemed like a very long time before anything was said. I don't remember who broke the silence or what was said after that, but over the last ten days I have thought a lot about her question and about our reaction. Now, the silence was not because we do not believe in the resurrection or do not think that it is important or it makes no difference; quite the opposite, in fact. Linda put into words the key question of Holy Week and Easter. It is a wonderful story of darkness and light, despair and hope, death and life, but what difference does it make?

Part of the problem in answering the question is that it is hard to understand just what happened on that morning. As you probably know, the Gospel writers give different details in their descriptions of the

resurrection. Matthew is the only one who says there were soldiers guarding the tomb. He says two women named Mary arrived at dawn. There is an earthquake and one angel appears and rolls away the stone. Mark says there were three women who came to the tomb after the sun has come up and one angel tells them Jesus has risen. Luke names three women, but says there were other women with them who came at early dawn to be greeted by two angels. John has one woman, Mary Magdalene, coming while it was still dark. She goes back and gets Peter and John. Then she sees two angels in the tomb. So it gets confusing. Were there one, two, or three or more women who visited the tomb? Was it before or after the sun came up? And how many angels did they see?

Frederich Buechner is a Presbyterian pastor, a gifted writer and a theologian with some keen insights. In one of his books entitled *Whistling in the Dark* he has a little essay about Easter. He talks about how Christmas is a big deal with a large cast of characters and all sorts of elements that appeal to us on many levels. And so we have decorations and carols and gifts and pageants, and all the other extra stuff like Santa and Christmas trees and Ebenezer Scrooge. But Easter is not a major production like Christmas. As far as all this confusion about these details Buechner writes that the story of Easter “does not have the ring of great drama. (but) It has the ring of truth... When it comes to just what happened, there can be no certainty. That something unimaginable happened, there can be no doubt.” Then he writes this:

*“The symbol of Easter is the empty tomb. You can’t depict or domesticate emptiness. You can’t make it into a pageant and string it with lights. It doesn’t move people to give presents to each other or sing old songs. It ebbs and flows all around us, the Eastertide. Even the great choruses of Handel’s Messiah sound a little like a handful of crickets chirping under the moon.”*

This partially explains our silence in response to Linda’s question. What difference does the resurrection make? Well, what difference does emptiness make? It makes an incredible difference, but as Buechner says you can’t depict or domesticate emptiness. Anything we might put into words sounds like crickets chirping.

But even though you cannot depict emptiness, the simple fact is that the tomb is empty and that makes all the difference. As you look at the Gospel accounts of this simple fact, you realize that the way they tell the story is an indication of what each writer thought the resurrection was all about. Mark leaves everything up in the air, inviting the reader to start over and read his gospel from the beginning once again, knowing that the tomb is empty. Luke is all about turning everything upside down, how those who are on the outside become the center, those who are poor are rich and those who are foolish are wise. So he has a group of women boldly proclaiming the good news of the empty tomb, but no one believes them. However, the greatest contrast is between the way John tells the story and the way Matthew tells it. They both give details not found in the other Gospels.

You have already heard me read Matthew’s account and I will get back to it in just a moment. Let me remind you of John’s account of the resurrection. All four Gospels mention a man by the name of Joseph of Arimathea who asks for permission to take the body of Jesus for burial. John is the only one who says the tomb was in a garden. Then it says on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene comes by herself, and John makes a point of saying it was while it was still dark. It is in John’s Gospel where Jesus says that he is the light of the world, and so Mary is in a place she believes where the light of the world has been snuffed out. So it is dark.

Even in the dark, Mary can tell that the stone has been rolled away and the tomb is empty. John then describes Mary, Peter and the mysterious “other disciple” running back and forth with a lot of confusion, until Mary is left weeping by the tomb. The Risen Jesus then appears to her and John tells us that Mary thinks he is a gardener. It is not until he calls her by name that she recognizes him, and understands what has happened; that Jesus has risen.

All right, so according to the Gospel of John, what difference does the resurrection make? Well, think back to how John begins his Gospel. John 1:1 reads, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” Where have we heard those words “In the beginning...” before? In Genesis 1:1, of course. So at the end of John’s Gospel we have darkness in a garden, and someone is mistaken for a gardener. Where do we have light breaking into the darkness and someone placed in a garden to care for it? Well, in the first three chapters of Genesis, where God creates the first human beings and places them in the Garden of Eden.

What difference does the resurrection make? According to the Gospel of John, it means that there is a whole new creation. When Jesus rose from the dead it was a great worldwide Mulligan; a universal do-over, a re-boot of the infinite cosmic computer. These ideas of John are echoed in the writing of the Apostle Paul when he says, “Anyone who is in Christ Jesus is a new creation. The old has passed away and all things have become new.”

So what difference does the resurrection make according to the Gospel of Matthew, the text that we just read? Again, think about how the Gospel of Matthew begins. In the opening chapter we first find the genealogy of Jesus, listing his ancestors all the way down to Joseph. Then it says that an angel appears to tell about the miraculous birth, and he calls Joseph the “son of David.” He addresses Joseph with a royal title as a descendent of Israel’s greatest king. But no sooner is the newest son of David born, than the family has to leave Bethlehem. They become political refugees fleeing a wicked king who wants to destroy them.

Matthew is the only Gospel who tells that story and the only Gospel who tells of a squad of soldiers sent by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, to guard the tomb. And how does that work out? Matthew describes an earthquake, and this super-hero angel who appears like lightening and tosses aside the tomb stone as if it was made of Styrofoam. The guards pass out from sheer terror, but the women, while awestruck are also filled with great joy, and sent out with a message of hope and peace.

The Gospel of Matthew is all about power, religious power, economic power, but especially political and military power. To Matthew, the resurrection means that those who think they are on top, those who think they have things under their control, those who think they have power have no idea what real power is. The earth beneath their feet will be pulled out from under them and they will be knocked flat by the immense resurrection power of God’s redeeming love. Again, the Apostle Paul echoes these thoughts when he writes “we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.” Let those with power try to do their worse. The tomb is empty and nothing they can possibly do will matter at all in the face of God’s love.

Well, those are the ways the Gospel writers would have answered Linda’s question, but some might argue that was then; this is now. What difference does the resurrection make to us today? There are those who would scoff and say it makes no difference whatsoever. Face up to reality. All you have to do is watch the latest news to realize that this is a sad and sinful world we live in. There is no new creation that John is alluding to. It is still a Good Friday world where the strong prey upon the weak, where those with military and political power remain in control and will do whatever it takes to hold on to that power. Poison gas is spread. Missiles fly and bombs fall. There is a whole lot of pain and suffering in this world and our Easter hallelujahs are naïve wishful thinking on our part.

I would respond to those who would want me to face up to reality with a story I heard about World War II. It is a story about a German prisoner of war camp that held American and British soldiers. The camp was divided by barbed wire fences and the two groups were kept separate, The Americans and British were forbidden to talk to each other across the compound. However, it just so happened that on each side was a Scotsman, a highlander whose mother tongue was Gaelic, a language that the guards could not comprehend. These men were not allowed to talk to each other, but the Germans could not stop them from singing. Each day one or the

other would sing an old tune from their childhood, in the ancient language of their people. In the middle of these songs one would sing a sentence or two that would give the other news of what was happening, and how things were getting along.

Unbeknown to the Germans, the Americans had built a tiny radio with odds and ends that had either been stolen or smuggled into the camp. With this radio they were able to pick up news from the outside, something incredibly precious in a prison camp. So most of the time it was the Scot on the American side who would weave into the songs the headlines from the outside world. One day the news came over the radio that the German High Command had surrendered and the war was over. The one highlander could not wait to get word across to his friend. When he did he watched him quickly disappear into the British barracks. A moment later a roar of celebration came from the buildings, as word quickly spread.

However, it was three or four days before the German guards and officers finally heard the news. When they did they fled into the night leaving everything unlocked and unguarded. The prisoners walked out the next morning, free, but in truth they had been liberated days before.

Now, think what it must have been like in that camp during those three days. Physically nothing had changed. Their situation remained terrible with bad food, crowded barracks and difficult living conditions. They were still prisoners, surrounded by barbed wire, armed guards with vicious attack dogs. But they had heard some gospel, some good news, very good news. The war was over. All would be well. They would be going home soon.

That, my friends, is the difference that the resurrection makes. Yes, the enemy is still there. Yes, there is indeed much sorrow and sadness. Yes, those with power hang on to it convinced that they have everything under control. But we have heard a song, a song that tells us how things really are; a song that tells us how things are going to turn out. "Thine is the glory, Risen Conquering Son. Endless is the victory, thou o'er death has won..."

It may indeed be a Good Friday world out there, but here in this place it is always Easter morning. Here the tomb is empty and the gates that once imprisoned us have been flung open. Every time we gather we hear the song again, and we are reminded that no matter how grim the news, no matter what sorrow we face, no matter how dark it seems to be, the war is over. Our side has won. And so we take up our Easter cry: Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia! Amen!