

## Scripture Readings for Easter Sunday 2020

### Isaiah 12:2-6 (NIV)

Surely God is my salvation;

I will trust and not be afraid.

The LORD, the LORD himself, is my strength and my defense;  
he has become my salvation.”

<sup>3</sup> With joy you will draw water  
from the wells of salvation.

<sup>4</sup> In that day you will say:

“Give praise to the LORD, proclaim his name;  
make known among the nations what he has done,  
and proclaim that his name is exalted.

<sup>5</sup> Sing to the LORD, for he has done glorious things;  
let this be known to all the world.

<sup>6</sup> Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion,  
for great is the Holy One of Israel among you.”

### Matthew 28:1-10, 16-20 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. <sup>4</sup> The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. <sup>5</sup> The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. <sup>6</sup> He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. <sup>7</sup> 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.” <sup>8</sup> So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. <sup>9</sup> Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. <sup>10</sup> Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

<sup>16</sup> Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. <sup>17</sup> When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. <sup>18</sup> Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

## The Resurrection: What Happened and What Does It All Mean?

“If Jesus had *not* been raised from the dead, we would *never* have heard of him,” so says the acclaimed Episcopal preacher, Fleming Rutledge.<sup>1</sup> I think she’s right; the Romans crucified many dissidents, and there were a number of Jewish ‘would-be Messiahs’ who *were* killed - and *none* of their followers claimed that the person came back to life afterwards. If Jesus had *not* been raised from the dead he would have been, at best, a passing mention in history books. Like John the Baptist, he would have been simply viewed as another prophet who was killed for speaking his mind. And *we* wouldn’t be here today. The first question we can ask is, “*What happened that first Easter Sunday?*” Theologian E.P. Sanders said that “from the accounts that we have, it looks very much as though the early Christians were struggling to describe something they knew *had* happened but for which they were aware they didn’t have good language.”<sup>2</sup> I think *he’s* right too, and this partially explains some of the strange descriptions in the gospel accounts. Let’s briefly explore Matthew’s depiction of events this morning.

He has Mary Magdalene and someone he refers to as “the other Mary” going to the tomb after the Sabbath was over, at dawn on the Sunday.<sup>3</sup> *Why* were they going there? In contrast to Luke, there is *no* mention of them going to complete the burial process in this account.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, they had witnessed the stone being rolled in front of the entrance so they had *no* expectation of actually entering the tomb.<sup>5</sup> Matthew also tells us the tomb was now heavily guarded, but we don’t know whether the two women were aware of this fact.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps they went there because it was a suitable focal point for their grief. But it also seems quite possible that they went there *in faith*, wondering if what Jesus had repeatedly said could possibly occur, namely that in three days he would rise again.<sup>7</sup>

Matthew’s grave scene is the most dramatic of the four Gospels. There’s an earthquake, an angel who rolls away the stone, guards who faint in fear, and a divine message to the two Mary’s.<sup>8</sup> In keeping with Jewish tradition, Matthew has angels appearing at great moments within God’s purposes,<sup>9</sup> and the image of this angel sitting on the stone is perhaps a sign of ridicule at the futile efforts of Jesus’ enemies to confine him in the tomb! Despite the apparent high drama, its meaning needs to be interpreted by

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<sup>1</sup> Rutledge, *Crucifixion*, (Eerdmans, 2015), 31.

<sup>2</sup> cited in Wright, *History and Eschatology*, (SPCK, 2019), 196.

<sup>3</sup> Matt 28:1 describes this as “the first day of the week” and this has connotations of the beginning of a *new creation*. It is there significant that the Church, part of the new creation, meets to worship on Sundays, *not* the Sabbath (Saturday). See also Matt 27:55-56. Note: *two* witnesses are there to attest to the events: Deut 19:15; (Matt 18:16; 26:60). However, two *women* would not satisfy a law court (in those days); evidently this account was never written with that intent!

<sup>4</sup> See Luke 23:55-24:1. Perhaps more importantly, note: Matt 26:12.

<sup>5</sup> See Matt 27:57-61.

<sup>6</sup> See Matt 27:62-66 (28:4, 11-15).

<sup>7</sup> The angel says as much (see Matt 28:5b)! See also Matt 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; 27:63.

<sup>8</sup> Matt 28:2-4. Matthew’s earthquake here makes the connection with the one at Jesus’ death, 27:51. The description of the angelic messenger (less dramatic than Matt 17:2 - which resonates with Dan 7:9; 10:6) points to the majesty and power of God, the unseen leading actor in this drama! The soldiers literally “quake” (and pass-out) with fear, in parallel to the *earthquake*.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew’s previous mention of an angel is in 1:20-21 (and in a dream in 2:13), and in 4:11.

the divine messenger to the two women: “Don’t be afraid, for I *know* that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified.<sup>10</sup> He is not here; he has risen, *just as he said.*”<sup>11</sup> And almost as if to drive the point home that Jesus is *not* here - because he *has* been raised - the angel invites them to come and see the place where he was laid. The two Mary’s had witnessed the crucifixion, had seen Jesus being buried, had seen the *outside* of the tomb, and now they saw the *inside*.<sup>12</sup> The empty tomb is not presented as proof, but as a *sign* of the resurrection! It is important to note that Jesus did *not* raise himself from the dead<sup>13</sup>; this was *an act of God*. That’s Matthew’s point in his vivid account of events.<sup>14</sup> The angel then gives them a message, “Go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised *from the dead.*’”<sup>15</sup> As they run to tell *them* that Jesus will meet them in Galilee, with emotions of fear and great joy, they meet the risen Jesus on the way. He greets them with the word “Rejoice!”<sup>16</sup> adding “Do not be afraid” and then he reiterates the angel’s instructions for “his brothers” to meet him in Galilee.<sup>17</sup> What is their reaction? They fall prostrate before him and “held on to his feet” – he had a *real* body; he wasn’t just a spirit; the risen Jesus can be touched!<sup>18</sup> And they *worshipped* him.<sup>19</sup> The two Mary’s are *both* the *first* witnesses of the empty tomb *and* the risen Jesus! When Jesus later meets his brothers in Galilee, Matthew tells us that “When they saw him, they *worshipped* him, but some doubted.”<sup>20</sup> The fact that both Mary’s and the disciples worship the risen Christ is significant because Jews would *only* worship God, else that would be idolatry. But *since* the resurrection *is* an act of God, *then* the crucified Jesus, the Son of God, who has now been raised from the dead, is worthy of worship. This legitimate worship *of Jesus* is a new activity and is a feature of the life of the Church.

Before moving on, I will only comment here on Matthew’s mention that “some of the disciples *doubted*” because I will talk more about that next week. Discipleship contains faith *and* doubt; they are opposite sides of the same coin - and *both* can be incorporated into our acts of worship. We come to the risen Jesus both trusting in him *and* full of questions, and he will happily meet *us* there on the way. Remember, the opposite of faith is *not* doubt, but *certainty!*<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The Greek tense used by the angel in v5, designating Jesus as “the crucified one,” implies a *past* act with *ongoing* consequences. In other words, Jesus crucifixion was *not* a temporary episode in the career of the Son of God, i.e., a past event that has now been nullified or transcended. The implication being even as he risen one, he bears the marks of his self-giving on the cross as a permanent testament to his faithfulness and character (cf. John 20:27).

<sup>11</sup> Matt 28:5-6.

<sup>12</sup> Matt 27:55-56,61. Note: They did *not* see the actual resurrection; no one that (in all the canonical Gospel accounts).

<sup>13</sup> Some have, somehow, suggested that Jesus, by the force of his will and personality was able to do this posthumous miracle! Others claim Jesus didn’t really die, which is an insult to Roman soldiers and a deliberate misunderstanding of their duties. Jesus was certainly dead when he entered the tomb; no one - *even* Pilate - seriously doubts that fact; Matt 27:57-66.

<sup>14</sup> This is subtly implied in the Greek used (Matt 28:6 has the verb in the ‘divine passive’ (NET).

<sup>15</sup> Matt 28:7.

<sup>16</sup> Matt 28:9. The Greek word translated “greetings” (from Aramaic) is pretty lame, though accurate! “Rejoice” is a better.

<sup>17</sup> Matt 28:10. It is in Galilee that he will commission his “brothers.” This term “brothers,” rather than “disciples” is significant. It indicates that they are now “family,” made possible by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

<sup>18</sup> Matt 28:10. This point is also clear in Luke 24:13-53 and John 20:11-31. See also 1 Cor 15 where Paul contrasts the corruptible physical body and Christ’s incorruptible resurrection *body, animated* by the Spirit.

<sup>19</sup> Matt 28:9. Note they did *not* worship the angel!

<sup>20</sup> Matt 28:17.

<sup>21</sup> See 2 Cor 5:7. Believing in the resurrection is always a matter of faith, you *can’t prove* it! But it *explains* so much.

The second question we must ask is: “*What does all this mean?*” We are not alone in asking that question; Christ’s followers asked the same question too. Moreover, after Paul’s incredible encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus,<sup>22</sup> he tells us he spent three years in the wilderness - no doubt trying to figure out what it all meant too!<sup>23</sup> Their writings outline their thinking. For example, Matthew, like Paul, repeatedly presents Jesus as the one who *fulfils* the Old Testament Scriptures.

More specifically, however, in the resurrection, Jesus’ cry of dereliction from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”<sup>24</sup> *has been answered*. Jesus has been obedient to his calling, even suffering death on a cross<sup>25</sup> and because of his faithfulness, *God* raised him from the dead, vindicating him before his accusers and demonstrating that Jesus is *indeed* God’s Chosen One, the Messiah.<sup>26</sup> Without this divine act, the crucifixion would simply be a terrible human tragedy. The early church, however, came to understand the cross and the resurrection to be *the* central event in God’s salvation history.<sup>27</sup> Because of this, we have to reread Matthew’s whole gospel *in light of* the resurrection, beginning with the very first verse.<sup>28</sup> If we do that, we will recognise hints of some of Matthew’s perspective as to the meaning of these events. For example,<sup>29</sup> he writes that the angel tells Joseph “You are to give him the name Jesus, *because he will save his people from their sins.*”<sup>30</sup> And in the Last Supper, as we heard on Good Friday, Matthew records the words of Jesus concerning the cup: “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out *for many for the forgiveness of sins.*”<sup>31</sup> The resurrection *demonstrates* that sins *have been* forgiven,<sup>32</sup> and this is certainly part of the explanation. But there’s more, Matthew hints that he, like Paul, regards the bodily resurrection of Jesus as the *initial* instance of the *general* resurrection of the dead that many Jews expected to happen at the end of time, on the “Great Day of the LORD.” For example, he expresses this in mysterious apocalyptic language at the moment Jesus died, saying “The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. . . .”<sup>33</sup> Seen in this light, the bodily resurrection of Jesus is *a glimpse of the future in the present*, the first fruit of a much bigger harvest to come.<sup>34</sup> But please remember this point, *everyone* in the first century knew that when you’re dead, you’re dead; no

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<sup>22</sup> See Acts 9:1-31.

<sup>23</sup> See Gal 1:16-17.

<sup>24</sup> Matt 27:46.

<sup>25</sup> See the early Christian hymn of Phil 2:6-11, especially 8.

<sup>26</sup> See Matt 1:1.

<sup>27</sup> The resurrection points to there being added significance to the death of Jesus. This is referred to as ‘theories of atonement’ in theology; these is ongoing and must include *all* the biblical references.

<sup>28</sup> We need to re-read the life, teachings, and actions of Jesus in light of the resurrection!

<sup>29</sup> In Matt 20:28 we hear of another image/metaphor: “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life *as a ransom* for many.” This is price to liberate a slave from bondage in the secular marketplace.

<sup>30</sup> Matt 1:21.

<sup>31</sup> Matt 26:28. This also ties in with the Temple curtain being torn in two in 27:51; Jesus then is the final ‘sacrifice.’ See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/A-Reflection-for-Good-Friday.pdf> .

<sup>32</sup> See 1 Cor 15:17; “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.”

<sup>33</sup> Matt 27:52-53.

<sup>34</sup> See 1 Cor 15, especially v20-21. (The miracles of Jesus can also be seen in the same light, signs of the coming reign of God.)

one *ever* imagined the resurrection of an individual ahead of the general resurrection – and not all Jews even believed in that! One more meaning from Matthew is expressed in what the risen Jesus says to his brothers in Galilee: “*All authority* in heaven and on earth has been given to me. . .”, so fulfilling a prophecy from Daniel.<sup>35</sup> That degree of authority is how Matthew understood the *extent* of God’s vindication of Jesus in the resurrection. This is also why it is appropriate to worship Jesus, as well as God and the Holy Spirit.<sup>36</sup> The resurrection changes everything!<sup>37</sup>

The story is told that in May 1543, when Nicolas Copernicus was on his deathbed, he was handed a copy of his most famous book hot off the printing press.<sup>38</sup> In this book he explained in detail his mathematical reasoning for believing that the Sun was the center of the solar system, *not* the Earth, and that *all* the planets therefore orbited the Sun. At the time this was utterly revolutionary, yet it took a few more centuries of research - building on the work of Kepler, Galileo, and Newton - before the Copernicus’ idea became universally accepted. Before that happened, there were many people - including the Church - who are anxious to protect the traditional perspective and they did their best to argue against this new theory. People would rather try and patch up the defects of the old geocentric worldview than to accept anything radically new. One reason for this is that believing the Earth goes around the Sun is *contrary* to our everyday experience. And even today we still speak of sunrise and sunset as if it was the *Sun* that was moving around the Earth. One thing is sure, you cannot maintain both views at once. And switching from one perspective to the other is referred to as a *paradigm* shift. Once you switch your worldview to a heliocentric system, your conceptual picture of reality will never be the same again.

The resurrection is a similar earth-shattering event that also results in a paradigm shift, a complete change of thinking about reality. You see, the resurrection of Jesus is *not* merely an idea, or a metaphor, or a *private* religious experience for the chosen or susceptible few, it’s a part of history.<sup>39</sup> Now it’s fair to say that to an atheist and to someone who believes God is distant and who does not interact with the world,<sup>40</sup> the resurrection is *impossible*. And if you believe God is somehow *within* the cosmos,<sup>41</sup> resurrection is *meaningless*. And to someone who, following Plato, believes that when they’re dead their spirit or soul goes to be with the divine being, the idea of the resurrection is *undesirable*.<sup>42</sup> Recall, Plato saw the soul as imprisoned *within* the physical body and was freed at death. This is *not* what the gospel writers describe *nor* what the early church proclaimed. No, resurrection meant *bodily*

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<sup>35</sup> Matt 28:18; Dan7:13–14. God’s vindication also means the devil utterly lost (see Matt 4:8-10)!

<sup>36</sup> See Matt 28:19-20 has an earlier practical trinitarian formula in the Great Commission.

<sup>37</sup> Jesus began his ministry after John the Baptist was arrested with “Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come *near*” (Matt 4:17). In response to the resurrection, the appropriate reaction is now “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is *present*.” This beginning of the “now-and-not-yet” kingdom of God also signifies the beginning a new *era*, a new creation, starting with the resurrection of Jesus. Something has definitively happened, but there is much more to come!

<sup>38</sup> The book being: *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres*.

<sup>39</sup> Many might like to brush the resurrection under the carpet, but world *history* has shown that to be ridiculous.

<sup>40</sup> i.e., a deist.

<sup>41</sup> i.e., a pantheist.

<sup>42</sup> These last few sentences were adapted from, Wright, *History and Eschatology*, (SPCK, 2019), 190.

resurrection, *not* that the soul of Jesus went to be with God. To be sure, from the descriptions given, it was a strange form of body; but if we believe this happened, then this is the first – and so far, only – tangible form of the “new creation” the Bible talks about.<sup>43</sup> What this also implies is that “bodies” are *good*; they are worth redeeming. Creation is not going to be discarded for a purely spiritual existence, it’s going to be rescued too. The transformation of the body is why “resurrection” means far *more* than “forgiveness,” important though that is, because it’s part of God keeping his promises of a *holistic* salvation as described in the prophecies of Isaiah and elsewhere.<sup>44</sup> A potent, bodily resurrection is necessary to counter both the real, physical consequences of our sufferings and the pervasive extent of evil.<sup>45</sup> And in the resurrection God *demonstrates* that evil will *not* have the last word. Something radically novel was witnessed by Christ’s followers, and world history has never been the same since.<sup>46</sup>

As I conclude, I come back to the two key questions and I’ll restate them: “*What do you think happened that first Easter Sunday?*” As you reflect on that, I encourage you to read again the gospel accounts of the resurrection and allow them to tell *their own* stories of the events witnessed. Once person accepts the *possibility* of the resurrection, it throws up the second question: *What do you think it all means?*” Like the Copernican revolution, the resurrection will turn a person’s view of the world upside down. But, ironically, it will also help make sense of everything in surprising new ways.<sup>47</sup> Of course, this will also bring loads of further questions that will need addressing, and obviously you are welcome to talk me about them as you wish. What I hope is that as we think over those questions, we will encounter the risen Jesus *on the way* and so come to a position of *worshiping* him - like the two Mary’s and the disciples. Amen. Let us pray.

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<sup>43</sup> See also: <https://securereservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Transformed-Bodies.pdf>

<sup>44</sup> If “resurrection” were in a platonic sense, that Jesus soul was going to heaven, then *this* world would have little value.

<sup>45</sup> God’s triumph over death also signifies a victory over all the systemic powers (political, military, social, cultural, religious, and even demonic) that placed Jesus on the cross.

<sup>46</sup> The resurrection of Jesus also demonstrates that God is *not* distant or disinterested, but intimately involved in history— in our suffering world, and because of that, we can then live in faith, hope, and love as we carry our own sufferings, and their scars, and journey onwards toward God’s completion of history.

<sup>47</sup> Just as evolution and much of cosmology cannot be (rigorously) *proved*, they are deemed scientific because of their huge *explanatory* power.