

Risen!

Christ's resurrection assures believers of salvation.

I remember Easter celebrations as a child. You probably do too, even if you were not part of a religious family. The kids got new clothes and were more thoroughly scrubbed than usual. Mom had a new dress, fancier than her normal Sunday attire. Maybe she even wore a hat—an unusual occurrence in my family.

The church parking lot was fuller than normal. The church building was crowded. So many people that I did not know and did not see at church very often were there. Not so much in our Sunday School class, but in the 11:00 worship service it was even hard to find a seat some years. And then there were the Easter cantatas, the Easter egg hunts, the chocolate rabbits, the family dinners, and the fancy eggs.

Not quite as good as Christmas. Baskets will never surpass a pile of presents. But, for my childhood at least, Easter was still a memorable and enjoyable celebration.

Looking back, I never really understood what rabbits and eggs had to do with Jesus coming back from the dead. But they were the “fun” part, so why make waves? Later, I came to understand the gospel, and things began to make a little more sense—not the rabbits and eggs, but the purpose behind the celebration. We were celebrating the risen Lord. As Christians, Easter reminds us that we don't follow some dead, historical figure. We serve a living Messiah who understands all our struggles—even death. From that point on, Easter was less confusing and much more meaningful.

Not only do believers celebrate the truth of Christ's resurrection, we also honor everything this history-changing event means to us. We celebrate God's provision of salvation, and the sacrifice given for our sins. We celebrate the power over sin and death, along with the assurance of eternal life. We celebrate His continued presence with us, providing comfort, guidance, and hope each step of the way. We celebrate the marvelous message of redemption and love available to all who will believe. We even celebrate the privilege and responsibility of sharing this good news with others.

And the best part is, the power of Easter is not limited to one Sunday a year. We can celebrate it—and live in it—year round.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

MATTHEW 27–28

The climax of all four Gospels is the resurrection of Jesus. Every word and action mentioned in those four accounts lead up to that single, momentous event. The apostle Paul later told the church at Corinth that, without the resurrection, the gospel is a lie, the apostles are false witnesses, believers are still dead in their sin, our faith is in vain, and we are wretched and hopeless people (1 Cor. 15:15-19).

Without the resurrection, the accounts of Christ's ministry would look like nothing more than an expanded version of John the Baptist's work—an eccentric prophet calling for repentance. Without the resurrection, the gospel teachings that Jesus is the Messiah, Son of God, and Savior of the world would ring hollow. Without the resurrection, His story would end in tragedy, complete with the violent execution of a good man and the disillusionment of His small group of followers. Thankfully, that is not how the story ends.

Matthew 27 picks up the story of Jesus after His betrayal, arrest, and pre-dawn "trial" for blasphemy before the Sanhedrin (Matt. 26:47-75). At daybreak (27:1), the Jewish authorities took Him to their Roman governor, Pilate. There, they asked Rome to execute Him since they did not have the authority to put Him to death themselves (John 18:31).

Before Pilate, the Jews made no mention of the blasphemy charge. Instead, they said that Jesus was a dangerous revolutionary and a threat to Roman authority (Luke 23:2-3). In spite of having no real evidence, getting a warning from his wife (Matt. 27:19), and clearly understanding that the Jews were railroading Jesus, Pilate gave in to the pressure of the crowd and ordered His execution (Matt. 27:22-26).

The soldiers mocked Jesus and led him to the place designated for public executions (27:27-37). Two criminals were also crucified with Him. Except for John, the surviving disciples had all deserted Jesus by this time, but some women who followed Him watched from a distance and witnessed His death. At least two of them also saw Joseph of Arimathea take His body from the cross and place Him in a family tomb (27:55-61). Their rabbi was dead, yet the Jewish authorities still feared His influence. They persuaded Pilate to place his seal on the tomb and to post a guard so His disciples could not steal the body (27:62-66).

The crucifixion was done. His tomb had been secured. The authorities thought they were finally rid of this troublesome preacher.

How wrong they were!

EXPLORE THE TEXT

RESURRECTED (Matt. 28:1-4)

Jesus told the disciples several times that he would die and then be raised after three days (Matt. 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:19). Even His opponents had heard this assertion (27:63). But while most of His disciples stayed away from the tomb, some of the women who followed Him had a different plan.

VERSE 1

After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to view the tomb.

The Gospel writers each give different lists of which women went to the tomb. John mentioned only Mary Magdalene (20:1). Luke recorded that anonymous women (plural) who had followed Jesus from Galilee saw the location of the tomb and returned to anoint His body (23:55–24:1). Mark also mentioned that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome brought spices to the tomb on the first day of the week (16:1-2). Matthew identified only **Mary Magdalene and the other Mary** without naming other women or the preparations to anoint the body of Jesus.

These minor variations are typical of eyewitness testimony. Identical narratives would imply collusion, a concocted story that a group decided to tell. The four Gospel accounts are consistent, while containing minor differences of perspective. They each have the ring of truth, and the various details give the reader a fuller understanding of what actually transpired.

The **Sabbath** extended from sundown Friday through sundown Saturday. The first opportunity the women would have to care for the Lord's body in the light of day was Sunday morning, **the first day of the week**. Mark added the detail that the women were not certain that they could remove the stone blocking the entrance to the tomb because it was very large (16:3-4), but their devotion to Jesus required that they make the effort.

VERSES 2-3

There was a violent earthquake, because an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and approached the tomb. He rolled back the stone and was sitting on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing was as white as snow.

The women's concern about the stone was soon resolved, thanks to an **angel of the Lord**. Angels dispatched **from heaven** not only do the will of the

Lord, but they also carry His word to designated recipients. In Greek, the term *angel* itself means “messenger.” Not only did this angel open the tomb, but he also had a message for the women (28:5-6).

Matthew’s language implies that the angel shook the earth to **roll back the stone**. Whatever the specifics, the angel created a **violent earthquake** when opening the tomb. Limestone is common around Jerusalem and is relatively easy to carve, so a limestone cliff would be ideal for digging out a tomb. The opening was small enough that a person had to stoop to enter, and a large limestone wheel was commonly used to cover the entrance.

A track carved in front of the opening allowed a stone to be rolled into place to seal the tomb, but owners could move it if they needed access. Even with a track, though, a limestone wheel a foot thick and several feet in diameter would have been very heavy. Still, it was no match for the angel’s power.

To be clear, the angel removed the stone so the women could enter, not so Jesus could get out. Jesus was already gone by this point. The angel also did not leave after performing this task. Rather, he **was sitting on** the stone when the women arrived. Matthew’s account is not detailed enough to convey exact timing, but the event itself must have been a great shock. These faithful women had come to tend to a dead body, but they soon learned that there was no body to tend.

The angel’s appearance left no doubt that this was a supernatural messenger. **Lightning** is often associated with God’s presence. For example, John depicted lightning issuing from the throne room of God in Revelation (Rev. 8:5; 11:19; 16:18), and Daniel described another angelic messenger as having a “face like the brilliance of lightning” (10:6). Luke used *lightning* to refer to radiance rather than to a sudden flash (Luke 11:36).

The angel’s appearance was also **white as snow**. Daniel said the clothes of the Ancient of Days were “white like snow” (7:9). Similarly, at the transfiguration, Matthew noted that the face of Jesus “shone like the sun” and His clothes were “white as the light” (17:2). The bright and glowing appearance suggests a messenger carrying the glory and authority of God.

VERSE 4

The guards were so shaken by fear of him that they became like dead men.

Mark wrote that the women were alarmed when they saw “a young man dressed in a white robe” who told them that Jesus had risen (16:5-6). But the description of the guards by Matthew indicates an entirely different level of fear, especially for men trained to face conflict. The angel and the earthquake petrified the guards at the tomb. They were **shaken by fear of him**.

Shaken is the verbal form of the word translated “earthquake” in verse 2. The soldiers had probably been warned about an assault by disciples from outside the tomb. But the divine intervention that opened the tomb and the appearance of an angel demonstrated a power beyond their ability to comprehend, much less combat. Like the centurion at the cross, they may have suddenly realized that Jesus really was God (Matt. 27:54).

Shocked by events, clueless about how to respond, terrified by the power displayed, sensing that their assignment meant nothing in the face of this divine messenger, the guards froze. What could they do? They did nothing. Petrified with fear, they simply **became like dead men**—silent witnesses to an event that they could hardly believe and certainly could not stop.

The tomb they were charged to keep closed was wide open. The body they were told to guard was gone. The act was accomplished by divine power they could not fight. They could have foiled a fake resurrection, but they were powerless in the face of a real one!

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article “Tomb of Jesus” on pages 1581–1583 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Does the empty tomb alone prove the resurrection of Jesus? If not, what more is needed to confirm that Jesus was raised from the dead?

ANNOUNCED (Matt. 28:5-7)

The soldiers were right to be terrified. The events of that morning exposed them as powerless in the face of true power. But the women were a different story. For them, God’s power was no cause for terror, but rejoicing. They would not flee in fear or failure. They would become bearers of good news.

VERSE 5

The angel told the women, “Don’t be afraid, because I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified.”

The angel’s words to the women were designed to calm their fears. The phrase **told the women** literally means to “answer” and implies the continuation of a conversation. Though not recorded by Matthew, the women must have wondered who this “person” was and what his presence meant.

The angel responded to these obvious concerns, first by telling the women **Don’t be afraid**. The Greek wording actually focuses on the women, as

the angel told them “You should not be afraid” with the “you” emphasized. The soldiers had reason to be afraid, but the women did not.

The women had no need to fear because the angel knew why they had come. They were there looking for the body of **Jesus who was crucified**. Unlike the soldiers, they were not hired agents. They were disciples seeking to honor and mourn Christ. They thought they were following a dead Jesus, but they were about to learn that they now served a living Lord.

VERSE 6

He is not here. For he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.

The angel’s message was simple and straightforward: **He is not here**. On the surface that could have meant many things. For instance, the body might have been moved, or they may have come to the wrong tomb. But before such fears could even form in the women’s minds, a more shocking revelation followed: **He has risen, just as he said**. Could this be true?

The stone, the guards, and the messenger all provided more than enough evidence to confirm the angel’s message. Yet, he offered one more proof of the resurrection: **Come and see ... where he lay**. Since the stone was removed, these women became eyewitnesses to the empty tomb. They saw for themselves that He was risen and that God’s power had accomplished the greatest of all miracles.

The angel reminded the women that Jesus had predicted everything they were seeing (Matt. 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:19). Of course, the shock and distress of the disciples revealed their imperfect understanding of His predictions. Their cultural belief in a Messiah who would conquer and reign got in the way. So, in their despair over His death, they forgot what He had told them.

The fulfillment of one prophesied event, His death, should have led them to anticipate the fulfillment of the other, His resurrection. But their grief blinded them—until the angel reminded them. The power of God was revealed in both the prophecy and in its fulfillment. The announcement of Christ’s resurrection simply confirmed that God was still at work.

VERSE 7

Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has risen from the dead and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; you will see him there.’ Listen, I have told you.”

Good news received should lead to good news shared. The angel told the women **go quickly and tell his disciples**, probably referring to the eleven.

The message was two-fold. First, they were to inform the men that Jesus had **risen from the dead**. Once the disciples recovered from that shocking revelation, their logical questions would be “where is he?” and “what happens now?” The second half of the angel’s command provided the answer.

The angel instructed the women to tell the disciples that they would see Jesus for themselves in **Galilee**. They would be able to confirm that He was risen and could ask Him whatever they wanted to know. **Listen, I have told you** suggests the validity and urgency of the commands. While the angel announced His resurrection, Jesus would confirm it by meeting His disciples.

EXPLORE FURTHER

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus predicted His death and resurrection at least three times. Spend some time reflecting on Matthew 16:21; 17:22-23; and 20:19. Consider how the disciples reacted to each of those events. During your Bible study, discuss why it’s difficult today for some people who hear about the resurrection to believe it’s true.

ENCOUNTERED (Matt. 28:8-10)

VERSES 8-9

So, departing quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, they ran to tell his disciples the news. Just then Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” They came up, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him.

The women departed **quickly** from the tomb; and, just as the angel had instructed, they **ran** to share the good news. Matthew did not record anything about the women entering the tomb, but the narrative implies that they had. Mark and Luke also mention it explicitly (Mark 16:5; Luke 24:3). As a result, their **fear** had morphed from anxiety to awe, accompanied by **great joy**. The *great joy* drove them to obey and to share what they had discovered.

Just then translates a word meaning “behold!” (ESV) and implies the sudden and unexpected nature of the encounter. As the women were rushing to meet the disciples, **Jesus met them**. The angel said that Jesus would join His disciples in Galilee. So, a reasonable assumption might be that all of them would see him there and not before. However, that was not what the angel had meant, as they quickly discovered.

Jesus met the awe-stricken women with a common wish for personal wellness: **Greetings**. But while the greeting was common, the meeting was

anything but usual. Falling at His feet was an act of complete submission. The fact that they **worshiped him** (prostrating themselves in adoration) cements the impression. The women weren't just amazed and happy to see their rabbi. They now knew without any doubt that Jesus, the resurrected Messiah, was due all of the devotion reserved for God.

VERSE 10

Then Jesus told them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to leave for Galilee, and they will see me there.”

Jesus essentially repeated the angel's words, but with a couple of important distinctions. Foremost, of course, the words came from Jesus Himself, His appearance confirming His resurrection. Also, the angel's instruction to tell His disciples became, from the lips of Jesus, **tell my brothers**.

This term of endearment would not have been lost on the disciples. They had fled when Jesus was arrested to avoid danger. They didn't come to His defense during His trials or before the people. This may have left them wondering if Jesus would hold their desertion against them. His words would have assuaged their fears and confirmed that they were still his *brothers*.

The message Jesus sent through the women probably felt like an undeserved embrace, a forgiveness given before it was even asked. They could meet the resurrected Jesus, confident of His continued love.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Reflect on the report that the guards gave the Jewish leaders in Matthew 28:11-15. How did the leaders respond to this firsthand witness of the resurrection? Why are some people so determined to deny Jesus?

COMMISSIONED (Matt. 28:16-20)

The resurrection is not the end of the gospel story. It is a beginning, confirming Christ's power over sin and death and revealing God's plan for the salvation of all who believe. With that backdrop, the real work of the disciples began.

VERSES 16-17

The eleven disciples traveled to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped, but some doubted.

The eleven surviving disciples did as Jesus instructed and **traveled to Galilee**. This journey of about 75 miles brought them to **the mountain where Jesus had directed them**. Matthew recorded several events that took place on mountains (4:8; 5:1; 14:23; 15:29; 17:1; 21:1; 24:3). The location of the Sermon on the Mount (5:1) or the transfiguration (17:1) would seem likely spots for this meeting, but none of the Gospels give a precise location.

When the disciples saw Jesus, they **worshiped** Him, although **some doubted**. The word translated *worshiped* is the same one used of the women who prostrated themselves in verse 9.

The verb rendered *doubted* can mean to question something or to hesitate in taking a particular action. A hesitant faith can indicate an internal struggle to understand or respond to something. Some disciples might have been uncertain what to do in that moment. It's also possible that they were not alone and that the doubters were other followers who had joined them.

VERSE 18

Jesus came near and said to them, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth.

The Lord's message contains both assurances and directions. The assurances assert His absolute authority (v. 18) and reliability (v. 20b). The One giving the command has the power, and those obeying will always have His support. Between these two assurances comes a single command with three supporting statements (vv. 19-20a).

First, Jesus assured the disciples of His authority. This statement echoed Daniel's prophecy, where the Ancient of Days granted the Son of Man “dominion and glory and a kingdom” (7:13-14). Likewise, Jesus said that He had been given authority by the Father, and His authority extends throughout heaven and earth and encompasses all people. The Lord then followed up His authority with an authorization to action.

VERSES 19-20

Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

The commission Jesus gave actually focused on a single command: **make disciples**. But this lone imperative is supported by three clauses. **Go, baptizing,** and **teaching** explain how Jesus wants His followers to make these new disciples.

The term **nations** refers to people groups that may be connected in a variety of ways, such as ethnicity, language, or political structures. The word was sometimes used by Jews to refer to anyone who was not Jewish, the “Gentiles.” A command to make disciples from every nation clearly communicated that the gospel is for all people.

Go (more literally, “going”) may be understood as a command or could mean “as you are going” or “while you are going.” One would stress the efforts and purpose of evangelism, while the other would focus the importance of evangelizing in every situation. Both support the primary objective of sharing the good news and urging others to follow Jesus.

Baptizing communicates the importance of a visible initiation. The act of immersion indicates a death and burial to one’s former life and a resurrection to follow and identify with Jesus. Baptism **in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit** highlights the triune God to whom the individuals are committing themselves. The disciples would have been familiar with John’s baptism of repentance. But following the resurrection, baptism took on a heightened meaning and symbolism. As both a personal act and public statement, baptism signifies the beginning of a new, Christ-like life submitted to the Father and empowered by the Spirit.

Becoming a Christ follower and commemorating that with baptism is only the beginning of one’s new life. Making disciples also requires *teaching*. By definition, disciples are learners, so a commitment to making disciples must be coupled with a commitment to help them grow in the Lord. Guiding them to **observe everything** that Jesus **commanded** is essential.

The concluding statement, **I am with you always**, provides assurance that the Lord who possesses all authority (v. 18) will never fail to undergird the disciple-making work of His followers with His presence. Though Jesus left the disciples physically, He sent “another Counselor” to be with them and to teach them as He had done (John 14:16,26; 15:26; 16:7). Thus, he continues to be with His people to the **end of the age**.

The fact of the resurrection and the work of the church go hand in hand. One makes no sense without the other. Easter celebrates both the great work of God in Jesus and the transforming gospel He commanded us to share.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Read the article “Resurrection of Jesus the Christ” on pages 1349–1350 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What part should the message of resurrection play in making disciples? How would you explain the impact of the resurrection on your own personal faith?