



HAD WE BEEN THERE

Pastor Al Detter Selected Texts Easter Weekend
5:30, 9:15 & 11:00am Grace Church March 22-23, 2008

Easter is the one floating major holiday of the year. And this year it's really early. Perhaps you've wondered why Easter jumps around. It's not because it has become associated with bunnies. Easter is always the 1st Sunday after the 1st full moon after the Spring Equinox. The dating of Easter is based on the lunar calendar used by the Jews to identify Passover. That's why it moves around on our Gregorian calendar.

Someone in my small group gave me these interesting facts. This year is the earliest Easter any of us will ever see the rest of our lives. Only those 95 years and older have ever seen Easter this early. The next time Easter will be this early will be 220 years from now (AD 2228). The last time Easter was this early was 1913.

Easter can actually be 1 day earlier than it is this year, March 22. The next time that will happen will be 277 years from now (AD 2285). The last time Easter was on March 22 was 1818. So this Easter is almost a once in a lifetime thing. In case you've ever wondered whether it's good to get into a small group, let me tell you, you learn all kinds of things in small groups at Grace!

Have you ever wished you could visit another era of history for a day? Suppose you had the chance to choose 7 different days of history. You could visit any era that you wanted and spend 1 day there and you could do that 7 different times. Which eras and days would you choose?

I've already figured out which ones I'd choose. One of the days for me would be the day of resurrection. I can tell you now, it wouldn't be Good Friday. I couldn't take it. Death is too hard on me all the way from pets to people.

We had this bird named Woody for almost 8 years. It's amazing how you can become attached to a parakeet. I got to know his different chirps and moods. I'd say, "Ring the bell" and Woody would put his beak on the bell and throw it. Well, last summer, Woody needed his nails trimmed so Marie took him to the pet store.

It wasn't too long until Marie called me. I didn't like the sound of her voice. I said, "What's wrong?" She replied, "Well, the lady just came out of the room and said I don't have good news. She cut the 1st nail and Woody expired." I had just seen Woody alive not a half hour ago. I couldn't believe he was gone. You might think this strange, but I choked back tears.

Now if that's what happened over Woody, I can't imagine what I'd be like if I had come become a close friend of Christ's and watched Him die, thinking it was forever the end of our earthly relationship.

But how great it would be to have been present when news of the resurrection swept through Jerusalem and traveled quickly all the way to Galilee. How special it would have been to have had smashed dreams become real. How incredible it would have been to realize that this Jesus who died is once again alive, having risen from the dead! To have back again the very special person you thought was irreversibly dead!! How I wish I could have actually been there!

The events of the resurrection are historical. The crucifixion and resurrection of Christ really happened. There's an empty tomb in Jerusalem today and Jesus is alive. But I want to approach the resurrection of Christ in terms of a great drama with an array of interesting and colorful characters.

So I read through the 4 gospels—Mathew, Mark, Luke, and John—on a search for those who were there the day Jesus rose from the grave. I'm sure many of you have some idea of who was involved that day. But I want to reintroduce them to you afresh this Easter weekend.

Here are the characters that play out in the great drama of the resurrection of Jesus Christ at the tomb:

The Guards (Matt. 27:62-66; 28:11-15).

Matthew is the only one who speaks about the guards. One of Jesus' disciples, Joseph of Arimathea, went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Pilate ordered the body of Jesus to be given over to him. After preparing the body for burial, Joseph laid the body of Jesus in a brand new tomb and had a large stone rolled against the entrance.

The next day, the chief priests and Pharisees got to think-ing, "Didn't that deceiver Christ teach that after 3 days He'd rise again?" So they went to Pilate and asked him to secure the tomb for 3 days just in case the disciples would come and steal the body and say that Jesus rose from the dead.

Pilate made some soldiers available to the Jewish leaders and told them to make the grave as secure as possible. So they sent a guard to watch over the tomb and to place a seal over the secured grave.

At some point in early dawn after the 3rd day, the stone was rolled away by 2 angels. The guards were so frightened, they fell like dead men. Then they took off like a pack of scared rabbits. Some of them didn't stop until they came into the city to report to the chief priests what had happened.

Well, that triggered a meeting with all the top Jewish leaders. In their continuing spiritual blindness, even in the face of an incredible resurrection, this was the best they could do. The priests said, "We'll give you a pile of money if you tell everybody that the disciples came and stole the body 'while you were sleeping'." That would, of course, have been the 1st movie by that name. How would they know what happened to the body if they were sleeping?

But that's what happened. The soldiers took the money and spread that story around. And some 30 years later, as Matthew writes his gospel, that was the story that was circulating.

Let's go to the next characters in the drama.

The Women (Matt. 28:1-10; Mk. 15:47-16:11; Lk. 23:55-24:11; Jn. 20:1-18).

The Gospels tell us that as it began to dawn on the 1st day of the week, some women made their way towards the tomb of Jesus. They encountered an earthquake and 2 angels at an empty tomb. The women were frightened as the angels made their great announcement that Jesus was not there. He had risen from the dead!

The women at the empty tomb were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of the disciple James and Joses, who was also called "the other Mary", and a little known lady by the name of Salome.

Who were these ladies? Mary Magdalene was the woman from whom Jesus cast out 7 demons. Her last name indi-cates her hometown in Galilee—Magdala. After Jesus set her free from demon possession, Mary became a follower of His. She was fairly prominent in the crucifixion and resurrection accounts. That's about all the New Testament says about her although many have tried to connect her with the Mary that Jesus forgave for sexual immorality—the Mary who washed His feet with her hair (Lk. 7).

The "other Mary" is the mother of the Apostle James. It's very likely that she was with the women who followed Jesus and His disciples and cared for their needs. She comes to the stage in this drama as she sorrowfully witnesses the crucifixion of Jesus and accompanies Mary Magdalene to the tomb only to discover that Jesus was no longer among the dead.

The 3rd lady was Salome. She's mentioned only in Mark's gospel and solely in connection with looking on the crucifixion from a distance and going to the tomb with the 2 Marys to anoint the body of Christ. (Some identify Salome as the mother of James and John.)

(There's another lady that's mentioned by name in Luke's account—Joanna. She had been healed by Jesus and was one of the women, although married (to an official under Herod Antipas {Chuza}), who accompanied the women who ministered to Jesus and the disciples. She may or may not have been at the tomb with the other 2 Marys but she was one of the women who announced the resurrection to the remaining 11 disciples.)

It's very interesting to me that the 1st people to realize that Jesus had risen from the dead were the very close women friends of Jesus. In fact, Mark tells us that Mary Magdalene was the very 1st person to see the risen Lord (Mk. 16:9). I would have expected that Jesus would have arranged for the 11 disciples to have seen Him 1st, and if not all of them, for sure, Peter.

I don't know why the women had the privilege to see the resurrected Lord 1st and to announce His resurrection to the rest. The Gospels don't tell us. But I imagine that as Satan came to Eve 1st in the Garden of Eden as the prelude to the fall of the human race, so Christ came 1st to the women as the prelude to the redemption of the human race.

On to the next characters in the resurrection drama.

Peter and John (Lk. 24:12; Jn. 19:2-10).

These are the only 2 disciples that are said to have gone to the tomb. Before I talk about what they did, you need to know that each of the gospel accounts takes a different slant on the events of the resurrection. Some record events that others leave out. Some vary in reporting who was at the tomb. Some seem to spend more time on an event that others merely mention. And some seem to record the chronology of events in a slightly different order. I think it's all reconcilable with some serious study. But the Peter and John event is a good illustration of the differences between the gospels.

Luke tells us that a whole group of women found the apostles and told them about the empty tomb and the angels' announcement to them that Jesus was alive and not in the tomb. All Luke says is that Peter ran to the tomb and found it empty except for the grave clothes, so he went home. John is the one who tells us the larger story and includes himself.

Apparently John slows down the chronology that Luke speeded up. Mary Magdalene came from the tomb and told Peter and John that Jesus was missing and was probably in another tomb. She did not yet comprehend that Jesus had risen from the dead.

When Peter and John heard that the tomb was empty, they raced to the tomb. John outran Peter and got there 1st. But they both saw the same thing—an empty tomb and the grave clothes of Christ. Neither understood at that time what had really happened so returned in their confusion to their homes. The best was yet to come.

Now to the last of the characters in the resurrection drama at the empty tomb:

The Angels (Mt. 28:2-7; 16:5-7; Lk. 24:4-7; Jn. 20:11-13).

The angels are the climax to the drama at the tomb. It's the excitement. It's what turns the story. Here's a composite of what happened. (Each gospel records a slightly different slant to the angels' visit to the tomb. Some talk about 1 angel. Some talk about 2. In Mark, the women thought the angel was a young man.)

As the angels descended to the tomb, a severe earth-quake occurred. They rolled away the mammoth stone at the mouth of the tomb and made the stone their seat. The angels were dazzling, like lightning and their apparel was as white as snow in brilliant sunlight.

The angels then entered the tomb and took a seat where Jesus had been lying. From that vantage point, they told the women who had come that Jesus was no longer among the dead but had risen. They asked the women, "Don't you remember that this is exactly what Jesus said would happen? Now go tell the disciples!"

The people who saw the angels had electric reactions. The guards fell as dead men and then recovered enough to run away. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground and then fled the tomb trembling and astonished. The fear in those days was—you see an angel and you die. Somehow the angels had time to get their message out and it was eventually believed. Jesus was alive!

Now I want to give you a little theory of mine. It's not explicit in the text but here's my theory. The popular notion is that the angels rolled away the stone and out came Jesus early on the 1st day of the week. Nowhere does it say that in the gospel accounts.

Here's what I think happened. Jesus rose from the dead sometime nearing the end of the Sabbath as calculated from the chronologies of the prophecies concerning the timing of his death and resurrection. By the time the angels and the women got there, Jesus was already gone.

Remember, He was able to pass through walls in His resurrection body. He was gone and the guards never knew it. The role of the angels was not to spring Jesus. He had been gone for hours. The role of the angels was to spring the news to humanity that Jesus has beaten our biggest enemy—death!

Well, there were other players on the stage that 1st day of Christ's resurrection away from the drama of the tomb—the 2 men on the road to Emmaus and the meeting of Jesus with the 11 disciples in Jerusalem. But those matters are for another time.

Now I want to pose the question in the title of my sermon. What if we had been there? What if we had been 1 of the characters in the drama that surrounded the empty tomb? With which one would we most identify?

I've created a **Scale of Belief** that the characters represent; a scale with which most of us can identify. It's a scale that comes from the drama surrounding the tomb on the day of resurrection. It's so representative of how people respond to Jesus today. As I go up the scale through the characters in the drama, see where you are on the scale of belief.

The guards represent the bottom end of the scale. **It's Stage 1—Apathetic Unbelief.** Jesus didn't mean anything to the guards. For all they knew, He was just another bothersome criminal they had to deal with. This wasn't anything out of the ordinary to them. They were aware of Him but Jesus Christ didn't factor into their lives. They weren't mad at Him. They hadn't rejected Him. Jesus was just irrelevant to them. Jesus had no effect on their personal lives.

In apathetic unbelief, you kind of know something about Jesus. You know He had something to do with history and religion. You're not really anti-Jesus. But you live your life outside of any real connection with Him. He's not a real factor in your life.

We move up the scale to Peter and John. **This is Stage 2—Disheartened Belief.** Peter and John had an extremely close relationship with Jesus for 3 years. They were in the inner circle of the disciples. They had heard Jesus teach and even prophecy His death and resurrection. They had seen Him perform miracles. They knew Jesus was the Son of God. But when Jesus died, they felt like we do when we lose one very close to us. They actually believed that they had lost a very dear friend to death for good on this earth and they were in raw grief.

Word now comes that the tomb is empty. I can tell you, their 1st thoughts were not about resurrection. They were about a mistaken tomb or an unexpected maneuver with the body of Jesus. I almost sense it was an emotional rally to fix something extremely important that wasn't quite right.

At this stage on the scale of belief, you know you've been with Jesus. You know you've had some great experiences with Him. Jesus and the experiences still mean a lot to you. But you're in a difficult trial, a very tough spot. You're cry-ing out to Jesus and He doesn't seem to be responding. You feel like He's kind of left your scene. You feel disheartened. In some ways, you feel like Jesus is dead.

You hear others talking about what Jesus is doing in their lives, like the women who claimed to see Him alive. Your curiosity is raised. But you wonder how Jesus can be active over there when He seems so inactive where you are. You do all you can to access the Jesus you knew before your pain. But you kind of resign yourself to live with a sense of disappointment and confusion.

Let's move further up the scale to the women. They too were close to Jesus. They had been healed by Jesus and for 3 years, had followed Him and ministered to His needs. They did the same thing in death. They stood beneath His cross and then made preparations to minister spices and perfumes to His dead body.

Their biggest dilemma was—who would move the stone to let them in? But when they got to the tomb, they discovered the stone was already rolled away. They thought someone had moved the body and they wouldn't be able to find it.

That's when the angels stepped in. They announced the resurrection of Christ. I don't think the women got the message. Here's what convinced them that Jesus was alive. It was when Jesus Himself appeared to Mary Magdalene at the tomb. Mary thought Jesus was the gardener. But when Jesus said to her, "Mary!", she recognized His voice and hugged Him so tightly she wouldn't let go. That's when she and the other women took off to find the disciples to say, "We have seen the Lord!"

This is Stage 3—Renewed Belief. This is the stage where you've been struggling. You're been hurting. Your dreams have been shattered. You try to make the best of the shambles. You may not even be expecting anything good.

But all of a sudden, you reencounter Jesus. Something happens and you know it was Jesus at work. It was something only He could do in your life or say from the Bible and you're radically touched. You're filled again with hope. Things begin to turn around and all you can do is tell others what's happened to you. What seemed so impossible has turned around—your marriage, your kids, your sickness, your job, your finances, your addictions—and you know it was Jesus. And your sagging faith has been renewed!

Let's go to the angels—the top end of the scale of belief. **It's Stage 4—Unshakable Belief.** You've known the Lord for a long time. You have a good grasp of the Bible. You've had enough skirmishes and problems to know that Jesus is reliable and that He's your Rock and Refuge and High Tower and Mighty Warrior and Victorious Lord.

Keep in mind, the angels don't sit around playing harps. The Bible teaches us that they do battle with the forces of Satan and darkness. Yet they follow Christ with absolute abandon and trust. They know God profoundly and who their enemy is and they're incredibly stable. They don't crumble when the worst comes their way because their belief is so strong in God and in His Word.

This is the stage we're shooting for—Stage 4. It's not that we'll have a life free from issues and troubles. But we've come to the place where we don't panic. We don't cave in. We have an unshakable faith in God and in His Word and it carries us through the worst of times. And we actually are able to steady others in lower stages of the belief scale.

Conclusion

Think of the 4 stages on the scale of belief that I talked about from the characters in the resurrection drama. Of those who were there, with which of the characters do you most identify? At which stage are you?

Maybe you identify with the guards at the Apathetic Unbelief Stage. Jesus is not really a part of your life although you know something about Him. This would be a good time to investigate who Jesus is. It would be worth your while to notice Him more in your life. You can tell yourself all kinds of stories like the guards did who took some money to cover up the resurrection. But deep down there's this nagging sense that Jesus is different from anyone else in history.

The 1 thing you're missing is that He wants to be your most incredible friend. He wants to connect with you through your heart about His death, burial, and resurrection. That wasn't for other people while you could care less. It was for you so that your sins can be forgiven and so that you can receive the free gift of eternal life. You may be at the Disheartened Belief Stage like Peter and John were. You have a genuine belief in Jesus. But life has hit you hard and you're disheartened because it doesn't seem that Jesus is touching your life with resurrection power. You need to listen to more people who are having touches by Christ until you become convinced that Jesus is doing something in your life.

You might be at the Renewed Belief Stage where the women were. You've been struggling in life. But you've had an incredible experience with Christ that you weren't expecting and you can't keep quiet about it. Yet at the same time, your most recent blessed experience with Christ hasn't given you the long-term stability you need.

Or you may be at the Unshakable Belief Stage, like the angels were—totally steady and secure in your confidence in Christ. Unshakable though embattled. An authoritative voice to others at lower stages. I'm not at that stage yet myself. But that's what I'm aiming for.

As we contemplate the message of Easter, I'm inviting you to make a response. My encouragement for you is to move up 1 or more stages in the scale of belief. We don't know for sure about the guards. But the rest of them moved up the stages in a hurry. Since Jesus is risen from the dead, you too can move up the stages like the characters in the drama. Make a move today!

(Postscript—I started the sermon today by asking, "If it were possible, what 7 days would you like to visit in history?" An interesting fantasy. But we all know it's a complete impossibility. You can only go back in time on TV or in the movies. How many of you believe that it's impossible to go back to a former day in history?

You're wrong! There is 1 day in history we can visit. Honestly. In the books of Romans (6:4-5), Colossians (2:12-13; 3:1) and Ephesians (2:5-6), the Bible says that if we have believed in Christ, we were buried with Him in His burial and raised with Him in His resurrection. Those of us who have believed in Christ were at the resurrection of Christ. We participated in some actual, spiritual, and mysterious way in that experience with Christ.

How is that possible? Let me ask you a question. I assume everyone in this room was born. Your mother had a birth and you participated with her in that birth. How many of you remember being with your mother in that experience? Not 1 of us. Did you actually participate in that experience? Yes. Or you wouldn't be here.

Were we as believers at the 1st century resurrection of Jesus Christ spoken about in the 4 gospels? Absolutely. I don't know how God did it but the Apostle Paul tells us clearly that somehow that's the 1 day in history that all people who believe in Christ get to go back to. We who believe in Christ became part of the drama of the empty tomb. I can't tell you how it happened. That's for God to reveal on the other side of eternal life. But we were actually part of the resurrection story! Praise God for making the impossible possible—participation with Christ in His resurrection!)