

“Easter Ironies”
Matthew 27:62-28:15
April 12, 2020

INTRODUCTION:

Life and literature are full of irony. For example, in this current pandemic, we love people by staying away from them. That’s ironic because it’s opposite of what you would normally expect. I remember a very large young man in my Junior High School whose name was Tiny. Literature abounds with irony too. Wendy and I were talking this week about the irony in *Lord of the Rings*, in which the least likely to be corrupted by the ring of power was the least powerful, a little Hobbit. Christianity abounds with irony. The way to be exalted is to humble yourself. The greatest among you shall be the servant of all. So it should not surprise us that the central event of Christianity, the death and resurrection of Jesus, is filled irony. As I was studying this passage this week, I was struck by the many ironies I found. If the resurrection of Jesus is to be of any benefit to us, we must both appreciate these ironies and enter into them through application. So let’s take a look at just three of the ironies and both appreciate and apply them to ourselves.

I. A God Who Wins By Losing

As this story opens, it looks as if Jesus has lost. He has died the death of a criminal, and his body is now residing in a tomb, wrapped tightly with burial cloths. The most powerful people in his nation are gathered to do all they can to keep his followers from launching a movement that will resurrect Jesus’ popularity by claiming that he has been raised from the dead. Interestingly, those who wanted to kill Jesus because he healed a blind man on the Sabbath are now gathered on the Sabbath, working to insure the death of Jesus’ movement. Jesus’ enemies, unlike his disciples, remembered Jesus’ prophecy about his resurrection on the third day. They assume, falsely, that Jesus’ disciples will also remember, and they are fearful that the disciples will come and steal the body and then claim that he has been raised. So they order that the stone covering the tomb should be sealed and that guards should be posted to prevent any theft of the body. The key word of this opening paragraph is the word “secure,” used three times. It is the perpetual quest of non-Christians to secure Jesus’ defeat. The power of earth and hell had combined to put Jesus in the tomb and to keep him there, and it looks as if they have succeeded.

Chapter 28 occurs on the next day, the day after the Jewish Sabbath, or simply Sunday. It is the first Easter Sunday, before dawn. It is dark, both literally and figuratively. Two women, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, decide to go to visit Jesus’ tomb. It doesn’t seem that they are going because

they remembered Jesus' prophecy about his resurrection on the third day. Rather, they probably were going for the same reason we visit the graves of loved ones today. It helps us remember them and feel closer to them.

Is this all that is left of the Christian movement? Is it just two women who have nothing more than fond memories of Jesus? The twelve disciples are not here. They are hiding in fear. It is appropriate that we pause and take note of the faithfulness of Mary Magdalene, one of the two women here. Throughout the life and death of Jesus, she stands by him. She doesn't even leave when he seemingly had left her at his death. She was there during the sufferings of his crucifixion (27:56), and when he was buried she sat facing his tomb (27:61). And now she returns just before dawn on this day. This is the darkest moment in the story. It would seem to any observer that Jesus has lost.

Have you noticed how in all the best stories the turning point occurs just when things look bleakest? So it is in this, the foundational story of all time. As the two women are at the tomb, a great earthquake occurs and an angel descends, rolls back the stone and sits on it. The soldiers who been posted to guard the tomb are paralyzed with fear. The angel addresses the women, telling them not to be afraid, but then giving the good news that Jesus has been raised. They are then told to go and tell the disciples. On the way, they meet Jesus himself, who tells them again not to be afraid but to go and tell the disciples of his resurrection.

Matthew then takes us back to the guards who had been paralyzed with fear at the arrival of the angel. They were in trouble. It was common practice in this day to execute guards who failed in their charge. These guards had but one duty, and that was to keep in place the stone covering the tomb and to keep Jesus in. They failed, and they knew they were in trouble. But there were extenuating circumstances in this case, namely the appearance of an angel. So they went to explain to the Jewish leaders exactly what had happened. As a result of the earlier decision to post the guards, we now have Jesus' enemies testifying to the resurrection of Jesus. God has won by losing. As Calvin points out, "Christ's resurrection would have been more obscure or, at any rate, their ability to deny it would have been all the greater, if they had not taken such care to place witnesses over the tomb." God had won earlier in the death of Jesus, intended by his enemies and by Satan to be the end of Jesus. But it only served the purposes of God to bring forgiveness and salvation. And now the actions of his enemies again end up serving God's purposes. God is so great and sovereign that he knows how to win by losing.

We apply this truth by taking to heart the message that is spoken twice, once by the angel and once by Jesus. **"Do not be afraid"** (28:5, 10). Why should we not be afraid? Because God knows how to win by losing. When it feels that everything is against you, remember the resurrection of Jesus and see your fear replaced by awe and gratitude. In his famous hymn, "God Moves

in a Mysterious Way,” William Cowper wrote, “Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take. The clouds ye so much dread are big with mercy, and shall break in blessings on your head!”

Think with me for a moment about the damage fear does to us. It monopolizes our attention. When we are fearful, we make big the threat of which we are frightened. As a result, God is made small. So hear the voice of Jesus saying, “Do not be afraid.” Let him speak those words to your fearful heart. Are you experiencing losses during this Coronavirus pandemic? Perhaps you have lost money, a job or health. Jesus says to you, “Don’t be afraid, because I know how to turn losses into wins. Trust me.”

II. The Fraud of the Fraud-Preventers

When the Jewish leaders gather on the Sabbath, the day before Jesus’ resurrection, they express a concern to prevent a fraud. They ask Pilate, **“Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, ‘He has risen from the dead,’ and the last fraud will be worse than the first”** (27:64). But after the guards report to them of the events that happened at the tomb, they arrange for a fraud of their own. They bribed the soldiers to tell a lie. **“Tell people, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep’”** (28:13). An additional irony here is that they now advance the very story they had earlier tried to prevent. They became guilty of the very thing they said they were trying to prevent. They knew they were promoting a falsehood, but they did it anyway. Truth was not their primary concern. Getting rid of Jesus was the thing of greatest value to them.

Notice that these leaders did not lack for evidence of Jesus’ resurrection. It is clear that they knew at least two things. They knew that Jesus had predicted his resurrection, and they knew that an angel had appeared to roll away the stone and announce Jesus’ resurrection. But still they did not believe. These same leaders had once approached Jesus to ask for a sign, presumably to authenticate Jesus’ ministry. Jesus told them that the only sign they would get would be the sign of Jonah, by which he was referring to his resurrection. This was the greatest sign imaginable, proving the authenticity of Jesus’ ministry. And they are presented with clear evidence, but still refuse to believe. When Jesus was crucified, these same leaders had taunted him, **“Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him”** (27:42). But now an even greater miracle has occurred, and still they don’t believe.

There are many today who are just like these leaders. They say that if God would only present evidence, they would believe in him. They think that the central problem is lack of evidence, when the real problem is a heart that has no place for God. It is a heart problem, not an intellectual problem.

Christianity does not teach that evidence is unimportant. The Bible is not anti-intellectual, asking us to believe things that are opposed to good reason. Notice the accumulation of seeing verbs in chapter 28. Eight times in these first ten verses a verb of seeing occurs, inviting the two women and the disciples to see that the tomb is empty. For a long time, I misunderstood the action of the angel rolling away the stone. I thought he rolled it away in order to let Jesus out. But it is clear in the text that he rolled it away not to let Jesus out, but to let in the women and later the disciples, so that they might see the empty tomb.

What the Bible does teach, here and elsewhere, is that our interpretation of evidence is affected by our hearts. We tend to make the evidence, no matter what it is, come out the way we want it to. We flatter ourselves into thinking that reason rules our lives, that we are heroically honest people who go where the evidence leads us, no matter what. The truth is more what you see in this passage. When you read those who deny the physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus, it quickly becomes evident that they do not go where the evidence takes them. They are just making it up as they go along in order to have things turn out the way they want them to, which is to make the resurrection a fiction. For example, John Dominic Crossan speaks and writes extensively against the bodily resurrection of Jesus. He contends that Jesus was deserted by all his disciples, buried in a shallow grave and likely eaten by scavenging dogs. He writes of the body of Jesus, that “those who cared did not know where it was and those who knew did not care.” But he has absolutely no documentary evidence for this contention. He’s just making it up. If you start with the conclusion that Jesus has not been raised, then you will take hold of any explanation. The argument of these Jewish leaders is suspicious from the very beginning. If their case is built on the claim they bribe the guards to make, that the disciples came and stole the body while they were asleep, a cross-examining attorney would have no difficulty discrediting that. If they were asleep, how did they know the disciples came to steal the body?

The application I want to propose is aimed at all skeptics of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Would you consider the possibility that the real reason behind your skepticism is found in your heart, not your head? Is it possible that you have latched on to any reason for denying it simply because you don’t want to believe it? Ask God to help you see your heart’s true condition.

III. Hope for the Hopeless

If the resurrection means anything, it means that there is hope in even the most hopeless of situations. Nothing feels more final than death. But the resurrection of Jesus shouts to us this glorious truth that death is not the end. I love the first word coming from the mouth of Jesus in his appearance to these

two women. If you were asked to imagine what might be the first words from the lips of the resurrected Jesus, what would you imagine him saying? Perhaps you would expect some profound statement of victory, or maybe a warning that they stand back and not approach him in his glorified state. It is nothing like that. **“And behold, Jesus met them and said, ‘Greetings!’”** (v. 9). The word used here is the most common of greetings in Greek. It is the everyday greeting people would extend to one another. Frederick Bruner translates it, “Hi!” He’s obviously not from the south. Had he been, he would have translated it, “Hey, ya’ll!” It’s just an everyday greeting, as if Jesus is saying, “You thought it was all over, but it’s just beginning. A future is before us of being together forever.” Our future life is not so different from our current one, with one major exception: no more sin and no more curse, and therefore everlasting joy. Our loved ones we meet in the next life might very well greet us similarly.

One other note of hope I see in this passage is the way Jesus refers to his disciples. When the angel gave a message to the two women, he told them, **“Go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee”** (v. 7). Jesus tells them the same thing, but with one notable change. **“Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me”** (v. 10). Not “my disciples” but “my brothers.” There is a world of grace and forgiveness in that word “brothers.” These are the ones who had all abandoned Jesus at the moment of his need. These are the ones who argued with one another about which of them was the greatest, as recently as the eve of Jesus’ crucifixion, just three days prior to this.

Many of us, myself included, sometimes think that we have snuck in to the kingdom of God through the side door. We believed we are uniquely flawed humans who don’t really deserve entrance into heaven. If you are concerned that this word of hope for the hopeless is for others but not for you, because of your sin, let your heart be at rest. Jesus came not for the righteous, but for sinners. He is full of grace. All that is needed is to believe that he is full of grace for you, and come to him in your needy self.

CONCLUSION:

When Mary Magdalene and the other Mary departed from the angel, we read that they did so with **“fear and great joy”** (v. 8). Some wonder how both of those could be present at the same time. Most parents feel the same way at the birth of their children. There is fear because you realize that nothing will be the same again, and there is joy because of the new life. It was the same for these women. Because Jesus has been raised, nothing will ever be the same. It means that Jesus is God, and that we are to submit to him and his rule in all things. It also means that because Jesus is God, his promise of everlasting joy is good. There is life after death, and we respond with great joy. So may God fill your heart both with fear and great joy, because Jesus is risen indeed!

Small Group Discussion Questions
Matthew 27:62-28:15

1. Do you have any memories of a favorite Easter? Describe it and what made it a favorite.
2. Just prior to the women being made aware of the resurrection of Jesus, things looked as black as ever. Have you or someone you know ever experienced a time when a prayer was answered just when things looked darkest?
3. We noted how God wins here by losing. The Jewish leaders get exactly what they want, guards posted at the tomb of Jesus, and this turns out to advance the proof of the resurrection. Now there are other witnesses of the resurrection, and these are from the enemies of Jesus. Have you seen any way that God has used something that appeared to be a loss for you to give you something good?
4. The application drawn from this fact that God wins by losing is that we are not to be afraid, a message repeated in the text. Are there fears you are battling now? What are they? How could this truth help you in your fight against fear?
5. The Jewish leaders claim to want to prevent a fraud, only to end up perpetrating one themselves. This shows that they are not very aware of their own desires. How might a greater awareness of our own desires help us in our walk with God? How might you be more aware of your desires?
6. The resurrection promises hope for the hopeless. Is there an area of your life now where you need to remember the hope we have in Jesus?