

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Jesus - for the Other

(Studies of Jesus)

HE IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN, INDEED!

Alive!

(Matthew 27:57-66; 28:1-15)

Study #7

Introduction: Based in history...

I graduated from Stephen F. Austin State University (in Nacogdoches, far east Texas) in 1978, with a major in English and a minor in Philosophy, good for a large cup of coffee anywhere, if you threw in a couple of quarters. (coffee was cheap back then)

I had always enjoyed literature and the world of ideas, so I went with liberal arts. Among the courses I took in the Philosophy department was, "World Religions."

We studied Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity. My professor for that class (which included 5 students; I vividly remember often being the only student awake during many of these class sessions) was Dr. MacGruder.

Dr. MacGruder was not a religious man, but he taught us that Christianity and Judaism stand unique among the world's religions for being based on historical events and not on philosophy or ideas.

I'm not sure that he was aware of what he admitted by saying that, but it was an astounding statement. And Dr. MacGruder was right.

If you take away certain historical events from Israel's history, Judaism falls apart. If there was no historical Abraham or Moses, Samson or King David, no Red Sea crossing or conquest of the land of Palestine, there is no Jewish faith. Judaism is founded on history.

The same is true for Christianity. The early church was birthed out of events that really took place.

Specifically, the exemplary life of Jesus, the remarkable teachings of Jesus, the hideous death of Jesus. And one more thing. The resurrection of Jesus.

Each of the four Gospels tells the story of Jesus from a slightly different perspective. And this morning, we're going to listen to Matthew's unique telling of the last chapter of Jesus' earthly life and the beginning of Jesus' next chapter.

Matthew tells us that Jesus died on a Roman cross on a Friday afternoon. Burial was the work that had to be done on Friday.

Friday's Work (27:57-61)

Buried in a Borrowed Tomb (vv. 57-60)

Joseph of Arimathea (v. 57)

[57] When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus.

- **Mark** tells us that Joseph was a prominent member of the Jewish Council (the Sanhedrin) and that he had been eagerly awaiting the arrival of the kingdom of God.
- **Luke** informs us both that Joseph was a good and a just man AND that he had disagreed with the way his colleagues on the Sanhedrin had treated Jesus.

- **John's Gospel** refers to Joseph as **[19:38]...a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one, for fear of the Jews.**

Here, Matthew agrees with John that Joseph was a Jesus-follower and tells us, too, that he was wealthy.¹ Put it all together, and Joseph was, certainly, on Friday afternoon, one disappointed man.

But it was Joseph who offered a place for Jesus' burial.

Laid in the tomb (vv. 58-60)

[58] This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. [59] And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, [60] and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the entrance of the tomb and went away.²

Considering all that Joseph had endured, in seeing Jesus unjustly tried, condemned, and executed, give him credit for offering his tomb for Jesus' burial.

It must have been late in the afternoon, following Jesus' death, that Joseph went to Pilate, the Roman governor, to ask for Jesus' body.

Earlier, we might have accused Joseph of cowardice for being a secret disciple, but not now. Here he acted with courageous faith.

In addition to Joseph, Matthew goes on to name two women who were players in this drama.

¹ **Isaiah 53:9] His grave was assigned with wicked man, yet with a rich man in His death.**"

² R.T. France - Tombs were of various kinds. Many were sealed with some sort of boulder wedged into place to discourage wild animals and grave robbers. But an expensive tomb consisted of an antechamber hewn out of the rock face, with a low passage (cf. 'bent over,' John 20:5, 11) leading into the burial chamber that was sealed with a cut, disk-shaped stone that rolled in a slot cut into the rock. The slot was on an incline, making the grave easy to seal but difficult to open: several men might be needed to roll the stone back up the incline.

Witnesses to the Burial (v. 61)

[61] And Mary Magdalene was there, and the other Mary, sitting opposite the grave.

We know Mary Magdalene. Mark and Luke tell us that Jesus had cast seven demons out of her. There is no reason to suspect that she was an immoral woman, only that she suffered from cruel demonic oppression.

And it's enough to say that **"the other Mary"** was one of several women of means who supported Jesus from their personal wealth.³

These two have come to Joseph's tomb. They watched the burial. They saw the stone rolled away. That watched as Jesus' body was placed inside the hollowed-out cave. They saw the half-ton stone rolled back in place.

And with that, just like that, Jesus and all the hopes He had stirred in the hearts of His disciples was gone.

It's tough to even imagine what life was like from that Friday night forward for all the disciples.

- They had known and loved Jesus, so they would have been grieving deeply.
- They would all have been under scrutiny from the Jewish and the Roman governments, since Jesus had been convicted of both blasphemy and sedition. They would have all been considered guilty by association.
- They had just lost the best Friend they had ever known and the One to whom they had pledged their lives. Their Lord was dead.

How did they feel? Try "hopeless" "devastated" "undone".

³ She is probably the mother of James, the lesser (the second apostle named James).

That's Friday. Surprisingly, the Bible hardly mentions Saturday, the day after the crucifixion.

Luke tells us that the disciples rested on the Sabbath (Saturday), according to the commandment, while Mark and John move straight from Friday to Sunday.

It is Matthew who alone gives us a glimpse of anything that happened on that Saturday. And it's not a glimpse of the disciples, but of work that was done by others.

Saturday's Work (27:62-66)

The Pharisees' Concern (vv. 62-63)

[62] Now on the next day, the day after the preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with Pilate, [63] and said, "Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I am to rise again.'"

The Jewish leadership took initiative to get with the Roman governor. They had a concern, and their concern revolved around Jesus' claim that He would rise again.

So, if we had thought that the resurrection was something that Jesus only spoke about to His inner circle, we've been wrong. He talked about it publicly, and He said it often enough that these rulers of the Jews had heard it, remembered it, and were concerned about it.

No, they weren't concerned that He was actually going to rise from the dead.

They referred to Jesus as "***that deceiver***" for pulling off the ruse that He was the Messiah. They have no regard for Him at all. But they do have concerns about what His disciples might do.

The Pharisees' Demand (v. 64)

[64] "Therefore, give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, otherwise His disciples may come and steal Him

away and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last deception will be worse than the first."

Again, the concern is not that Jesus would be raised. It is that His silly followers would steal His body so that they could keep on spreading Messianic nonsense about Jesus even after He was dead.

A Roman guard would guarantee the safe-keeping of Jesus' body, and that would put to rest the Jesus movement.⁴ Pilate agreed, and granted them their request.

The Pharisees' Success Over Pilate (vv. 65-66)

[65] Pilate said to them, "You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how." [66] And they went and made the grave secure, and along with the guard they set a seal on the stone.

So, Jesus is buried and the grave is made secure. Mission: Accomplished.

And that Saturday night, the Jewish chief priests went home to sleep, hearts at rest. Saturdays' work was done and there would be no more problems with Jesus.

Matthew now fast forwards us through Saturday night to Sunday. We see the same two women who were at the burial, back at Joseph's tomb.

Sunday's Work

The Scene at the Tomb (vv. 1-10)

The women at the tomb (v. 1)

⁴ There is disagreement as to whether Pilate gave his own troops for a guard (Dr. Luis Barbieri, [Bible Knowledge Commentary](#)) or if he simply allowed the Jews to post their own temple guards (Thomas Constable). It seems to me to be more consistent with the narrative to say that Pilate gave the Jews a Roman guard to watch the tomb.

[1] Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave.

Maybe they didn't know that a Roman guard had been posted or that a seal had been set.

These women did know that Jesus was dead. They had been there at the crucifixion and had watched Him die. They had watched men place His body in the tomb. They had watched as the stone was rolled into place.⁵

And now they have come to start off a new week to honor Jesus' memory by going to the gravesite.⁶ They expected the stone to be in place in front of a tomb with Jesus' body inside.

When they got to the tomb, though, they found what they did not expect.

The angel at the tomb (vv. 2-4)

The angel's power (v. 2)

[2] And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it.

So, the arrival of the angel caused the earthquake. The angel, himself, was responsible for the rolled-away stone. And there was the angel sitting there, on top of the stone.

The angel's appearance and impact (vv. 3-4)

[3] And his appearance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. [4] The guards shook for fear of him and became like dead men.

That phrase, "**his appearance was like lightning**", has long intrigued me. It speaks of brightness, sure. But with lightning comes a flash. There is movement with lightning. So, in my mind's eye, I picture the form of an angel in a blur of blinding, flashing light.

No wonder the guards went catatonic. Any of us would, too!

So, the sealed tomb was unsealed and the guards weren't guarding when the women arrived.

Thirty-three years earlier, it had been angels who had announced Jesus' birth to lowly shepherds. Now an angel announces Jesus' resurrection to two, grief-struck, forlorn women.

The angel with the women at the tomb (vv. 5-10)

The angel speaks (vv. 5-7)

Given the angel's appearance - "**like lightning!**" - we understand, "**Do not be afraid!**"! But that's not all he has to say.

[5] The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified.

[6] "He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said.⁷ Come, see the place where He was lying. [7] "Go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going ahead of you into Galilee, there you will see Him; behold, I have told you."

So, the angel reminded the women of what Jesus' opponents had remembered. The chief priests and Pharisees remembered that Jesus said He would be raised from the dead. The women forgot.

⁵ Again, the stone would have been a circular slab rolled in a channel carved in to the rock. The stone would have weighed at least a half a ton.

⁶ They were certainly expecting that His body would be in the tomb. Matthew doesn't mention their intent to finish the work of embalming Jesus' body, which other Gospel records do mention.

⁷ None of the Gospel writers explored the theological implications of the resurrection. They simply recorded the story - much as you would expect people to do who were writing down a history of the life and times of Jesus.

But Jesus did rise, and this angel is all verbs. Action. He invites the women to “come” “see” “go” “tell”.

And off they went, quickly, the hopelessness of Saturday gone. And this is the final Easter Sunday glimpse of these Jesus followers Matthew gives us.

The women return, report (vv. 8-10)

[8] And they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples. [9] And behold, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him. [10] Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and take word to My brethren to leave for Galilee, and there they will see Me.”

As they began to run, who should meet them - but Jesus! And the two Mary’s did exactly what any of us would have done. They dropped to the ground and worshipped the now RESURRECTED Jesus!

Both Luke and John tell us that both Mary and Mary ran back to where the disciples were and that they did announce the resurrection to the guys.

Matthew doesn’t go there. The women have the angel’s words and now they have Jesus’ words. And we are left to assume that the women carried out their assignment.

Instead, Matthew takes us from the tomb to an unknown location in Jerusalem. It is a scene of intrigue and, yes, of “fake news.”

The Scene in the City (vv. 11-15)

The Roman guards report to the Jewish chief priests (v. 11)

[11] Now while they were on their way, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all that had happened.

While the women were running to deliver their news to the disciples, the Roman soldiers who had been stationed outside the tomb revived from their catatonia and made their way into Jerusalem to report what had happened.

But notice. They didn’t go to Pilate. These Roman soldiers understandably went to the rulers of the Jews with the news.

And by the time Matthew sat down to write his account of Jesus’ story, he had found out what happened in that off-the-record meeting between the Jewish rulers and the soldiers.

The “Passover Plot” story is hatched (vv. 12-14)

[12] And when they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, [13] and said, “You are to say, ‘His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.’ [14] “And if this should come to the governor’s ears, we will win him over and keep you out of trouble.”

That’s the story. It’s a pitifully weak story. I mean...

- ...if the soldiers were asleep when Jesus’ body was stolen, how did they know the disciples stole it?
- ...and if they knew because one of them woke up to see the disciples stealing the body, why didn’t he stop them? Why didn’t he wake up the other soldiers to stop them?
- ...and why would the disciples - depressed and terrified after Jesus’ death - have wanted to steal Jesus’ body? Why risk a fight with the armed might of Rome, steal a dead body, and then proclaim a resurrection message that they knew wasn’t true?
- ...plus, Roman soldiers who fell asleep on watch were, as a matter of policy, put to death. (See Acts 12:19)

It was a terrible story, a really bad story. But it was, evidently, the best bad story they could come up with. (Think “Argo”) And, after paying the soldiers handsomely, that was the story that went out.

The sorry story is widely-spread (v. 15)

[15] And they took the money and did as they had been instructed; and this story was widely spread among the Jews, and is to this day.

So, when Matthew wrote his gospel - and we don't know when he wrote, a few years after these events, a decade or two? - this was still the story that many people had been told and that they believed.

Despite all the holes in this sorry story, it was still being told because the opposition had to ensure that the story of what *really* happened at Joseph's tomb on the first day of that week never got out.

If word ever spread that there was an earthquake, caused by the arrival of an angel of God who rolled away the stone from the front of Joseph's tomb to reveal that Jesus was alive and gone, there would be no stopping the Jesus movement.

The opposition got it. They understood the importance of the resurrection to the message of Jesus. And we get it, too.

The resurrection is central to our faith. It is the historical heart of our faith. So much so, that the Apostle Paul wrote, ***[1 Corinthians 15:17]...if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is worthless.***

In other words, if Jesus' resurrection was just a "spiritual" thing ("*He's been raised in our hearts*") and if He was not literally, physically raised from the dead, then we might as well all go home. Right now.

And so, because of the centrality of the resurrection to life and to life in Jesus, as we close today I'm going to tell you some of what convinces me that Jesus was raised from the dead on that first Easter Sunday.⁸

⁸ I highly recommend the following for fuller treatment of the resurrection of Jesus. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*; Frank Morrison, *Who Moved the Stone?*; Greg Boyd, *Letters from a Skeptic*; N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*; C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*.

First, the salient facts.

Conclusion: Jesus - A LIVING Savior and Lord!⁹

Jesus died and was buried, and the tomb was empty

We know that Jesus endured six trials - three Jewish trials and three Roman trials. These - illegally - lasted through the night.

During the night and into the morning, men beat Him cruelly about the face and body, plucked out His beard, jammed a crown of thorns onto His head, and scourged Him with mutilating Roman whips.

After He was condemned and sentenced to crucifixion, Jesus was forced to carry the heavy crossbar on His bleeding back to the place of execution.

Once there, men drove iron spikes through His hands and feet to secure Him to the cross. Then, after roughly six hours, the Roman centurion on duty - an expert in such things - pronounced Him dead.¹⁰

As we have already seen today, Jesus' body was taken off the cross and placed in Joseph's tomb. The tomb was placed under Roman guard, its entrance was shut off with a large stone, and it was sealed with seal of Rome.

We also know that Jesus' followers returned to Joseph's tomb to finish the work of embalming His body on the first day of the week. They found the Roman seal broken, the stone rolled out of place, and the Roman guards gone.

⁹ That Jesus lived is incontrovertible fact, as confirmed by Scripture and the first century Jewish historian, Josephus, and the Roman historians, Tacitus and Pliny the Younger.

¹⁰ After His death, a soldier thrust a spear into His side and "*blood and water*" issued forth, indicating that He was truly dead.

When they looked inside the tomb, they saw that it was empty. While the graveclothes appeared undisturbed, Jesus' body wasn't there. And the dead body of Jesus was never produced.

So, now, two questions. First, how can the empty tomb best be explained?

What best explains the empty tomb?

The first explanation given by Jesus' contemporaries was that the disciples stole it, presumably to keep the Jesus legend going by making people think that He had been raised from the dead.

But the idea that the disciples would do this, given their mental state after Friday's crucifixion, and that they would hold on to this story, never wavering, even in the face of martyrdom, even though they knew that it was a lie, just doesn't hold water.¹¹

I wouldn't die for what I knew was a lie, and you wouldn't, either. Why would we think that Jesus' disciples would?

The tomb might have been raided by someone else, but by whom? The Jews? No - if they had the body of Jesus, they would have produced it to end the Jesus movement. And whoever raided it would have had to fight through Roman soldiers to get it.

So, it's not at all likely that the body was stolen. Which, except for a few really weird suggestions,¹² leaves us with the biblical option of resurrection as the most reasonable.

¹¹ Charles Colson, one of President Nixon's henchmen during the Watergate scandal, a man who became a courageous and outspoken follower of Jesus, wrote that if Nixon's men could not keep a consistent cover-up for even a few days, at the threat of jail time, then surely Jesus' disciples could not have endured torture and death for what they knew to be a lie, either.

¹² For times' sake - and out of respect for your intellect - I am leaving out other options that have been offered, such as the "wrong tomb" theory (the women went to the wrong tomb on Easter Sunday morning, found an empty one, and left, convinced that Jesus was alive; but the Jews surely would have gone to the right tomb and produced Jesus' body) and the "swoon theory" (the proposal that Jesus didn't die on the cross, but only swooned, later revived in the cool, damp tomb, and

The Old Testament looked forward to the Messiah's resurrection in several places. (Psalm 16:10 among them), God promised that He would not allow the Messiah to undergo decay, but that He would rescue Him from death.

All four Gospels tell us that the tomb was empty because Jesus was raised from the dead. And that's a mouthful, because the four Gospels represent four separate strands of historical writing.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John didn't sit down together in a room and decide what to write.

They each wrote independently. They relied on different source materials. They each wrote with their own unique personalities and perspectives. They each added details that added to their purpose for writing.

But they were writing the story of Jesus, not propaganda.

If they had been simply creating a story, none of them would have reported that the women were the first to see Jesus. A first century author who was writing to convince his audience would not have mentioned women, because in the first century women were not considered credible witnesses. The reason Matthew mentioned that the two Marys saw Jesus, is because they saw Jesus.

If the Gospel writers had been creating a story, they would have collaborated and produced narratives that dovetailed better than the four Gospels do.

In Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, there are no unresolvable contradictions, but there is not a wooden sameness, either.

went out - how? - proclaiming that He was the resurrected Lord, disappearing after forty days, never to be seen or heard from again; but Roman centurions were really good at ensuring that victims of crucifixion were really and truly dead).

Throughout the New Testament, the authors either argue for the resurrection or assume it. (See 1 Corinthians 15)

And, Jesus Himself repeatedly said that He would rise from the dead. (Matthew 16:21-23, for one). So, if He died on a Roman cross and did not rise from the dead, He either purposefully lied or was gravely mistaken.

What would we say about a man who said that He would rise from the dead - and didn't?

Someone who purposefully lied, and told people to base their eternal futures on him and his claim would be, simply, evil. Someone who says, "I will rise from the dead", who means it, and is simply mistaken, is off his rocker.

What I'm saying is that the character of Jesus is on the line in the resurrection question. The morality and the integrity and the courage of Jesus all argue for a resurrection.

There is no better explanation for the empty tomb than the "too-good-to-be-true" one. He was raised from the dead by the power of God to a resurrection life.

Second, what best explains the dramatic and immediate changes that occurred in Jesus' disciples that began on the first day of the week, two days after He was crucified?

What best explains the dramatic and immediate change in the lives of Jesus' disciples?

Everything about the disciples' sadness on Friday and Saturday makes perfect sense in light of Jesus' death. It is exactly what we would expect, given the loss of their best Friend and Mentor.

Everything about their paranoia rings true. As followers of a now-crucified insurrectionist, they would be Public Enemies #'s 1-11. Their lives were in grave danger after Jesus' death. They were understandably frightened, hiding from the authorities.

So, when we see their joy mid-morning on Sunday, we are forced to conclude that SOMETHING happened.¹³

There was palpable excitement in the days following that first day of the week. The group hung together over the next several weeks, not as a band of lost men and women, but like people who were waiting for a great "next." They devoted themselves to prayer. There was no fear and there was no sadness.

In addition, very early, all of these JEWISH followers of Jesus, began worshipping on the first day of the week.

As Andy Crouch points out in his excellent book, Culture-Making, for several thousand years, no matter where they lived, Jews always worshipped on the Sabbath.

Worship on the Sabbath was written into the story of creation and into the Ten Commandments. All of the disciples of Jesus grew up worshipping on the Sabbath, the last day of the week.

But the day of worship shifted from the last to the first day of the week, quickly and naturally for Jesus' followers.¹⁴

Imagine that you leave the United States to live abroad for a few years. When you return, you find that churches now worship on Tuesday, instead of Sunday. Wouldn't you assume that something must have happened?

¹³ From The Resurrection of the Son of God, N.T. Wright - It is very difficult to explain the sudden rise of the early church which was led by Galilean tradesmen who had been scared out of their wits on Saturday, who became convinced of His resurrection by Sunday (or shortly thereafter), and were preaching Jesus at the risk of life and limb within a month and a half - unless the resurrection happened.

¹⁴ Again, from Wright - "There is very early evidence of the Christians meeting on the first day of the week...The seventh-day sabbath was so firmly rooted in Judaism as a major social, cultural, religious and political landmark that to make any adjustment in it was not like a modern Western person deciding to play tennis on Tuesdays instead of Wednesdays, but like persuading the most devout medieval Roman Catholic to fast on Thursdays instead of Fridays." (And, as Andy Crouch says, even this is a huge understatement.)

The most reasonable explanation for the change in the day of worship and the change in the disciples' demeanor and outlook on life is that something happened.

I think that something was the resurrection. The resurrection was the thing that changed everything for the first followers of Jesus.

It was an event as historically valid as the Spurs current series against the Grizzlies, the USS Carl Vinson heading to the Korean Peninsula, and the May 6 San Antonio election for mayor.

It happened. He is alive. And His resurrection changes everything for us, too.

A living, risen Jesus is a Jesus who can offer eternal life to everyone who comes to Him. Only a Lord can save, and He shows by His defeat of death that He is Lord of all.

If you have not yet come to Jesus for forgiveness and LIFE, come to Him today.

In the Gospel of John, we read, ***[1:12] But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.***

Faith alone in Christ alone saves forevermore. Place your trust in Jesus today - and live!

Live eternally and live abundantly. Knowing Jesus and growing in Jesus brings peace and joy and hope. He sustains you with purpose in the storm. Even when you would expect to be falling apart at the seams, a living Jesus will hold you together as you follow Him.

And, as we'll see next week, our living Jesus has left us a mission, a commission so GREAT that it's worth giving our lives to fulfill.

As we leave this place today, we leave grateful to God for grace received, confident that Jesus is alive - in the world and in our hearts - and eager to serve this Risen Savior!

He is risen! He is risen, indeed!!