



Following Jesus: Transforming

March 27, 2016 – Easter Service

Matthew 28:1-10

The movie, *Risen*, is the Easter story through the lens of a Roman tribune. In one scene after the resurrection, the Tribune asked a disciple: “Why do you follow Jesus?” A leper was being harassed and run out of a small village. The disciple told the Tribune: “Watch.” Jesus went to where the leper was laying after being pelted with stones. He healed the man. “Why do you follow Jesus? That’s why!” The disciples saw astonishing things. Blind given sight, lame walking, Lazarus brought back from the dead, multitudes fed, storms calmed, and Jesus transfigured. They’d been with the most compelling person who’d ever lived. That’s why they followed. But something new had happened – He was resurrected. Previously, they’d followed, but now they were willing to do more than follow: they would all die for Him.

We said about Jesus in the Apostles Creed: **suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried**. The religious leaders were terrified a riot would result in Rome being forced to put down another Jewish insurrection. In fact, this very thing happened 37 years later in 70 A.D. Jerusalem was destroyed. The magnificent Temple Herod had built was destroyed. So, to avoid any potential disturbance, the religious leaders broke their own rules to get rid of Jesus, who was causing them problems. They had an illegal trial at night. They convinced the Governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, to condemn Jesus to die. Pilate didn’t want to do this, but he feared a riot, too, which could put his job in jeopardy with Caesar. So, he caved to their pressure. He had Jesus flogged and sent to be crucified. The soldiers stripped Jesus and then gambled for his clothing. He was mocked him by soldiers. A crown of thorns was jammed upon his head. They made a sign that ridiculed him: “King of the Jews.” Nailed to a cross between 2 common criminals. Passerby’s derided him (being a public spectacle = intent). It was brutal and shameless to do this to a completely innocent man.

But **suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried** isn’t how the Apostles Creed ends. **The 3rd day He rose from the dead**. The resurrection is the cornerstone of our faith. I believe it’s impossible to be a Christian if you don’t

believe the resurrection. We don't have to be able to EXPLAIN its mystery, but you must believe it. All of Christianity rises and falls on the resurrection!

Today's text comes from **Matthew 28:1-10** ("Transformation" - Environmental Projection)

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

The characters in this text:

1.) **The women** "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary" Mary is a very common name in the New Testament. Jesus' mother was "the Virgin Mary." Martha and Lazarus' sister "Mary." There was "Mary Salome," too. Mark/Luke tell us that *the other Mary* was in fact, James' mother.

"Mary of Magdala," a town on the NW side of the Sea of Galilee. Luke's gospel tells us that Jesus cast 7 demons cast out of her. It wasn't until Pope Gregory in 591 mentioned in a sermon that she had been a prostitute. In the movie, "Risen," it shows her in that role. The Gospels don't mention this at all. She wasn't Jesus' girlfriend or mother of His child like some have dreamed up.

All 4 gospels mention Mary Magdalene –her name shows up in the 4 Gospels 12 times (more than most of the disciples). She was the 1st eyewitness of the resurrected Christ. If you were making up a story in that culture, you'd not choose a woman. Women were held with little respect then. Even their testimony was inadmissible in a Jewish court of law.

2.) **an angel** The angel stories in the Gospels are different. Luke has 2 of them. Whenever the angels show up the humans respond by absolute fear. Here, the angel nearly scares the guards to death but then ignore them and speak to the women.

3.) **The guards** In the movie, “Risen,” shows the ferocity and expertise of the Roman soldiers. These were trained military men. Some skeptics have said that Jesus really didn’t die on the cross, but He just “swooned.” Supposedly, the Roman guards, who were paid executioners, were confused and thought Jesus was dead, when in fact, he was just badly wounded (flogged and crucified). They suggest after he was buried in the cave he resuscitated, rolled the “mega stone” away, and overpowered the guards. Then He convinced His disciples that He was in fact, alive, and those disciples would be willing to die for him? The soldiers’ problem: “They lost a body.”

4.) **The disciples**

The 3 year “Return on Investment for the disciples + all their hopes and dreams – were nailed to the cross. One disciple betrayed Jesus, the leading disciple had denied him 3x. All of the disciples were broken by the crucifixion. Now their lives were in danger, too.

Life has a way of breaking us. If you’ve not been broken yet in life it’s because you’ve not lived long enough. Someone may betray you or “de-friend” you. You may lose your job. You might have to file bankruptcy. Your health may abandon you or some accident may infirm you. You may have to live with a thorn in the flesh. You may get a divorce. Live long enough and someone you truly loved will die. Mortality is 100%. Death is our great enemy. This isn’t news. We all know it.

It’s in the midst of this most horrible crisis that these crazy women reported to the disciples how they’d gone to the tomb and found it empty. Ultimately, it wasn’t the empty tomb that convinced them, it was meeting the Risen Jesus face to face. There are 11 different incidences in the New Testament when the Risen Christ appeared to people.

That horrible Friday turned into the greatest even the world has ever known. The old dragon was slain. The old enemy of death was overcome. Why would the disciples die for a false story? They had nothing to gain from it. The “career path” of a disciple led to martyrdom for all of them except for John who was exiled to the island of Patmos. It makes no sense that these men would die for something they knew, first-hand, wasn’t true.

Our GOOD NEWS is not about our betrayal, cowardice and denial; it’s about God’s fixing our brokenness through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Sharing this GOOD NEWS is the mission of the church. To announce the transformation as possible through Jesus Christ.

Those following Jesus, His disciples, believed A (He was God in the flesh), B (He was perfect) and C (He was crucified). But 2 things transformed them: “D” (the resurrection) and 50 days after the resurrection was Pentecost. Jesus’ power

came into their lives. Whereas they had been in hiding for fear of the religious/political powers of the day; after Jesus returned from the dead and came and met them, and after they received the Holy Spirit, they became totally different people. The resurrection transformed them from cowardly disciples to courageous apostles.

5.) **Jesus**⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him.¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

The Gospel:

God became a Man = Christmas. He was **perfect**. He kept all of the law. He **died for us**. The God-Man fulfilled the Old Testament Law. He became the sacrificial lamb who bore our sins. **Jesus rose for us**. Hard concept to understand – it's unprecedented. Resurrection is not resuscitation. He is transformed. His resurrected body was changed. Sin killed Him; but the power of God raised Him from the dead. No matter how rich/famous/powerful we might be, death is the great equalizer and silencer.

All of this may be true about Jesus, but unless I respond, it's only history or bible trivia. The offer for forgiveness of our sin, for an invitation to follow Jesus in this life, and for eternal life after we die. How do I receive it? It's NOT by a self-improvement course. It's NOT by trying to be better than the next person. It's by **FAITH**. This means more than an intellectual assent to a group of facts, but it means we must recognize that we are following the wrong path, which is our naturally wiring. We must repent of our sins and trust in Him as our savior. On the one hand, this is the hardest thing in the world to do. We are proud and want to save ourselves. We are afraid that if we allow God to come into our lives, we'll be miserable. We have certain images of what it means to be a Christian and we fear we'll end up like them. Many of us want to ignore the message now and spend ourselves "*eating, drinking and being merry.*" We don't want God interfering with our lives as they are. We feel okay about how things are going and if we mess it up, THEN maybe we'll consider doing whatever needs to be done. Many fully intend to procrastinate until we're really old. Then we'll do whatever the mumbo-jumbo routine is and will get to "have my cake and eat it, too." Live for myself until THE END, say a quick prayer, and get ushered in. There are a couple of flaws with this plan. One, nobody knows when we will die. And that's the end of the saying: *eat, drink and be merry...for tomorrow we die.*" What will happen then? Second, if we live in fear and rejection of God NOW, there's no guarantee that THEN we'll be any more willing to change. The basic issue = the heart. We'd rather trust ourselves, live in our own Kingdom, than trust in God and live in His.

In Rod Dreher's book, How Dante Can Save Your Life, he tells the story of 92 year old **Carlos Sanchez**. Carlos was born in Guatemala & went to Dartmouth to study engineering. **"Those brilliant minds made a lot of boys lose their faith. They made me lose mine. Everything became so uncertain."** On a visit to Guatemala, he went to Mass, hiding his atheism from his family out of courtesy. As he knelt to receive communion, a life size image of the crucified Christ appeared at his side. The old man recalled, **"Jesus said I have always loved you. Simple as that. No reproach no nothing."** In an instant 20 years of unbelief evaporated. Years later, a 2nd mystical experience at the same communion rail happened: "When the priest came to give me communion his arm became dazzling white. Then our Lord said to me, why don't you do what I tell you? As distinctly as I hear you. He wasn't threatening me, but that really was terrifying. I knew I had to do something right away. It took years to convince the church to receive a man of his age, but eventually at the age of 51 he went to seminary and was later ordained. By talking with him I could see that all my intellectual doubts about Christianity amounted to nothing more than a problem of the will: I didn't **want** to believe, because **then I would have to change my life.**

In the movie, "Risen," one of the disciples, Bartholomew, is shown as a very free spirit. When the Roman Tribune asked if he'd ever seen a crucifixion, the soldier answered his own question by saying: "Of course not! You ran away, too." He pointed to a nail and described crucifixion. He asked a very grim-faced Bartholomew how he'd like to be crucified. All of a sudden, Bartholomew breaks out in a huge smile, extends his hands and says: "Bring it on." That's the transforming power of resurrection.

Remember the words of Jesus to the Disciples that day: "Do not be afraid." Neither should we. Faith removes our fear and gives us a message to share that's truly worth hearing!