

**THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MATTHEW**  
**AN OLD PLAN TO SHAPE NEW LIVES**  
**(7) SNATCHING VICTORY FROM THE JAWS OF DEFEAT**

Matthew 28:1-15

Jeffrey S. Carlson

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**SCRIPTURE**

<sup>1</sup>After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. <sup>2</sup>And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. <sup>3</sup>His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. <sup>4</sup>For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. <sup>5</sup>But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. <sup>6</sup>He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. <sup>7</sup>Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” <sup>8</sup>So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. <sup>9</sup>Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him.

<sup>10</sup>Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.” <sup>11</sup>While they were going, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened.

<sup>12</sup>After the priests had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers, <sup>13</sup>telling them, “You must say, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ <sup>14</sup>If this comes to the governor’s ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” <sup>15</sup>So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story is still told among the Jews to this day (Matthew 28:1-15 NRSV).

**MESSAGE**

The Gospel of Matthew can be divided into six sections. These sections seem to correspond to the first six books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua. The Book of Joshua is filled with actions dealing with conflict, victory, and the responsibilities that come with that victory. Here in the sixth section of Matthew you also have conflict, victory, and the implications or responsibilities as a result of victory. Last week we looked at the conflict Jesus faced and by every outward appearance he was the loser. Today we look at how he snatched victory from the jaws of

defeat.

In 1879, a Liverpool minister by the name of George Garrett built and launched a submarine named the Resurgam (Latin for "I Shall Rise Again"). However, the Resurgam sank off the Welsh coast, and never rose again. "Resurgam" was an empty boast.

In contrast, Jesus Christ did indeed rise again as he said he would. The resurrection of Christ is vindication for his claims and his people.

The resurrection validates the person of Jesus Christ. It authenticates that he is who he claims to be. For what person in history has said, "My enemies are going to kill me but within three days I will be seen alive again" and actually pull it off? Only one! And until someone else comes along and duplicates what Jesus did we need to give our attention to Jesus. More than that, we need to fall down and worship him.

Matthew wants to make it clear that Jesus is the "Son of David", that is, the Messiah, in fulfilment of prophecy. The resurrection confirms this prophecy. Matthew begins his account of the resurrection by telling us how certain women came to the tomb "after the Sabbath" when it was permissible to do work. If we were telling this story today we might say "thirty-nine hours later" (3:00 p.m. on Friday to 6:00 a.m. on Sunday) but Hebrew culture reckoned a part of a day as a whole day, and the new day started at sunset, so that is why the Scriptures say that Jesus was in the tomb for three days.

Many of the same women who courageously witnessed Jesus' gruesome crucifixion planned to visit the tomb in order to assist the family in finalizing the body for burial. Jewish custom permitted women to prepare corpses of either gender. Aromatic oils and spices were often used.

Jesus had indicated to his followers that he would be resurrected after being put to death but, at the time, they did not understand what he meant (Mark 8:31-33). So it came as quite a shock for Mary Magdalene and the other disciples to find an empty tomb where Jesus had been buried.

Now the disciples did believe in an after-life and even in a kind of resurrection at the end of time (John 11:24) but they were either unable or unwilling to grasp what was different about Jesus' teaching. They may have simply taken what Jesus said and translated it into their own pre-conceived ideas about life after death.

Two thousand years later, many continue to do this. Most Americans believe in some kind of after-life. But according to a recent Scripps Howard/Ohio University poll, only half of

those who attend church appear to believe in the resurrection. So every Easter when they hear about the resurrection they may simply think of that word “resurrection” as just another way of saying what they already believe about the after-life.

The popular alternative to the resurrection is belief in the immortality of the soul. The word immortality simply means “not subject to death” and is a translation of a word found in several places in the New Testament. God alone is innately immortal (1 Tim 6:16) and grants immortality to those whom he chooses. Jesus said:

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25-26 NRSV).

But the phrase “immortality of the soul” refers to a belief that was a cornerstone of ancient Greek philosophy and has influenced views about life after death from Gnosticism to the New Age movement of today. It teaches people that the soul itself is innately deathless whether or not God even exists. Christians believe that the soul is immortal but such immortality comes from God and so can be removed by God. Jesus said:

“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both body and soul” (Matt 10:28).

At the risk of oversimplifying, let me summarize some of the major differences between the Christian belief in the resurrection and the notion of the immortality of the soul. Historically, the teaching on the immortality of the soul has said that the body is evil, death is good and we have no moral accountability for how we live our lives. In contrast, the resurrection affirms the body is good, death is the consequence of sin (but sin and death have been conquered by Christ), and we *are* accountable to God for how we live our lives.

The women who had walked to the tomb expected to find the death of their hopes, but they ran from the tomb in joy when they realized that not even in their wildest dreams could they have imagined the astonishing message the angel had given them that Jesus had been raised from the dead. And when they met the risen Lord they worshiped him.

The resurrection is a vindication of who Jesus is (see also Rom 1:4). His teachings and claims are true. He is our Lord and God. According to Michael J. Wilkins this means that, “Whenever or wherever he drops in on our consciousness, we must be ready to worship him.”

The resurrection validates the person of Jesus Christ. It also validates the community of

Jesus Christ. The founding of the church was not so much the work of Jesus on earth as it was the work of the risen Lord. Jesus had earlier said, “I *will* build my church” (Matt 16:18) and that promise came to pass after his resurrection. Furthermore, the church was established in the one place in all the world that was most antagonistic to its existence, which is itself strong evidence for the historicity of the resurrection.

The earliest explanation circulated by critics was that the disciples stole the body! In Matthew 28:11-15, we have the record of the reaction of the chief priests and the elders when the guards gave them the infuriating and mysterious news that the body was gone. They gave the soldiers money and told them to explain that the disciples had come at night and stolen the body while they were asleep.

But did the disciples steal the body? If so then we are faced with a psychological and ethical impossibility. Stealing the body of Christ is something totally foreign to the character of the disciples as we know them. It would mean that they were perpetrators of a deliberate lie which was responsible for the deception and ultimate death of millions of people. It is inconceivable that even if a few of the disciples had conspired and pulled off this theft they would never have told the others. Each of the disciples faced the test of torture and martyrdom for their statements and beliefs. People will die for what they *believe* to be true, though it may actually be false. They virtually never die for what they know is a lie.

There is in legal circles a concept known as an admission contrary to interest. This is when something is so obviously true that you have to admit it even though it benefits your opponent. When the critics said that the disciples stole the body of Jesus, what were they admitting? They were admitting that the tomb was empty. The fact of the empty tomb is a datum of history.

I want you to note that Jesus commissioned Mary Magdalene and the other women to be the first witnesses of the resurrection. The witness of women was considered unreliable in that culture, yet Jesus went against the culture by revealing himself to the women and telling them to tell the news to the other disciples. Many scholars consider the Lord’s choice of these women as witnesses to be one of the bedrock truths of the resurrection. It is unlikely that any Jew would have made up such a story. It must be factual.

This commissioning also indicates that it is Jesus’ intent for women and men to be restored as co-workers in the community of faith, a role they had been assigned from creation (Gen 1:26-28). As Paul would later write”

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are

all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28 NIV).

The return to the region known as “Galilee of the Gentiles” would further reenforce the concept that God in Christ is gathering a people for himself which is not limited to one gender or race but includes every gender, age, ethnicity and nation on Earth.

The late James Montgomery Boice told the story of the people of nineteenth-century England, who were anxiously awaiting news of the outcome of the strategic battle between the British forces under Wellington and the French forces under Napoleon at a place called Waterloo. A signalman was placed on top of Winchester Cathedral and told to keep looking out towards the sea. When he received a message, he was to pass it on to another signalman on a hill, who, in turn, would pass it on to another, and so on. In this way, the news of the outcome of the battle was to be relayed to London and all of Britain.

At last a ship was sighted through the fog. The signalman on board the ship sent the first word — “Wellington.” The next word was “defeated.” Then the fog closed in, and the ship could no longer be seen. “Wellington defeated!” The tragic message was sent across England, and a great gloom fell over the land. After a few hours the fog lifted, and the signal came again — “Wellington defeated the enemy!” Now the full message was quickly relayed across countryside, but this time the nation rejoiced!

Boice saw a striking parallel between this story and when Jesus died his cruel death on the cross. A great gloom fell over the followers of Jesus. They thought the message was, “Jesus defeated!” But after three days the fog lifted, and the full message came through — “Jesus defeated the enemy!” Jesus is risen from the grave and he has defeated death. Jesus Christ is victorious over sin and death and his victory means:

- He is who he claims to be.
- He wants us to be his gathered people forever.
- He commissions us to be witnesses to the resurrection.