

**There is Just Something About That Name**  
**By Reverend Litton Logan**  
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**Scriptures:**

Matthew 28:1-10

<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."

**Introduction and Comments:**

Once in a bible study as a kid, my pastor referred to me as a skeptic. I guess it was because I asked so many questions and needed so many explanations. I looked up what a skeptic was: someone who doubted or questioned a lot. Well, that was me. But, I wasn't born that way; in fact, I blamed my preacher, my mom and dad, and my grandmother for me being a skeptic. I say this because the pastor once preached a sermon on pagan influences in Christianity, mainly about Easter and the Easter Bunny and Christmas, Christmas trees, and Santa Claus. Well, in all fairness to my pastor, I had begun to have serious doubts about the Easter Bunny, because he always hid the Easter eggs in the same dumb places and he could never get the blue and green eggs to turn out right - they looked like battery acid. On my own, I had come to the conclusion that the real Easter Bunny had hired some of our local Mississippi cottontails as seasonal over-hires and what could you expect? So, needless to say, when the pastor and my parents started telling me all these bible stories about whales swallowing people and barfing them up alive and a dead Jesus coming back to life, to say the least, I was skeptical. I mean they had told me stories about the Easter Bunny and Santa Claus and we all know how that pans out.

Just a cursory reading of our four gospels reveal major differences and inconsistencies between the four gospels concerning Jesus' last week, his arrest, trial, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. So, this beautiful Easter morning let us look at just Matthew's account of the resurrection and what it would have meant for his church as well as for our church and our time.

**Sermon:**

In Matthew's Gospel, when last we see Jesus, he has died a broken and betrayed man on a Roman cross and by special dispensation, been buried in the borrowed tomb of a friend. Thus, Jesus was buried as befitting a man of honor among the tombs of the elites of Jerusalem to begin what in Jewish understanding would have been a yearlong and painful process of

atonement for his sins. It was believed that a person's evil deeds were retained in the flesh and were painfully sloughed off during decomposition. At the end of that year, his bones would have been gathered and placed in an ossuary or bone box, and given a second burial. This understanding gives an added dimension to his resurrection but also to the words of Psalm 16 paraphrased by the Apostle Peter in the book of Acts, wherein speaking of Jesus he says, "For You will not leave my soul in Hades (the abode of the dead or the grave), nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption (decay). You have made known to me the ways of life; You will make me full of joy in Your presence (Psalm 16: 8-11, Acts 2:27-28).

Since we did not have a Good Friday Service, I want to remind us of some of the background – probably more background than you want - surrounding Jesus' death that may help us appreciate some of the nuances of the Jewish side of this story.

I start by mentioning that a select group of the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem, probably just the members of the priestly section of the Sanhedrin, under the instigation of Caiaphas, the high priest, had secretly conspired to have Jesus arrested on trumped-up charges of threatening the Temple, a non-capital offense. Jesus is taken to Caiaphas' home outside of the walls of Jerusalem. However, it was Jesus' vague and cagey response to Caiaphas' question about him being the Messiah, Son of God, and his reference to the divine Son of Man that seems to have sealed his fate.

There are mixed opinions among western scholars as to whether the Sanhedrin, referred to in our text as the body of the elders, had the power to execute people for religious capital offenses by stoning. Given my research, I think they did. However, what we do know is that this small group of Jewish leaders, meeting at night in the home of the high priest, did not have the authority to condemn and have Jesus stoned for blasphemy, and they definitely did not have the authority to have him crucified for crimes against Rome. Matthew, almost as an afterthought, indicates that the elders of the people (possibly meaning the entire Sanhedrin) met the next morning, ratifying the work of that nocturnal group. (Matthew wants to keep all things Jewish.) This is one of those points of differences and contention among the gospels that scholars are still debating.

Speculations are that this cabal of Jewish leaders may have guessed that if Jesus were questioned before a full assembly of the Sanhedrin, given certain precedents, he would have gotten off with only a verbal reprimand or at worst, a flogging, plus it would have given Jesus, this pretentious, Galilean peasant, exactly what he wanted - a hearing before the august, religious governing body of the Jews, concomitantly giving him more credence among the people as a prophet, come from the Lord.

So, these leaders referred Jesus to Pilate; I think knowing full well that Pilate would misunderstand Jesus' messianic claim, which he obviously does, as we see in his questions to Jesus, 'Are you the King of the Jews?'. Everyone knew only Rome could appoint a vassal king over the Jews, and at the time Judah was under direct Roman rule. I might mention that claiming to be the Messiah was in and of itself not a capital offense among the Jews. However, claiming to be the Messiah, Son of God and the mysterious Son of Man, who was to come at the end of days to overthrow the governments of the world, exact judgment on humankind, and usher in the kingdom of God on earth in Roman occupied territory would have been a seditious offense. So, the Jewish leadership, who were charged with maintaining good order among the people by Rome, especially Caiaphas, who was appointed Chief Priest by Roman authority, set about getting the Romans to intervene and do their dirty work to their mutual political and economic benefits.

However, Pilate doesn't jump in with both feet. Pilate had been censured earlier by the Emperor of Rome for some of his high-handed dealings with the Jews and was under strict

orders to be conciliatory and sensitive to Jewish religious sensitivities. Therefore, he tries to appease both the crucify and don't crucify factions in the crowd.

This is important because the Romans as a rule could not have cared less about some ragtag, country bumpkin from Galilee claiming to be a Jewish Messiah, unless his claims were shown to be seditious or as promoting civil disorder and disobedience as we see in the case of Jesus in the Temple. So, Jesus is arrested, condemned, and put to death. Problem solved for the aristocracy, for the Romans, and for many of the people in the city, who lived under the Roman threat of indiscriminate retaliations for civil disorder, not to mention the effects an uprising would have had on the people and their property. Yeah! Crucify him! I don't want my house burned or my business looted and ransacked - Crucify him!

Given Jesus' growing popularity among the people in Jerusalem and the ubiquitous spirit of apocalypticism during a Passover celebration, I think the Jewish leadership were desperate and needed to act quickly and decisively to head off what they saw as the threat Jesus and his followers posed. They wanted to avoid the wrath of the Romans if Jesus and his followers incited further trouble as well as avoiding the condemnation of the people for arresting a popular prophet.

However, the responsibility for Jesus' crucifixion lies finally at the feet of Pilate and maybe a few of the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem for purely social, economic, and political reasons.

Be that as it may, Jesus was crucified for sedition between two brigands, or as I have come to understand, two Israelite freedom fighters, and promptly buried - problem solved. However, in Matthew's Gospel, the priests and Sadducees, who didn't believe in the resurrection, accompanied by some Pharisees, who did believe in the resurrection, rounding out the Jewish leadership's role in condemning Jesus, go to Pilate and ask him to place guards at Jesus' tomb and to seal it. Pilate tells these leaders they have guards, the Temple guards, and to use them. All this guarding and sealing the tomb seems to have been a face-saving maneuver to prevent Jesus' disciples from stealing his body and seeming to make good on his prediction of a resurrection.

For reasons that Matthew doesn't share with us, Mary Magdalena and the other Mary come to the burial tomb of Jesus three days after the crucifixion. Given what we know about Jewish understandings of death and their burial practices at the time, these women may have come to the tomb often or stayed at the tomb for the entire three days after Jesus' death. Furthermore, as women they would not have posed a threat to the guards or been seen as potential grave robbers.

I also want to mention that there was a Jewish decree in Jerusalem that a dead Jew was not to remain unburied overnight in the city of Jerusalem, so Jesus in Matthew was hurriedly prepared for burial, washed, and as was the custom, wrapped in a clean linen cloth by a group of men. As further background, many rabbis maintained that the care of the dead was of the highest priority and even took precedent over certain Sabbath rules and statues. Interestingly, according to Jewish beliefs at the time, Jesus would not have been considered "certifiably" dead until the fourth day because it was believed that the soul or shade hovered over and around the body for three days in a state of confusion and would find no peace until reunited with its body in the earth. Thus, family members and friends frequently attended the dead for three days to make sure the deceased had not been interned alive and to be a comforting and consoling presence to the still lingering, confused soul. Given these understandings, there are indications that a tomb or grave was not sealed until after three days. So, the guarding and sealing of the tomb by the Priest and Pharisees takes on a little more meaning, doesn't it? Also, anointing a body with spices and fragrant oils was to mask the odors of decomposition, coming from a tomb

or coffin during those three days. So, there would have been no need to anoint Jesus after he had been dead for three days in a sealed tomb, not in the climate of Jerusalem.

When the women arrive at the tomb, they experienced a violent shaking of the earth brought on by the appearance of an angel. The angel by itself rolls back the large stone that had sealed the burial tomb of Jesus, mocking human attempts to thwart God's power. At the appearance of the angel and the rolling back of the stone, the guards become ineffectual with fear. The angel says to the women: "He isn't here; he has been raised," come see for yourselves! <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.'

Christianity rises and falls, no pun intended, on the resurrection of Jesus. Without the resurrection, Christianity becomes just a failed Jewish reform movement spearheaded by Jesus of Nazareth. As a side note, it never ceases to amaze me that a belief in life after death, which has been a hallmark of human awareness from the earliest moments of our species as well as many modern people believing that God created the universe, people still want to quibble over the fact of the resurrection. For goodness sake, given the idea of God as the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe, the resurrection of Jesus pales in comparison to the law of universal gravitation - so, give me a break.

Within the early Christian community, the resurrection was authenticated by Jesus' personal appearances to the apostles, James, his brother, and five hundred brethren at one time (1 Cor. 15.6). Therefore, there is no doubt that when the New Testament writers speak of the resurrection they speak within a Jewish understanding of a physical resurrection, not some metaphorical or transitory, psychological phenomenon such as mass hysteria or mass hypnosis, or someone, come Easter morning, including the angel and the two "Marys", who watched Jesus being interned (27:61), misidentifying the tomb. To all of this, I add, let us also see Jesus' resurrection as God reversing the judgment and condemnations of the Jerusalem religious establishment, its crowd of supporters, and all those across the ages who doubt God's power and presence in human history.

As the women leave their encounter with the angel, they meet the risen Jesus. Jesus' first words to the women have been translated as, "Greetings!" "Good Morning!", or "Rejoice!" That is, "Good morning, let us rejoice!" Yet, why do we see Jesus appearing after the angel has just told the women he is risen and to go and tell the disciples? Why didn't Jesus just appear to the women first and tell them himself? Many scholars believe that here Matthew conflates several traditions concerning Jesus' resurrection appearances in Jerusalem before he goes to meet his disciples in Galilee. Matthew takes each of these traditions seriously; therefore, he is careful to include them in his account of Jesus' resurrection, especially since Jesus tells the women to go and tell "his brothers," as opposed to the angel saying, "go tell his disciples". The implications being Jesus has forgiven his disciples for their betrayal and abandoning him and again recognizes them as members of his surrogate family.

Since Matthew writes fifty-odd years after the resurrection and fifteen years or so after the Jewish rebellion, there may well have been Jewish Jesus-believers alive, who had abandoned the Way of Christ by taking up arms during the rebellion or who under rabbinic pressures had recanted their faith but wanted to return to the fold. Therefore, recalling this story of forgiveness welcomes them back as "brothers" and "sisters" in Christ.

However, let me back up a bit. I would like to talk about the rolling away of the stone and the stupefied guards. Why the stone and the guards? Well, that stone and the guards speak volumes about the scheming of the religious leaders of Jesus' day and the attempts of human governments, so-called great thinkers, and skeptics across the ages of all ages to limit the power of God. Many such people are stupefied by and in fear of the power of these stories

of Jesus' life, ministry, and resurrection because of their ability to transform human lives and the course of history well beyond the power of an idea. Which is to say, God can and will do whatever is necessary to make apparent God's power and presence in the world for divine ends. Therefore, God would not, will not, let Jesus, his teachings, his life and ministry die and be buried no matter what we humans may say or do. Two-thousand-odd years and various attempts to suppress the heart and message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ have failed, and I predict will always fail. Why?

Well to put it very simply - "There is Just Something About that Name" (sing along with video on screen)

There is simply something about Jesus' message of God's love that resonates with our deepest longings, hopes, and our innate awareness of the "Who" of the universe that cannot be denied or suppressed. And, the stories of Jesus' resurrection, his love for God, and God's love for him captures and epitomizes all those hopes and insights.

<sup>16</sup>Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. <sup>17</sup>When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. <sup>18</sup>And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Matthew 28:16--20 (NRSV)

As I've said before, I think, especially in Matthew's Gospel, given that Jesus is speaking to his Jewish disciples within his Jewish world context, he is telling them to go to fellow Israelites living among the nations of the world first and foremost. However, after the destruction of the Temple along with the Jerusalem Jesus community and any writings they may have had, we see the resurgence of the rejected ideas and writings of the Apostle Paul and the "Jews Only" train jump the tracks and the Holy Spirit drives the message out to all peoples in all nations.

Did you notice that even some of the disciples here in the close of Matthew's Gospel, who saw Jesus, doubted? I mean, had he really been dead? Well, maybe not "certifiably" by Jewish custom, but close enough to make a point about him being God's Holy One, whom God would not leave in the grave or allow to see corruption. Yet, those disciples, even with their doubts, went out into the world to proclaim the Good News. You see, healthy doubt is the proving ground of faith as it were. Or, as we read in the Gospel of Mark "I believe; help my unbelief! Mark 6:23-24, RSV)

Did you also know that in Matthew's Gospel, as in the shorter or original ending of Mark's Gospel, we have no ascension of Jesus into heaven after the resurrection? In fact, in Mark's Gospel, and here in Matthew's Gospel, after the Great Commission, we have no idea where Jesus went. What happened to him? Where is he? Well, he isn't here; come see the empty tomb.

I would submit to you that the most salient question about the resurrection in Matthew's Gospel is not whether the resurrection happened or not, or whether Jesus was "certifiably" dead, but where is Jesus now.

The answer to such a question is apparent when we recall in Matthew Jesus saying, "remember, I am with **you**" [his disciples] always, to the end of the age", as we go out into the world proclaiming the Good News and making disciples within all nations.

Therefore, for Matthew, Jesus is not in the tomb, Jesus is not up there, out there, but here, with us, living in us, his disciples. Please folks, understand that this is more than a powerful idea or a comforting metaphor. This is a real and powerful force, greater than the law of gravity, working within reality for our salvation - saving us from arrogant self-determinism

independent of the will and ways of God. If you don't believe this, ask any one of a billion people "Where is Jesus?", whose lives have been changed for the better through the power of the gospel and the promises of God's eternal love. Ask those people "Where is Jesus?", who believed they had no further to go down into depravity, soul sickness, hopelessness, oppression, and fear, who embraced the Gospel of Jesus Christ and found the power for a new life, hope, and direction. And, then listen closely to their answers and you will know **where Jesus is; where he went.** He is here among us, in our hearts and lives, and he is alive as the hope of the world. Am I wrong in this? Well, for any who are skeptical, we've just proven the resurrection and all that it means and can ever mean for humankind.