

Week 14 Reading: Matthew 27:57—28:20

Focal Text: Matthew 28:1-20

A Word to Sunday School Teachers: While this Sunday officially marks the end of our Matthew Project as I had projected it, you can extend this another week to Mar. 30 if you like. I am going to preach from the first part of Matthew 28 today (Easter Sunday), and next week my sermon will be from Matthew 28:16-20. You could study 28:1-15 in your class today, and next week study 28:16-20, which would get you through March, and then start fresh in April.

A. Two Marys Discover the Empty Tomb (28:1-7)

In Matthew the women come “to see the tomb”; in Mark they come to “anoint the body.” But in Matthew there is a guard posted which makes anointing impossible; also in Matthew the body of Jesus was already anointed in 26:12. Obviously, in Matthew the women are not wondering who will roll the stone away (as in Mark) since they do not intend to open the tomb.

There is another earthquake (cf. 27:51) and the angel of the Lord descends, rolls back the stone and sits down on it. Matthew’s description of the angel—“His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow”—recalls descriptions in Dan. 7:9 and 10:6. These are apocalyptic symbols/images signaling an event of world-changing proportions, showing the continuity with Jesus’ crucifixion. Mark simply has “a young man” sitting on the right side of the already opened tomb, “dressed in a white robe.”

In contrast to the guards at the crucifixion who bore witness—“Truly this man was God’s Son”—the guards who witness the descent of the angel and the rolling back of the stone “shook” with fear “and became like dead men.”

The angel identifies Jesus as the one “who was crucified” (perfect tense in the Greek), and “has been raised” (Aorist passive in the Greek and could be translated as here in NRSV or as “he has risen” in the NIV). Boring comments that the use of the Greek perfect tense (signifying a completed action with ongoing consequences) to speak of Jesus as the crucified one points out that his crucifixion “was not a temporary episode in the career of the Son of God, a past event nullified, transcended, or exchanged at the resurrection for heavenly glory.” Boring contends that as the risen one, “he bears the mark of his self-giving on the cross as his permanent character and call to discipleship (12:24).” Jesus’ resurrection was God’s vindication of his self-giving unto death. Jesus suffered the humiliation and degradation of a cruel, barbaric death; death as a common criminal. But rather than being cursed by God, Jesus in bearing the human curse of sin and death, is raised/glorified/vindicated by God.

The angel commands the women to carry the good news to the disciples. The women, in Matthew, are not only the initial witnesses of the empty tomb, but the first to proclaim the good news of the risen Christ. In Mark, the women are overcome with fear and keep silent, and the story ends by leaving the responsibility for proclaiming the good news with the reader (Mark 16:8). But here in Matthew the women go immediately in obedience to the angelic instruction to tell the disciples.

In addition to announcing Jesus' resurrection the women are to inform the disciples that Jesus is going ahead of them into Galilee and there they will see him. Galilee is more than mere geography; there is a theological message here. Galilee is "Galilee of the Gentiles" (4:15), the appropriate setting for a mission to the nations (28:16-20). So this is a move away from the corrupt power structures in Jerusalem and the first step in going into all the world with the good news.

In Luke's Gospel all the appearances take place in Jerusalem; in Matthew (as well in Mark) there is no room in the story for any appearances in Jerusalem or Judea. The stories of the resurrection appearances of Jesus cannot be harmonized into a single narrative. Each story is a testimony to the church's resurrection faith, not a part of a single historical report. The story is the vehicle of faith. That is not to say, that there is no historical dimension to the stories, certainly there is a historical core. But the primary purpose of telling the stories is not to give a historical report, but to preach the crucified, risen Christ. Therefore, the Gospel writers were not concerned with historical accuracy and had no problem adding to, deleting from, or changing the stories in order to communicate the particular emphasis they want to make.

Keep in mind too that resurrection faith has permeated Matthew's telling of the Jesus story throughout this account. Even the infancy narrative is told through the lens of the risen Christ. Matthew tells the pre-Easter stories with a post-Easter faith; therefore it is not a strict historical account, but a theological one. This whole Gospel, not just the final chapter, is a witness to the risen Christ who is Lord of the church. There is no story, no Gospel, without the resurrection.

B. Two Marys Encounter the Risen Christ (Matt 28:8-10)

Unlike Mark where fear dominates and causes the women to be silent; here they hurry off to tell the others "with fear and great joy." In route to accomplishing their task they encounter the risen Christ, and are thus the first witnesses to his resurrection. In Boring's words this becomes "a paradigm of Matthew's understanding of the reassuring presence of the risen Christ in the missionary activity of the church" (cf. 1:23; 18:20; 28:20).

Matthew says that the women "took hold of his feet, and worshiped him." The response of the eleven in 28:17 is that "they worshiped him." The only other time in Matthew where

we are told that the disciples worshiped Jesus is in 14:33, where Jesus walked on the water to the disciples being tossed about on the turbulent sea and then caused the storm to cease. That story has the characteristics of a resurrection story. The risen Christ, vindicated and glorified by God, commends worship; though Jesus himself never sought worship.

Jesus tells them not to be afraid (a standard element of theophanies) and repeats the instruction given to them by the angel. But Jesus replaces “disciples” with “brothers”—“go and tell my brothers.” Though Judas betrayed him, and Peter denied him, all the disciples had fled and deserted Jesus. Yet Jesus still acknowledges them as his brothers. Jesus has already forgiven them and made possible the healing of the breach. So the women are not only heralds of Jesus’ resurrection, they are also agents of reconciliation, announcing forgiveness and a new beginning.

C. The Bribing of the Guards (Matt 28:11-15)

Rather than following the women on their mission, the story swings back to the guards. In Matthew’s account the guards witnessed what the women experienced. And they go and tell the chief priests, the corrupt religious leadership that orchestrated Jesus’ arrest.

Unlike the experience of the guards at the crucifixion scene, the apocalyptic signs did not generate faith for the guards at the tomb. It’s ironical that the guards become the perpetrators of the very story that setting the guard and sealing the tomb were designed to prevent in the first place.

It cost the chief priests more to keep the guards quiet than it did to sway Judas to betray Jesus—“a large sum of money.” The soldiers end up being false witnesses, accepting money to tell a lie. Boring notes: “The fact that Roman soldiers would report to the chief priests is one of the indications that the story is not literal history, but part of Matthew’s theological understanding of the resurrection” (p. 501).

Matthew’s note that “this story is still being told among the Jews to this day,” reflects the controversies between the synagogue and the church that Matthew’s church was experiencing. The Christian story of Christ’s resurrection was being countered by a Jewish story that the body of Jesus was stolen.

D. The Great Commission (Matt 28:16-20)

In this final scene the eleven meet Jesus on a mountain in Galilee, a place where significant events take place (cf. 5:1, 17:1). On the basis of the witness/proclamation of the women, the disciples have come to faith in the risen Christ and faith that they are still his brothers.

Matthew says that when they saw him “they worshiped him; but some doubted.” This may be translated to mean others besides the eleven doubted, or that some of the eleven worshiped and some of them doubted, or as in the NAB, “but they doubted” meaning that the very ones that worshiped also doubted. The first option doesn’t seem to be very likely because Matthew mentions no one else except the eleven. Because of the way Matthew has characterized the disciples throughout his Gospel as those of “little faith,” the last option is preferable. The disciples represent a worshipping and wavering faith community. For Matthew there is no perfect faith that eradicates all doubt. Whatever the nature of the resurrection appearances, they were not of such a nature as to remove all doubt. And yet it is to these of “little faith” that the mission is entrusted. The eleven are in one sense representative of all disciples—there is no complete faith; all waiver and fluctuate between commitment/worship and indecision.

Jesus is introduced as the one who has been given by God “all authority in heaven and earth.” Throughout Matthew, Jesus as the Teacher of Righteousness (5:17-20) taught with authority and acted with authority (cf. 7:28 and 21:23-27). Here that authority is extended by God to cover the whole cosmic universe. Jesus as the risen/glorified Lord is the one who represents God’s cosmic rule. In this role Jesus is the cosmic Christ, the king in the present-and-coming rule of God on earth (cf. Phil 2:5-11, Col 1:15-18; Heb 1:1-3) and is as Lord of heaven and earth. As the cosmic Lord Jesus is worshiped by the Christian community. To encounter Jesus is to encounter God who is defined by Jesus. God is not confined to Jesus, but God is defined by Jesus. The one mocked in the passion narrative as “king of the Jews” as been enthroned by God as king of Jews, Gentiles and all creation. Matthew has no explicit doctrine of the deity of Christ, but presents the story in such a way that to encounter Jesus is to encounter God.

In the final scene Matthew presents Jesus as the Teacher who has been given all authority. And so his primary authority for Matthew is the authority of his word. In Matthew Jesus does not show the disciples the marks on his body, nor does he eat with them. What matters for Matthew is his authoritative word. Jesus’ only action is to speak. Boring says, “Matthew sacrifices all curiosity-titillating details to the word of Jesus, which continues to be spoken to the disciples after Easter” (p. 503). This appearance and commissioning by Jesus comes in response to the disciples’ obedience to Jesus’ word spoken through the women. As throughout Matthew, faith involves obeying/doing the word of Jesus (cf. 7:15-23; 12:46-50; 21:28-32; 25:31-46).

Boring suggests that that the scene described in 28:16-20 is Matthew’s theological interpretation of the mission of the church in obedience to the command of the risen Christ. Boring says that if this passage was an actual report of what historically happened—that Jesus literally commanded the disciples to carry on a Gentile mission—it would be difficult to understand why they had the kind of struggles with it as these are depicted in Acts 1-15. Acts narrates a gradual process in which the community of Jesus’

disciples after Easter came to realize through the guidance of the Spirit that the Lord of the church wants his church to be a universal, inclusive community of all nations. Boring's point is that if it was as historically clear as this passage in Matthew suggests there would have never been the struggles to reach out to all peoples as we find in Acts (p. 503).

Here the commission is to all the nations. Earlier in 10:5-6 the disciples had been sent only to Israel. Jesus had originally envisioned Israel as the locus through which the kingdom of God would extend to all people in fulfillment of the promise given to Abraham (cf. Gen. 12:1-3). In some sense, that still holds true, in that the first followers of Jesus were Jewish and the church began as a distinctly Jewish movement (cf. Acts 2-8). However, Jesus' denunciation of the Scribes and Pharisees in Matt 23 and his judgment parables targeting the corrupt Jewish religious leadership anticipates the invitation of the kingdom being extended to others, though the others are not specifically identified (cf. Matt 21:33-46—"He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants"; in the parable of the two sons just prior to the parable of the tenants the others are identified as the tax collectors and prostitutes who are going into the kingdom ahead of them). Israel is not abandoned, but Israel is not now the major concert. The call to discipleship is open to all people—that would include Israel, but it affords Israel no special status. David Garland points out that in 28:18 there is an allusion to Daniel 7:14 where the dominion, glory and kingdom given to the son of man is that "all people, nations and languages should serve him" (Reading Matthew, p. 272). This universal mission breaks down all geographical and racial barriers and extends the scope of Jesus' authority beyond Israel to all nations.

It is significant that the charge to the disciples is not to get people saved, but to disciple them by teaching them all the things that Jesus taught them. The implication is that salvation is a part of discipleship; the process of discipleship is the process of salvation through Christ. While Matthew's Gospel contains a confessional Christology, it has been made clear that confession alone is not sufficient. What matters is doing the will of God. Faith is doing the will of God as it is expressed through the life and teachings of Jesus. Salvation is experienced by doing the will of God; obeying the teachings of Jesus.

Baptism is the act that signals the reality of this process. It is an important experience that marks the transition from someone outside the community of Christ's disciples to one who is within the community. Therefore it is an important introductory act/rite that carries with it a rich theological symbolism that is interpreted and applied in different ways in the New Testament. For Paul, it is the primary symbol/experience that signifies a Christian's corporate participation and identification in the death and resurrection of Christ. For Matthew it signifies immersion into the very life of God expressed in the form of Father, Son and Spirit

The phrase “in the name of” may (a) be a reference to the authority by which the baptism is carried out, (b) be a liturgical formula pronounced over the baptized, (c) refer to the fellowship/communion with the divine reality into which the candidate is baptized or (d) have a sense of all of these meanings. Luke, in his account in Acts, never uses this formula. In Acts those who are baptized are simply baptized in Jesus’ name (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5).

Like the rest of the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew has no fully developed doctrine of the Trinity. Though Matthew has Jesus stand in the place of God and has Father, Son, and Spirit appear in the same scene (Jesus’ baptism, 3:13-17) there is no theological discussion or explanation on how the Father, Son, and Spirit relate to each other, and nothing about their being “co-eternal” or “of the same substance” or “being distinct Persons, yet one God”—the kind of stuff we find in the later creeds of the church. Boring says, “The essential point is that the one encountered in Jesus as the Son of God and in the Spirit-led church as the people of God is not some subordinate deity, but the one true God.”

Personally, I find it makes more sense to talk about the Trinity in terms of “function,” rather than “substance” or “essence.” The one, true, living God reveals God’s self to us redemptively in terms of Father, Son and Spirit. Of course, there are many images of God. There are a number of places in the Old Testament where motherly images are used to describe and relate to God. For example, in a number of places God is pictured as a mother eagle protecting her young (i.e., Deut. 32:11-12); as a tender Mother, delivering her children at birth and caring for them throughout life (i.e., Isa 46:3-4); God is like a Mother who will never forsake her nursing child (i.e., Isa 49:15); and in the wisdom literature God is personified as Wisdom, which is a feminine image (i.e., Prov 1:20-33).

In this charge to the disciples they are given for the first time authority by Christ to teach. Before, when they were sent out to proclaim the nearness of the kingdom, they were given authority to announce the kingdom, heal diseases and cast out demons, but not to teach (10:1-8). Here they are specifically commanded to teach, for this is how disciples are made. They are to teach and nurture obedience to “everything that I have commanded you.” Of course, discipleship is as much caught as it is taught. The teaching to love one’s enemies becomes a real possibility when one sees that teaching embodied in a real life.

Of course, nothing is said here about what to do with people who have been taught and nurtured in other religious traditions. We live in a pluralistic culture and we should not assume that we have all the truth about God. As mentioned earlier while Jesus defines God for us, Jesus does not confine God. God is greater than any one revelation or expression of God. What is needed today is a more open, sensitive approach, and not a superior attitude that automatically rejects other religious expressions outright. (As with Christianity in particular, so with religion in general—there is both good and bad, healthy and unhealthy

religion). If we do not concede that God can reveal God's self to people in other religious traditions then there is no way to meet them as friends and fellows pilgrims on a journey. There would be hardly any grounds for a kind, generous, friendly dialogue to take place.

The view I take is that the cosmic Christ, the Lord of heaven and earth, functioning as Spirit ("the Lord is Spirit," 2 Cor. 3:18) can accommodate, adapt, reveal and mediate a relationship/connection with God for people who for whatever reason (religious upbringing, culture, indoctrination in another religion, place in the world, lack of Christian witness, etc.) are not open to Christian revelation, but are open to the light, truth, experience, etc. that is of God. I believe that the Spirit of the living Christ can touch, connect, change, encounter, empower, enliven, heal, etc, people who may not have a conscious awareness or belief in the Christ we know through the Christian witness and revelation. In Matt 25:34-40 those are welcomed into the kingdom did the will of Christ without even knowing Christ. In Matthew 12:30 Jesus says that whoever is not with me is against me. That can be turned around to say, whoever is not against Jesus is with him—which is the way it is interpreted in Mark's Gospel. In Mark 9:38-40 we read: "John said to him, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.' But Jesus said, 'Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able to soon afterward speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.'" Here someone who didn't really know Jesus and was not one of the disciples was using Jesus' name to cast out demons. Jesus says that's okay because "whoever is not against us is for us"—suggesting that one may have very little knowledge or understanding of Jesus and yet still be engaged in the cause of Christ in the world and be part of God's kingdom on earth.

An interesting feature of this final scene is that Jesus does not ascend—he does not leave the disciples, but instead promises to be (remain, dwell) with them always, to the end of the age. The disciples will soon learn that it would not be in the same way as before; that Jesus is talking here about a spiritual presence, but in Matthew Jesus doesn't ascend, because he doesn't leave. Matthew assures us that the spiritual presence of the living Christ will sustain and empower the church's mission. The continued presence of Christ is not a promise that his followers will be spared victimization or preserved from the threat of suffering, but they are assured that his living presence with them will give them the grace and strength necessary to love like Christ and carry out his cause in the world.

David Garland comments that Matthew's conclusion revolutionizes and transforms Israel's hope (reflected in such passages as Isa 2:2-3) in four ways: "First, it is Jesus, not Jerusalem, who is exalted (28:18). Second, the nations are not to come to the temple where God is presumed to dwell because it will soon be destroyed (23:38; 24:2). Instead, Jesus' disciples are to go out to the nations; and Jesus, as 'God with us' (1:23) and as 'something greater than the temple' (12:6), goes with them (28:20). Those in Israel who have not responded to the mission of the disciples lose their special status as the people of God

(21:43) and simply become one of the many nations that must be evangelized. Third, ‘the word of the Lord’ has now become the teaching of Jesus, and salvation comes from walking in his paths (28:20; see 17:5). Finally, the word of the Lord does not go forth from Jerusalem but from the despised outpost of Galilee (28:16)” (p. 272).

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Compare the empty tomb stories in the Synoptic Gospels (Matt 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; and Luke 24:1-12). What are the common features? What are the differences? Why do you think the accounts have such variant details? Why were the Gospel writers not concerned with historical accuracy?
2. What are the implications of Jesus’ resurrection as a vindication of his suffering and death? Even in resurrection Jesus is still the crucified one. What are the theological and practical implications of that?
3. What role do the women play in the resurrection story? Does this have any significance for the faith community today? Does this suggest to the patriarchal Jewish community the possibility of emerging roles for women in the new community that results from Christ’s life, death and resurrection (“the Christ Event”)?
4. Go back and read Matthew 14:22-33. What are some of the features in that story that would suggest to interpreters of Matthew that this was originally a resurrection story?
5. What would suggest to you in the story that Jesus has already forgiven the disciples for their denial and desertion?
6. How do you account for the “doubt” that characterized the disciples when they met Jesus on the mountain? What lessons can be drawn from this?
7. In Matthew’s presentation of Jesus how does Jesus primarily express his authority?
8. Summarize the Pastor’s understanding/perspective of the cosmic Christ. How might the cosmic Christ connect with people who have never heard of Jesus or because of their social, cultural, religious conditioning would never be open to embracing Christian revelation? Do you agree or disagree with this position? Why?

9. In Matthew's presentation of Jesus why doesn't Matthew ascend (as he does in Luke)? (Notice how Luke compensates for Jesus' ascension in 24:49). Does the gift of the Spirit in Luke-Acts and the continued presence of Jesus in Matt 28:20 amount to the same thing? Why or why not?
10. How does the death and resurrection of Christ transform Israel's hope?
11. What is the mission of the church and how, according to Matthew, is it to be accomplished?