

SERMON NOTES

Great Saturday

Syntaxes Gospel
Matthew 27:1-20

THE TRUTH OF THE RESURRECTION AND THE GREAT COMMISSION

INTRODUCTION

After the crucifixion and burial of Jesus Christ, Matthew records that on the next day, which was the morning after the Passover celebration the evening before, the religious leaders of the Jews met again with the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. This time, their concern was for the security of the grave. Whereas the disciples had not paid attention when Jesus told them that He must be crucified, but that He would rise again in three days, His enemies had paid careful attention. Moreover, they gave the frightened and disheartened disciples too much credit for even having the desire to fake Jesus' resurrection, much less having the ability to pull off such a scheme.

Matthew records their conversation with Pilate:¹

“Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, ‘After three days I am to rise again.’ 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.”

Apparently, the Jewish High Priest and his associates, who worked closely with the Romans to keep the peace, had been assigned a contingent of Roman soldiers to assist them. They had already used their Roman cohort of several hundred men to help them in the arrest of Jesus on Thursday evening.

Therefore Pilate replied to their request:

“You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how.”

Matthew records that the Jewish religious leaders went and set a guard at the tomb and also put a seal on the stone which closed the entrance. Matthew then moves to recount the events of the following day.

¹ Matthew 27:62-66. Matthew is the only Gospel writer to record the episode of the posting of the Roman guard at the tomb of Jesus.

SYNTAXIS READING

Matthew 27:1-20

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

The angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying.

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.’

And they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshipped Him.

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.’

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.

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

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.

But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated. When they saw Him, they worshipped Him; but some were doubtful.

And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.' "

NOTES

1. The Experience of the Faithful Women

“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.

The Sabbath here is the High Sabbath, the day of Holy convocation that began the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Our tradition teaches that this day in that year fell also on the sixth day, the normal weekly Sabbath, our Saturday. It may be that the High Priest and his associates broke the Law by meeting with Pilate, posting a guard, and setting a seal on the tomb stone of our Lord. No work was allowed on the High Sabbath. Moreover, because respect for the High Sabbath dictated that no bodies could remain on crosses, all the bodies were removed before it began Friday on evening.

The time is now *after* the High Sabbath. It is the first day of the week, Sunday morning. The women are free to do work once again and as the other Gospels record; they brought spices to complete the burial preparation of the body,² which had been hurriedly entombed before the onset of the Sabbath.

Mark also relates the concern of the women as they made their way to the tomb: who would roll away the heavy stone from the entrance? It was too heavy for them to do alone.³

It is obvious that these women, the most faithful of the disciples, did not remember Jesus' words about His Resurrection. They were coming for the dead; not to meet the living.

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. And his appearance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow.

Matthew's is the only Gospel that records the two earthquakes, the one when Christ died and this one, when He arose. This second earthquake is connected with the descent of the angel of the LORD.

The appearances of the Angel of the LORD in the Old Testament are believed by many to be theophanies, appearances of God⁴—appearances of the pre-incarnate Word of God. The physical appearance of the Angel of the Lord and that of Christ, transfigured,⁵ are similarly described.

² Mark 16:1; Luke 24:1

³ Mark 16:3

Christ was no longer in the tomb. The stone was not rolled away for Christ to exit; but so that the women could enter.

The guards shook for fear of him and became like dead men.

This appearance of the Angel caused the soldiers to be paralyzed with fear.

The angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying.

The experience of the women is told by the Gospels from different points of view. Apparently much has been conflated by Matthew and Mark, and only a simple summary is offered. Luke tells more of the other women and John concentrates on Mary Magdalene’s story.

A possible reconciliation of all the accounts may be suggested.

1. The women arrive, see the empty tomb and decide someone has stolen the body (John).
2. Mary Magdalene runs back to tell Peter and the disciples (John).
3. The other women enter the tomb and speak to the angels (Matthew, Mark, Luke).
4. Meanwhile, the soldiers recover enough to run back to the High Priest (Matthew).
5. The other women, after speaking to the angels, turn back frightened (Mark), until, on the way, they meet Jesus, and then go on to tell the disciples (Luke).
6. Somehow, they go a different way missing, Peter and John followed by Mary Magdalene, or else, the running disciples do not stop in their haste to hear the women’s new information.
7. John arrives at the tomb, sees the grave clothes but does not enter (John).
8. Peter arrives, runs into the tomb, sees the grave clothes, and the two men decide Mary Magdalene was right—someone has stolen the body. (John).⁶
9. They leave to go home and Mary Magdalene remains weeping (John).
10. Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene (John).
11. None of the male disciples believed the women’s story of seeing the risen Lord (Luke).

The empty tomb was the first proof that Christ had risen from the dead. The testimony of the angels was the second proof. The last proof was actually seeing and speaking with the Lord.

The angels had to remind the women that Jesus had told them before He was crucified that He would rise again.

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.’

According to Matthew and Mark, the plan was for Jesus to meet His disciples in Galilee. Because of the male disciples’ unbelief, they did not go immediately;⁷ Jesus had to adjust that plan.

⁴ Genesis 16:7-13; 21:17-19; 22:11-18; Judges 13:3-23 among others. However, Gabriel is also called an angel of the Lord in Luke 1:11-18.

⁵ Cf. Matthew 17:2

⁶ John explains that they believed this “for as yet they did *not* understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead.” John 20:9

⁷ Luke records that the disciples did not believe the women’s report (Luke 24:11), considering it nonsense. Both Luke and John report that Jesus then began appearing to the male disciples that very evening (Luke 24:13-43; John 20:19-29).

And they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshipped Him.

The women, however, believed the angel's words, but were so terrified, at first, that they couldn't say a word. Still, they started off. Their faith was rewarded by a meeting with their Lord. Now, they fully understood Who He is and fell down and worshipped Him.

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.'

Jesus repeated His plan—to meet the disciples in Galilee—to the women, for them to pass on to the disciples. Jesus gently removed their terror, and encouraged them to take the glad tidings to the disciples.

2. The Report of the Guards

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. And when they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers,

This account of the soldiers' experience is only reported by Matthew.

It is difficult to understand how the High priest and his fellow chief priests could be so stubborn in their unbelief. Yet, they are proof that when one hardens his heart, no amount of proof will change his mind. The soldiers gave an honest account. But perhaps, the chief priests believed that the soldiers had indeed fallen asleep, and came with this story to get themselves off the hook. However, for a Roman soldier to fall asleep at his post meant the death penalty, it was not likely that they *all* should have fallen asleep.

Whatever the chief priests might have actually believed, they decided to bribe the soldiers to give a different account from the first report.

and said, 'You are to say, "His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep. " And if this should come to the governor's ears, we will win him over and keep you out of trouble.'

The fabricated story was ludicrous for a Roman soldier. Moreover, if the tale hit Pilate's ears, they were dead men. Knowing this, the chief priests promised to protect them.

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.

The Roman soldiers had seen, or at least heard, of the chief priest's power over Pilate in the case of Jesus. They probably thought it best to take the money and not cross the chief priests. People still believe the lie to this day

3. The Great Commission

But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated. When they saw Him, they worshipped Him; but some were doubtful.

Forty days elapsed before Jesus ascended into heaven. Matthew skips over the first eight days in Jerusalem and goes straight to the event in Galilee.

Matthew has omitted the references to the upper room appearances on Resurrection day and a week later.

We do know from John 21 that the disciples were on the Sea of Galilee (aka the Sea of Tiberias) during part of the forty days, and met the Lord on the seashore. Here Matthew gives us the meeting on the mountain that Jesus had commanded through the word of the angel that the disciples must attend. Later, at the end of the forty days, the disciples were again in Jerusalem. They were witnesses of the Ascension from the Mount of Olives and returned to Jerusalem, as commanded, to await Pentecost.

Because of Matthew's tendency to conflate, his comment—that some doubted—may point to the most famous of the doubters, the disciple Thomas. The doubts of Thomas that anyone had actually seen post Crucifixion, the living Christ were actually resolved a week after Easter when Christ appeared again in the presence of Thomas. When he saw Christ, Thomas exclaimed, "My LORD and my God!"

And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations,

On the designated mountain in Galilee, perhaps Mount Harmon, Jesus instructed the disciples concerning their future mission. Luke does not record the events that transpired in Galilee after the Resurrection. Since Matthew omits the account of the Ascension—viewed from the Mt. of Olives—and a form of this instruction is given in Luke's Gospel account of the Ascension, as well as in Luke's account of the Ascension in Acts, it is difficult to know which writer is conflating. What is certain: both writers witness to a form of Jesus' commandment to evangelize the world.

Upon His Resurrection, Jesus Christ had ascended initially to the Father;⁸ at that time, He had received again all that He had laid aside when He had taken the form of man at His incarnation. All the authority of heaven and earth was bestowed on His resurrected incarnated form. Since God is Spirit, the Incarnation is the form of God which we will see seated on the Throne of God.

The command, the Great Commission to the Disciples, to all of those disciples and Apostles gathered at the meeting on the mountain, was the same: Go to all the nations, not just to those folks at home or members of their own nation, but to *all*. The disciples of Jesus, His students, are to make other students of our Lord from all the nations.

baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,

After making disciples, they are to baptize them in the *one* NAME [YHWH] that each of the forms of the ONE God bears.

That this phrase was a part of the original Gospel has come under question.⁹

⁸ At His meeting with her at the tomb, Jesus warned Mary Magdalene: "Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren, and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.' John 20:17)" St Paul teaches us what happened at this ascension, "***when He [the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory] raised Him from the dead, and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come. And He put all things in subjection under His feet,*** and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all (Ephesians 1:20-23)." God's incarnate form is always subject to the Father, Who is pure Spirit.

⁹ See F. C. Coneybeare, *The Armenian Church, Heritage and Identity* (New York City: St. Vartan Press, 2001) pps. 150-51.

teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’ ”

This phrase has been seen to follow naturally after “make disciples of all nations.” In the making of students, the teaching of all that Jesus had taught to the original disciples was essential.

APPLICATION

Our reading, from Matthew’s account of the Resurrection, has emphasized two points: 1) the truth of the Resurrection (though our Lord’s enemies led untold millions to believe the false theft account promoted by the Jewish chief priests), and 2) the great command of our Lord to evangelize the nations.

The truth of the Resurrection can be seen by the fact that it was totally unexpected by the disciples. The women had come to the tomb early in the morning after the Sabbath, not to meet the living Lord, but to anoint His dead body. There was no sense in this action if the disciples had somehow stolen the body while the guards were asleep. The women would have been directed to the new burial site. Moreover, the original thought of the women—when they found the tomb empty—was that someone had stolen the body away. This was a shock to the male disciples. Peter and John, two of the leaders of Jesus’ followers, ran to verify the report of Mary Magdalene. This would have been absurd if they had planned the theft.

The psychological state of the disciples—extreme fear, disappointment, and grief—was not conducive to a scheme to steal the body of One Who had, to their minds, failed them in their hopes of Kingdom glory. In fact, their recognition that their Lord was God Incarnate, and that He had come to sacrifice Himself for the sins of the world did not surface until after they had met the Risen Christ. It was only after the forty days of Christ’s explanation of the Holy Scriptures, that the Disciples finally understood the meaning of the earlier teachings of our Lord. It was only post Resurrection, that this new knowledge emboldened the once terrified disciples to take the good news, the Gospel, to the ends of the world. In the process, they suffered ridicule, excommunication from their own people, and execution-- hardly the actions of those who knew they were promoting a lie concerning the central teaching of their Gospel—the Resurrection.

Finally, that the Roman guards would have been so lax as to fall asleep at their post, especially when they had been alerted to the High Priest’s fears of a possible theft, cannot be believed. Moreover, such a laxity would have meant the death penalty for them.

The truth of the Gospel is far more plausible, even though it requires that the testimony of the Gospel writers, with all its miraculous aspects, be accepted. At the time of his writing about the Resurrection, St. Paul notes that there were hundreds of people still living who witnessed the resurrected Jesus Christ, and presumably could be interviewed by doubters. Jesus Christ indeed rose from the dead.

Standing solidly on the truth of the Resurrection and its tremendous testimony to the exaltation and supreme authority of the Incarnation of our God, Jesus Christ, Matthew moves to his second emphasis: the great commission to the disciples. The evangelizing work of the disciples was to begin immediately. It was (and is) the task of the disciples to multiply their number throughout the world. We are to fill the earth with faithful disciples from every nation, tribe, and tongue. The making of disciples meant teaching them what our Lord had taught, sealing their commitment to Him through baptism.

According to our tradition, two of those disciples, in obedience to the Great Commission, came to us in Armenia, and brought the glorious news of God's love and grace. In the early days, the Armenian Christians took the good news of Jesus Christ to their neighbors, the Georgians from our homeland in Armenia. Today we are scattered around the world, and are practically positioned to reach all nations for Christ. But we must be prepared if we are to be obedient to the great commission. As the Apostle Paul wrote, we must "study to show ourselves approved, workmen who do not need to be ashamed, because we rightly handle the Word of Truth."

We must pull ourselves out of the slump of indifference, and through knowledge of Him, fan the flickering flame of our faith into bright burning torches that will light this dark world. We must let Him write His ways upon our hearts so that we can share from our innermost being the wonders of His grace and love to all mankind.

But we will not do this alone. Our God will be with us, for He has promised, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." What more could we ask, want, or need? This Easter, gripped with the truth of His Resurrection and the reality of His unmatched power and authority, let us go forth to do His will, knowing that we **can** and **must** fulfill His command to teach the world the blessedness of His forgiveness, and the joy and beauty of Life in His Presence forevermore.