

Prayers

To God

Pray and ask the Lord for understanding, so that your soul might understand the full implications of God's saving work through Jesus Christ.

For Self

Give thanks to God for the new life you have been given through the resurrection. Think back over the years and remember past Easters. How have you changed over the years, for the best, or not for the best?

For others

Lord God Almighty, raise up Your church to be a witness to the resurrection. May it be a bright shining light to the whole world, demonstrating love peace and joy and hope in miraculous power and energy, so that people might believe God is indeed who He says He is in the Bible. AMEN

Meditation

Find beauty in companionship,

For Jesus is our friend and respects our love:

Find beauty in simply duties,

For Christ empowers us to do all that's good:

Find beauty in helping the poor

For the Son of God brought hope to the world:

Find beauty in doing what is right,

For the Spirit creates the fruit of the Spirit within:

Find beauty in working with others

For the Father loves the unity of His people:

Find beauty in overcoming problems

For the Lord our God is victorious over all evil:

Find beauty in resting from all you do

For God Himself rested, and loves the Sabbath.

Bible Passage

Matthew 28:11-20

¹¹ While they were going, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had happened. ¹² Then they met with elders and devised a plan to give the soldiers a large sum of money; ¹³ they told them,

'You must say this,

"His disciples came by night and stole him while we were asleep."

¹⁴ If the governor hears of this, we will deal with him and keep you out of trouble.'

¹⁵ So they took the money and did as they were told. And to this day, that is the story told among the Jews.

¹⁶ The eleven disciples then went to the mountain in Galilee where Jesus had arranged to meet them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but they doubted.

¹⁸ Jesus came and said to them,

'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

Review

In this powerful passage, Matthew concludes his Gospel. The first part deals with the false stories told about the resurrection, placing responsibility for them firmly at the door of the guards and the chief priests (28:11-15). The second is the massively important account of Jesus' meeting with the disciples in Galilee, at which He gives them the 'Great Commission'. This text probably competes with John 3:16 (*'For God so loved the world ...'*) as the most preached upon text in Christianity!

Two different responses to the Gospel

Before we look at each part of this reading, it is worth noting that when read together, they powerfully illustrate the two different ways people respond to the resurrection and the saving work of God in Jesus Christ. Some, like the chief priests and guards, become caught up in the doubt, suspicion, gossip and misinformation about Christ (28:11-15). Others will meet with the risen Lord, and when they do, He commissions them to do His work (28:16-20). Over the centuries, many have tried to avoid what Matthew reports, wanting further proof. Yet such a quest is to no avail. Eventually we are faced with a decision as to whether we accept the account or not, and the decision determines our destiny.

The report of the guards

Apart from the obvious need to provide a cover story for what happened, the guards at Jesus' tomb were in deep trouble. They had not seen the risen Jesus because after seeing the descending angel and the destruction of the tomb seals, they fled! How could they tell the authorities they had fled because of an angel? However, they must have soon discovered that the body had disappeared, hence their need to explain why it had gone!

Once the truth was out, the authorities had no option but to limit the damage. They want no talk of resurrection, or any hint that this Jesus has survived Roman crucifixion; it is a matter of saving face for all concerned (28:12). All involved needed to be 'on message', and say that the disciples have taken Jesus, implying a degree of negligence on the part of the soldiers, who therefore had to be kept quiet. This was easily done with a bribe and a concocted story (28:13,14). The bribe was surely substantial, for any army guard caught sleeping on duty in the risked death, and Pilate was not a lenient man.

Lastly, the guards were told that influence would be brought to bear on their behalf if the story was ever heard by Pilate (28:14). Their story is highly improbable, and is barely believable. How can a tomb seal be dismantled without waking those on guard? Why would the soldiers be asleep, anyway? One can hardly imagine anyone taking the guards seriously, but we do not know whether Pilate ever heard the story (28:14)!

The plan for spreading a lie

This is reported by Matthew to explain to Christians that the Jewish authorities created the cover up story about Jesus' resurrection. From Matthew's day until today, some still prefer to accept conspiracy theories about the resurrection, which all boil down to logical reasons why Jesus' body was not in the tomb. But where can such questioning ever end? It is a route to frustration, because people are looking for the impossible; history has no 'replays' or alternative truth. Too often, the sceptical pathway is chosen by those who have already rejected the Gospel, and doubt not just the resurrection but the divinity and authority of Christ.

Matthew's report of the first Easter Sunday is either received by us in faith or not received. Moreover, history shows that those who receive it are changed by God's grace, and those who do not receive it remain with their questions unresolved.

The gathering of the eleven

The remaining eleven disciples travel to Galilee to meet Jesus; but what is on their minds? None of them have seen the risen Jesus (according to Matthew), but all have heard the women's report. In addition, one of their number, Judas, killed himself, and all have deserted the man who now summons them to meet Him! The journey to Galilee would take a day or two, and this enables the disciples to face their shame, talk to each other and come to terms with all that has happened; they have much to talk about.

When they get to Galilee, they meet the risen Jesus (28:17). This verse is difficult because the phrase at the end reads '*but they doubted*'. For generations, scholars have been cautious at the idea of presenting the idea that all the disciples had doubts, and some have found a way to change the translation to, '*but some doubted*', which sounds less dire. Most Bible translations take this line, but arguments have raged between scholars for centuries over this, and the same question arises whichever is right. Why and what did some or all of the disciples doubt?

It may well be that because the disciples had not witnessed Jesus death or the empty tomb (according to Matthew), they harboured questions about what had happened, and this would be entirely natural. However, as we read on, Matthew says that despite their doubts the disciples 'worshipped' Him as soon as they meet Him (28:17). It is a powerful moment; imagine Peter, for example, worshipping Jesus after his terrible and pathetic attempt to follow his Master when He was taken captive (26:58 f.). Much healing and forgiveness lies within this worship.

The Great Commission

The final words of Jesus to the disciples are of supreme importance. If we are to get behind these words and understand their spiritual and eternal power, we do not need mere cold analysis of them, but spiritual empathy and sensitivity.

Initially, Jesus sums His ministry and hands it all over to the disciples, emphasising the authority of the Father; He sums it up in words we know as 'The Great Commission' (28:19). The disciples are trusted by God despite their frailties, and from now on, God gives them (meaning 'us') to do this work. They are to take the work and ministry of God through Jesus Christ to the whole world (28:19)! And this is God's plan for the salvation of the world, which rests on the shoulders of eleven frail men and the women with them!

Jesus concludes with instructions which bring together the Gospel call with the promise of divine help; '*I am with you ...*' (28:20). Just as Jesus has made disciples and worked with them and through them, they are now to '*make disciples of all nations*', and they are to follow His own example and that of John the Baptist in using baptism as a sign of both an acceptance of the Gospel and God's work of grace in the believer. Further, they are to be baptised '*in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*', the unique 'Trinitarian' formula which only Matthew records. No baptism is complete without these words.

The final promise

Lastly, Jesus calls on the disciples to not only 'make disciples', but to teach them all that Jesus said and did; all He had taught them in His earthly life and ministry. The Gospel cannot be passed on from one generation to another as if by Chinese whispers, with the message being coloured and changed by each generation. The standard must be what Jesus taught the disciples, and Matthew himself appreciated this perhaps more than most, because he was one of the few who wrote down what he knew of Jesus teaching and ministry in a 'Gospel' message.

The command to discipleship is accompanied by a final promise at the end of the Gospel that has been treasured by Christians as the greatest and most necessary of blessings; the presence of the Saviour Himself. '*I am with you always, to the end of the age*' (28:20). This promise is a fulfilment of Jesus' name '*Immanuel*' (meaning 'God with us') given to Him at birth by the angel (Matt 1:23). Without it, the Great Commission cannot be fulfilled; but with it, everything is possible.

Application

Discipleship issues

Get on with it!

Theses could be written about almost every word or phrase of these last words of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel. However, we need to consider the meaning of these words and how they should be put into practice, not in abstract, but by each of us. Thousands of preachers have dealt with these issues over thousands of years, and in so doing have presented to us only what Jesus Himself presented to the first disciples. However, if the only thing we do is explore the meaning of what Jesus said rather than do His bidding, then we gain virtually nothing. Crucial, we need to know whether God's people will put this command into practice. We are talking about doing what God requires for the salvation of people throughout the world, from now until eternity. No more pressing issue stands before us in any age.

Being obedient to the commission

Whether we are obedient to this commission surely defines whether we stand in the tradition of discipleship according to Matthew. More than that, because his Gospel is accepted by the God's people as scripture, it defines whether we are Christ's disciples at all. Matthew's Gospel does not stand above the others in what it says; it simply expresses the call of discipleship in this clear and distinct way. The other Gospels do not disagree; they present the same information about Jesus' call on the life of His disciples in different ways, and they have other things to say as well. We will only discover what they have to say when we study them, and for the moment, we should be sure to respond to the Gospel Matthew has written for us as he has so clearly asked of us. We are called to have faith in Him who died and rose for us, and to be obedient to His commission.

Questions for groups

- 1. Does it worry you to think that some of the disciples 'doubted' (28:17)? What do you think they doubted?*
 - 2. Is Jesus' speech an adequate summary of the task of the church today? If not, what should be added?*
 - 3. Was Jesus right to have confidence in the disciples' memories of what He had taught? Why did He not write down his teaching; it could have been done?*
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Final Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus, You trust me, and I do not understand why You feel able to do this. Sometimes I can trust myself, but often I cannot. Your love and compassion is more than I can understand, but use me, I pray for the work of Your Kingdom, and may I be an ever willing servant! AMEN