

Matthew 23-06-11a

Good morning. Welcome to the Sunday morning services at Grace and Truth Bible Church. This is the 11th of June, 2023.

We are in the closing lines of the Gospel of Matthew, the 28th chapter. This is the very interesting section that deals with the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ and his post-resurrection appearance, where one of the most famous of all scriptures is located, traditionally known as the Great Commission. We're not quite in Galilee yet, although Jesus has encouraged his disciples multiple times to go there, and he would see them there.

They seem to have trouble getting out of town, and this will create an interesting come to pass, as we'll see this morning. Let's take a moment to ask God's blessing on our fellowship, on our study, on those who are traveling and not able to be with us, and then we'll begin. Father, it is a wonderful encouragement and comfort to know that we are sustained by your grace, enabled by your power, guided by your word, and given status and meaning and purpose through the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ at your right hand.

We belong to him, and in him we have so many wonderful privileges that we thank you for, and we pray that as we exercise some of those privileges this morning in looking at your word and sharing its truth with each other, that your Holy Spirit will enliven and enable all of our spiritual gifts, that our time together will be meaningful and helpful to those present and those who will join us out of time in the future. We pray that in all things the Lord Jesus will be glorified as we look at this wonderful moment in his life and ministry. We ask it in Jesus' name.

Amen. Well, it is such a fascinating scene to picture, isn't it? The early dawn of Sunday morning with the tomb, the guards, the stone. Sometime during that dark night the angel descended.

Probably two angels descended, but you can imagine that one was sufficient to strike the guards into fearful paralysis and unconsciousness. The stone then being rolled away. Comparing the accounts, there are so many details, and by blending them together we find the story unfolding in quite a scenic fashion.

The body is in the tomb at sundown, by my reckoning, on Thursday and spends all day Friday, which is Passover proper, the Sabbath day. People having partaken of the Passover meal Thursday night behind closed doors. Everything that took place in the trial was on the Day of Preparation.

Day of Preparation, capital P, not just preparation for a normal weekly Sabbath, but preparation for Passover itself. Many, many things had to be in readiness so that when

the sun went down and that high Sabbath and that feast began, the food and all of the attendant requirements were in readiness. So, they hastily remove the Lord Jesus' body from the cross.

It's so interesting to me that at the point that Jesus is dead, the body is never called Jesus. It is called the body. And it is a reminder that once our spirit has left the body, that is not us, that is the vacant house.

And yet, once again, when Jesus is raised and people witness and behold his body, he is once again Jesus. But in the intervening period, it is the body. And so, it has been placed in the tomb, sealed with a large stone.

The fear is that somebody will try to fake a resurrection. The unbelievers and enemies of Jesus in the Jewish leadership are more aware and concerned about the possibility of resurrection than his own followers who have witnessed him raise the dead and do miraculous healings for years. And yet, this tells you the power of shock, the power of radically altered circumstances.

Jesus tried to prepare his disciples. He told them over and over again. He was going to Jerusalem.

He would be delivered into the hands of men. They would take him and crucify him. And every time he told them, he would rise again the third day.

But when the circumstance actually occurs, they can't think. They can't retrieve the information and make it the object of their faith. And if they had, what would this scene that we're picturing in our minds look like early on Sunday morning? What would have been great to see on Sunday? Once the sun went down Saturday night, Sabbath is over.

You can travel in the night. Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. What would have been a wonderful sight for the Lord to see when he emerged from the tomb sometime before dawn? How about 12 disciples and a group of ladies grouped expectantly outside the tomb? What would they have seen had they been thoughtful enough and faithful enough and aware enough and hopeful enough to be there? They would have seen the angel.

They would have experienced the earthquake at its epicenter. They would have seen the risen Lord emerging from the still sealed tomb. So many things could have been different if they had been there.

But of course they weren't. Even as the sun rises, it is the ladies who appear at the tomb. And we've seen the significance of their testimony being the first.

It is so counterintuitive. And yet God has chosen for their faithfulness to be on display and honored their honoring of the Lord Jesus by favoring them with the first sight of the empty tomb and the first witness from the angels and the clothes lying in the tomb and

so on. Of course they then go to the disciples.

There are so many different ways God could have done this. Jesus, upon being raised, instead of appearing on Sunday night in the closed and locked upper room, could have appeared to the disciples that morning. He appears to the ladies in the garden, to Mary Magdalene in the garden, not to the disciples.

It's a full day. His 11 disciples, minus Judas, don't see him until evening. Two non-part of the 12 disciples, Cleopas and a companion, are on the road to Emmaus.

They see him that day. Peter, John, Andrew, James, Philip, Bartolomeo, Simon, all the rest of these other disciples, James the less, they don't see him till evening. It is so unexpected.

These that spent the most time with him, that heard him affirm the truth of his resurrection coming, are the last to see him on that day. The ladies have seen him. Cleopas has seen him and his companion.

It would be interesting to know who that gentleman was. So, one thing is certain. Jesus actually resurrected.

The body was not stolen. The disciples couldn't figure out where it went. The ladies couldn't figure out where it went.

The soldiers didn't know where it went. The Jewish authorities didn't know where it was. Nobody could produce the body.

Nobody could account for the missing body. The angels witnessed to the resurrection. The enemies of Christ witnessed to it.

They pay off the soldiers to fabricate a story that it was stolen because they don't know where it is. And everyone is a witness. Ultimately, Jesus will be seen of upwards of 500, as we know from 1 Corinthians.

So, this scene leaves us with the morning in the garden, and the story in Matthew is that there was a great earthquake. An angel of the Lord had descended from heaven, had come and rolled back the stone and sat upon it. This, I think, is what the soldiers witnessed, because by the time the ladies get there, this angel and his companion are at the tomb and inside the tomb, sitting at the head and the foot of the place where the Lord lay.

And they seem to speak to the ladies from inside. So, in our account, having described the way the tomb came to be open, and it was open when the women arrived, and in verse 5, the angel says to the women, do not be afraid. I know that you seek Jesus, who was crucified.

He is not here. He has risen. As he said, come see the place where he lay.

From Mark 16, verses 1-8, very early on the first day of the week, these ladies, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome brought spices. They went to the tomb when the sun had risen, and they were saying to one another, who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb? Looking up, they saw that the stone was rolled back. It was very large.

Entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were amazed. And he said to them, do not be amazed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified.

He has risen. He is not here. See the place where they laid him.

Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him as he told you. It's been the subject of great scrutiny that Jesus names Peter separately, his disciples and Peter.

Why is Peter's name mentioned by itself? First of all, this is in the Gospel of Mark, which is Peter's recollections and retelling as set down by Mark. Go tell his disciples and Peter. A few nights previously, Peter has vehemently denied that he knew the Lord, that he was not one of the disciples.

And one wonders, is this a special encouragement to Peter after his failure where he goes out and weeps bitterly? Or is it a gentle jibe that if Peter considers himself no longer to be one of the disciples, then go tell the disciples and Peter, who has disavowed membership in the group. It's hard to know, but Peter remembered it vividly. And tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee.

This is the same thing we saw in Matthew 28, verse 7, he is going before you to Galilee. So the ladies in Mark's account went and fled from the tomb, trembling with astonishment. They said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.

Luke's account in chapter 24, first day of the week, these ladies go to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb. When they went in, they did not find the body.

While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, why do you seek the living among the dead? Notice in both Luke and John, there is the report of two angels, two supernatural men who appear suddenly in dazzling apparel. It's an odd thing to, if I was going to construct questions for a Bible trivia game, I might include one that says, when and where does the Bible mention snow? And it's a puzzlement until you remember that these dazzling garments are described as being white as snow.

It's the whiteness we remember, and we forget that it's compared to snow. And in the Middle East, in the ancient Near East, certainly snow is something of a rarity. And it's not like living in Michigan, here in the States.

And so snow is remarkable against the backdrop of that environment, which is green, dark green olive trees in the summer and the cedars and so on. And then in the winter, when the greenery dies away, it is rocky and dusty and very brown. And so the appearance of snow was similar to linen that had been washed with fuller soap and was as white as people could make it.

And so it's compared to snow. And it tells us in our Matthew 28.3, that his appearance was like lightning, his countenance and his raiment white as snow. Luke tells us that these two men were arrayed in dazzling apparel.

And as they speak to these ladies, they say, why do you seek the living among the dead? Remember how he told you while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified, and on the third day rise. And they, the ladies, remembered his words. And returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.

Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. And as I pointed out in preceding lessons, I think even John, all he hears is the first part of the story.

When Mary comes to tell him and Peter that Jesus is raised, their initial thought when they see the tomb and the missing body is, well, someone's taken him and we don't know where they've laid him. And so they're trying to tell Peter and John this story. And before they can get to the part about the angels, Peter and John, what are you talking about? And they get up and rush out and they don't even stick around to hear the rest of the message.

All they heard was Mary saying, well, we got there and we were wondering who would roll away the stone. When we got there, the stone is rolled away and the body is missing. And we didn't know who had taken it or where they had laid him.

Well, whoosh, those two guys are gone. And they're going to have to catch up. And if you keep reading in John, you find out that the rest of the story is down below.

After the foot race between Peter and John, then there is the account in John 20 of the conversation between Jesus and Mary. But it's such a startling and confusing time. If you think the crucifixion was confusing, the empty tomb and the resurrected Lord, people are just having a hard time grasping and processing the information that they're getting.

Why is that? Why are they having such difficulty? Every account includes and excludes

different details. They all harmonize. If you look at it carefully on a superficial glance, you would say, well, it's either this or this.

But they can all be reconciled. And anyone who has spent time around courtroom trials with eyewitness testimony can vouch for the fact that eyewitness testimony is often something that has to be reconciled because different perspectives, different times, different things strike different people. One person will observe a detail that another one misses.

One person will remember part of a conversation and the other one won't. And it's all true, but it doesn't sound the same upon an initial hearing. That's what you have here.

And there is also a lot of initial fear. But how could this have been avoided? What is the that these people are having such a hard time grasping what's going on? What do they lack? The same thing happens to us when we get rattled and derailed and drawn up, short, confused, depressed, discouraged, afraid. Our problem is reflected here.

Their problem, what is it? They did not remember the words of the Lord. He told them, be prepared. And yet in the shock and awe of the crucifixion, its aftermath, the sequestering during Passover and the Sabbath that followed it, they haven't really been able to get together much.

And those who are together, they don't seem to be able to speak that truth to each other. I am sure some of these ladies were staying for the feast in the same household or in the same lodgings. The disciples, I would expect that James and John probably had a place that they stayed in town.

John had special access in Jerusalem. It's been a head-scratcher for many people that John, who is from Galilee, he's a Galilean fisherman, and yet he seems to have connections with the priestly household and is able to get Peter admitted into the courtyard where he then denies the Lord. But John is inside and John is privy to and witness to things.

And people say, well, if you notice carefully, these special access notations are not said to be John literally. It says, the disciple whom Jesus loved. And he is spoken of indirectly, which has led to speculation that the disciple whom Jesus loved was not John.

And one of the arguments that the disciple whom Jesus loved was not John himself is, how could this Galilean fisherman have an inn at the place of Jesus' trial and have access to the high priest and be privy to some of their conversations? Because he's from Galilee, wouldn't he have the same accent that Peter has, that the maid spots by the fire? And wouldn't he be similarly looked down upon? Can anything good come out of Galilee? So if John were Galilean, how does he suddenly have this special access? So they say, well, you can make a case that the disciple whom Jesus loved wasn't John. It

was someone else. So they start looking around.

Who could it be? And there is somebody who is explicitly said to be someone that Jesus loved and it's in the gospel of John back in chapter 11. Who is that? Lazarus. Lazarus lives in Bethany, which is near Jerusalem.

And they say, well, maybe he had an inn with the priestly household and they try to make it work with Lazarus. You can research this if you're interested. They've had other speculations.

Some have even tried to suggest that the disciple whom Jesus loved was Mary Magdalene. That fails rather quickly because all of the pronouns are masculine, talking about this beloved disciple. And especially in John at the very end of the gospel, where they're walking down the road and Jesus says, Peter, do you love me? And then Peter says, well, what about this other guy? They're referring to the other disciple, the disciple Jesus loved.

And Jesus says, well, what is it to you if he should remain till I come? Well, that can't be Mary and being spoken of with masculine pronouns unless somebody tampered with scripture. But it's fascinating that people can take little bits and pieces and weave them together. If you want a real hair-raising account, read the Gospel of Peter, taking bits and pieces of scriptural truth and weaving it with a bunch of imaginary nonsense.

The Acts of Pilate is another non-inspired, spurious, written-after-the-fact account telling the story of the crucifixion and resurrection, supposedly from Pilate's point of view. That'll not just raise your hair, it'll curl your hair, and various other traditions and such. But here's the point.

There is the witness of the empty tomb first. As shocked, as unprepared, as faithless in the moment as the women and the disciples are, there is an undeniable fact that is witnessed by the angels, by the guards, by the Jewish leadership, by the women, and by the disciples themselves in the person of Peter and John that the tomb is empty. So the only alternate explanation to resurrection is theft of the body.

This is the lie that Matthew records the Jewish leadership as planting in the mouths of the guards, paying them to say his disciples came and stole the body while we slept. But there is a problem, a serious problem, with that account, and it's in John's gospel. So if you turn with me to John chapter 20, on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early while it was still dark and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb.

So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, now looking at the accounts in the synoptics, it appears that there is a group of women that are headed. We have Joanna and the other Mary and Salome all

mentioned, and yet John only mentions Mary Magdalene. There are various ways to figure out what happened here.

I think one of the most likely is that the group was headed to the tomb, and Mary Magdalene was probably younger than the other women. We know that these other ladies are married with grown sons, the wife of Zebedee, and these other ladies seem to have been middle-aged at least. Mary Magdalene is likely to have been much younger, and it's possible that in her concern and in her angst and in her excitement, she sort of got ahead of the other ladies.

They're still picking their way through the dark, and she rushed ahead. So she is the first to see the tomb empty, and as soon as she sees it, she immediately turns and runs right past the other ladies, who haven't even gotten there yet, to go find Peter and John. That's one possibility.

The other is that they all came together. Mary is the one that sprinted back, so she's the one that gives the account, and so John says this is what Mary Magdalene saw. Doesn't matter a whole lot, but it's interesting to piece it together and see that the accounts are very reconcilable if you just take your time and think through what this scene and experience would have looked like.

So she goes and runs and tells the two, and she says, they have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him. As Peter and John run back to the tomb, what do you think Mary Magdalene would do? Of course she is going to run back as well. She can't run as fast as Peter and John, but she's pretty quick, and she will soon rejoin the group of ladies, and at some point they will all arrive at the tomb, and that accounts for your synoptic accounts that say that the ladies together talk to the men.

So in the sequence of events, just in case you're ever wondering how can these accounts be reconciled, here is one possibility. It's not the only possibility. It seems likely to me.

The group of ladies are traveling in the dark. There are older ladies by and large. Mary Magdalene gets ahead.

She's the first to see the empty tomb. She doesn't see the angels or Jesus or anyone. She just sees the empty tomb.

She runs back and tells Peter and John, the tomb is empty. I don't know where they have laid him. Peter and John immediately take off.

They go to the tomb, and they see what John records here in verse 4. They both ran, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first, and stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came following him and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying, and the napkin which had

been on his head, not lying with the linen cloths, but rolled up in a place by itself.

Then the other disciple who reached the tomb first also went in, and he saw and believed. For as yet they did not know the scripture, and what does this mean by know? You can hear a thing, you can understand a thing, but you don't really know it as the object of your faith, as a foundation for your beliefs, your viewpoint, and so on. They did not as yet have as certain knowledge in their souls, bedrock, that he must rise from the dead.

So then the disciples went back to their homes, and in the meantime, the ladies, the group of ladies, Mary Magdalene has returned to the garden area, to the tomb area. The other ladies have come, and notice in verse 11 of John 20, Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. She has caught up and is now standing weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept, she stooped to look into the tomb, and she saw two angels in white.

You could imagine that the other ladies by this time have arrived. But John just continues with Mary's perspective, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. This matches what Luke says, that there are two men speaking to the women who arrive, and Luke gives the list, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, the other women who witness this, and tell it to the apostles.

I want to back up a little bit though to what Peter and John saw, and what John says convinced him. He saw and believed. There is an entire verse devoted to this.

Verse 3 says they went toward the tomb. In verse 4, the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. Stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in.

That is verse 5. Then in verse 6, Simon Peter came, following him. He went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the napkin, which had been on his head, not lying with the linen cloths, but rolled up in a place by itself.

This seems to be a very emphatic point that John specifically records. The other Gospels don't mention the barrel cloth or cloths. John does, and he emphasizes it here several times.

So, why does John emphasize this? This is what he says, the disciple who reached the tomb first went in, saw, and believed. He doesn't believe when he sees the stone rolled away. He doesn't believe when he sees that the tomb is empty.

Apparently, he believes when he sees these cloths. Why would that be? Well, we're going to pause here and take our break. When we come back, we're going to examine this closely.

It's a very fascinating come to pass, but why all of the kerfuffle? Why the coming and

going and fear and confusion and angst, sorrow? The word for fear here is phobos. When the angel tells Mary and tells the women, do not be afraid, phobos in Greek, this is terror. Do not be terrified.

And it was confusing enough that the crucifixion took place, and they did not remember that the Lord had told them it would happen. And because they didn't remember that, they don't remember that he said he would be raised until they are reminded by the angel. The ladies then remember that Jesus had pointed this out, but why wasn't it in their mind? They're going to the tomb.

It's the third day, and they don't seem to remember it until they are reminded. So two points of application from this observation and interpretation, and that is, first of all, God prepares us ahead of time. No testing befalls us, but such as is common to man.

We shouldn't sing the song, nobody knows the trouble I've seen. We face typical tests. They're not unique.

They're not unusual. We shouldn't look at ourselves as having been singled out for special attention. They certainly seem unique to us, but no testing befalls us where God has not already provided the means to cope.

It's translated in the King James, a way of escape. But what it really is, is a way to escape failure in that test. We are delivered out sometimes, we're delivered through sometimes.

It looks like it's coming, and then it is diverted at the last moment. Our fears do not come to pass. God intervenes, and we don't face a challenge that we thought was certainly coming.

By whatever means, it is a test of our faith, not of our common sense, not of our economical foresight, or our social foresight, or how could I have known? Did I miss a clue? Why was I surprised by this circumstance or this come to pass? These tests, because we are believers, are always, always, every circumstance, every challenge is a test of our faith. Will we use our faith? Are we going to trust God? In order to trust God, we have to remember what He said. And the colossal failure of Peter in the courtyard at the campfire with the young maiden questioning him, is not the only failure that weekend.

Peter's consternation and confusion is such that the Lord Jesus, he's not ready to see the Lord Jesus until that night. Jesus can appear to the women, because the women, reminded by the angel, the messenger, remember what Jesus said. Now that they have remembered it, He appears to them.

The two men on the road to Emmaus are discussing everything that took place. They are thinking their way through the circumstances. They are ready to receive the presence of the Lord Jesus.

The eleven disciples aren't ready because they still haven't gone back and thought through what they know. John gets it when he's looking at the tomb, and he's going to see the Lord with the other ten disciples that evening. But to experience the presence and the power of the Lord Jesus in our lives, we have to remember what He said and take it to the bank.

Trust it, rely on it, treat it as fact. Not be fearful, but believing. Do not be fearful, but believing.

This was the words the Lord Jesus spoke, I'm sure, numerous times to His disciples. That's our challenge. When hard times hit, sometimes it's a test of long duration that just gradually builds, and the load gets heavier and heavier.

The straw is trying to break the camel's back. Other times it is a surprise, it's unexpected, it's got shock and awe involved. Whatever the challenge, whatever the test, remember, this is not about circumstances, this is not about what will the outcome be in the physical world, this is about my faith.

If I will focus on what I know, if I will go to the Lord in prayer, ask and seek and knock, ask for strength, seek for guidance, knock on doors of opportunity on how best to cope, to reflect the Lord's glory in and through whatever the circumstance is, this is what God is looking for. This is the practice we are getting in this life in preparation for the life which is to come. Let's pause here and take our break.

When we come back, we're going to see what's up with these clothes.