

REJOICE!

MATTHEW 28: 1-10

Introduction:

It had been a long weekend for the women. Mary Magdalene had been among the group of women that helped lay the body of Jesus to rest in the tomb of Joseph. The Sabbath had already begun when they arrived at their place of abode on Friday evening. Since they were mainly Galileans, they would probably be staying with family or friends. The little group of Galileans, a long way from home, sought to comfort one another that evening.

The Sabbath was a long and painful day. Every conversation was about Jesus, his death and their disappointment. They had been so sure that He was the Messiah that they had forsaken all to follow Him. That they were better for having known Him none could deny. Mary Magdalene would never forget the moment He set her free from the seven demons that had almost destroyed her life. But what about the future? What do they do now that Jesus is dead?

The Sabbath passed so slowly. In the afternoon some of the women made plans to go to the tomb before the break of day the next day to complete the burial preparation of the body. They wanted to do

everything they could to make sure that He was buried properly. Even though the government had put him to death as a common criminal, they knew better. They would leave before the break of day.

Before there was any sign of the new day, the women made their way toward the garden where the body had been placed in Joseph's tomb. They knew that there would be a company of soldiers guarding the tomb, and they wondered how they would get the stone rolled away so they could anoint the body. None of them had ever known a darker moment in all of their lives.

Just as they drew near the tomb, and as there was just the faint indication of the breaking of the new day, the earth began to shake under their feet. It was obvious that the area was being shaken with an earthquake. This was the second time in three days that there had been such a quake. Then it was like a streak of lightning as a heavenly messenger, an angel, suddenly appeared at the tomb. While they watched in amazement, the angel rolled the stone away from before the tomb, and took a seat on the tomb. There was an unearthly glow about the garments of the angel.

It was too much for the company of soldiers. They began to tremble with fright, and some of them may have even fainted. They were

prepared to deal with an angry Jewish mob, but not with a heavenly soldier. His appearance took all of the fight out of them.

Mary Magdalene and the sister of our Lord's mother, the wife of Cleophas, were also frightened by the appearance of the angel. He had a reassuring word for them: "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him'. Now I have told you."

Matthew does not tell us whether they actually looked into the tomb or not. They probably did. Surely the word of such a glorious heavenly person was enough to convince them, but there was also the empty tomb. We are told that they did not delay doing what the angel had instructed. It was as they were quickly making their way to tell the brethren that they met Jesus.

It happened so quickly. Without any warning, suddenly He was there. Since it was so surprising, they probably did not recognize Him at first. But then He spoke and they knew the voice. Our focus is upon the first words that they heard Him say. Actually it was just one word. The older versions translate as though it was just a normal word of greeting, like our "Hello". It is true that the word was commonly used as a greeting in the Greek-speaking world, but the HCSB catches the weight of the word when it renders it, "Rejoice!" Is this not helpful? The first word of the risen Christ to one of His disciples is, "Rejoice!" If there had never been a real reason for joy, there was one now.

On this gloomy Easter morning I want us to hear the first word from the lips of S the risen Christ. We really do need to know afresh that there is reason for Joy. Christ is risen! Rejoice!

I. BECAUSE YOUR SAVIOR LIVES.

Mary Magdalene and the others knew how much they needed a Savior. They had so hoped that Jesus might be that Savior. But Friday had dashed all of their hopes. When they placed the dead body of Jesus in the tomb of Joseph, they buried more than a body—they buried their hope of a Savior for the world. But now He is standing before them and saying, “Rejoice!” Surely the Savior lives!

1. He lives to share His saving life.

The New Testament Gospel emphasizes how much benefit we receive from the death of Jesus on the Cross. It was so vital for our salvation. But the documents also give emphasis to the benefit that comes to us since He is alive. His resurrection to life was an important aspect of His saving work.

The Apostle Paul puts these two side by side in his letter to the Romans: “Since we have now been justified by His blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of His Son,

how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through His life!” (Romans 5:9-10. The risen Lord is able to impart to us His saving life by living in us. This is the reason Paul testifies, “For I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20)

Rejoice! Your Savior lives to share His saving life with you—yea, to live in you by the power of the Holy Spirit. Is it not a reason for joy to have the very resurrection life of the Lord Jesus in you?

2. He lives to intercede.

This is the second aspect of His saving work—He lives to represent us before the Holy Father. Paul put it like this: “Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.” (Romans 8:34)

The letter to the Hebrews says it another way: “Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.” (Hebrews 7:25)

Given the reality that we are always sinners, always in need of mercy, what a mercy it is to have a living Savior, One who is forever stationed at the right hand of the Eternal in the heavens to watch over our affairs.

He is there to take care of everything related to our salvation. We have a living Savior.

It is little wonder that the hymn writers of the church have called on us to rejoice so often. They have realized the significance of having a living Savior. This is one of the primary things that set the Christian faith apart from the rest of the world. Rejoice, O Christian! Christ lives! Your Savior lives!

II. BECAUSE YOUR SINS ARE GONE.

You will remember how the last of the Old Testament prophets introduced Jesus to Israel—“Behold! The Lamb of God who bears away the sin of the world.” What happened on that fateful Friday was foretold by the prophet, “All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:6) That happened on Friday and it cost Him His life to have our sins placed on Him. But now He stands before Mary Magdalene, and beloved sister of His mother. What has happened to the sins that we placed on Him?

1. He carried them away.

This is how we are to see the events of Friday. When Jesus left Calvary in death on Friday, He was bearing the sins of the world. This

means that all of our sins were on Him. He bore them away. He was the scapegoat over whom the transgressions had been confessed.

2. He covered them with His blood.

There has always been the question about where Jesus spent Saturday. We know that His body spent Saturday in the new tomb that belonged to Joseph, but where did the spirit of Jesus spend Saturday? Did He actually go to Hell on Saturday, or was He just in the realm of the dead? The Father has been pleased to leave all of this shrouded in mystery. But this much we can know with some certainty—during the time that the body was in the grave Jesus made an appearance before the Father and the deed of the Cross was laid before the Father. During that encounter the blood of Jesus was made to cover the sins of the world. The merit of His life was accrued to our account on the books of eternity, and our sin issue was settled. When Jesus was raised on Sunday, it was for our justification. It was so that we would have sure evidence that our sins were gone, and that we are accepted before God. Now you understand why Jesus gave the exhortation, “Rejoice!” There is reason to rejoice—Our sins are gone. The work of atonement has been finally and fully accomplished. Hallelujah! What a Savior!

III. BECAUSE YOUR ENEMY IS DEFEATED.

Ever since Cain murdered Abel, his brother, the human family has lived with the fear of death. An awareness of one's mortality tempers every thing that happens in life. The enemy has used this to his full advantage in his attacks on humans. He has constantly reminded them, "There is no hope because when it all finished, you will die anyway. You might as well indulge yourself. Live it up! Death is just a step behind you."

But when Jesus greeted Mary with the "Rejoice!", something significant has happened. Here stand one who has died, but is alive again. He stands before her in a resurrection body as one who has conquered death.

1. His victory over death was complete.

Just how significant is the victory over death? The reality is that Jesus conquered death completely. Later the risen Christ would reassure his suffering servant John by saying, "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades." (Revelation 1:17,18)

He not only overcame death to live again, but in gaining that victory He came out of the tomb with the keys of death and Hades in His right

hand. This means that both of these dreaded enemies are now under His command.

2. His victory over death is shared.

This is a central message of the Bible. Just as we share in the weight of Adam's sin, and the condemnation and death that it brought into the world, by faith in Christ we now share in the victory that He gained over death.

Paul put this hope into unforgettable words in the Corinthian letter: "I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

Listen, I tell you a mystery: we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' the sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 15:50-57)

The grave has never looked the same to the believer since the appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene. The word has been out— death has been conquered.

Bill Gaither has told about the writing of the favorite Gospel hymn, Because He Lives. It tells you why we will rejoice this morning.

We wrote “Because He Lives” after a period of time when we had had a kind of dry spell and hadn’t written any songs for a while ... Also at the end of the 1960’s, our country was going through some great turmoil with the height of the drug culture, and the whole “God is Dead” theory was running wild in our country. Also it was the peak of the Vietnam war. During that time our little son was born— at least Gloria was expecting him. I can remember at the time we thought, “Brother, this is really a poor time to bring a child into the world.” At times we were even quite discouraged by the whole thing. And then Benjy did come. We had two little girls whom we love very much, but this was our first son, and so that lyric came to us, “How sweet to hold our new-born baby and feel the pride and joy he gives, but better still the calm assurance that this child can face uncertain days because Christ lives.” And it gave us the courage to say, “Because Christ lives we can face tomorrow” and keep our heads high.

God sent His son—they called Him Jesus; He came to love, heal and forgive; He lived and died to buy my pardon; an empty grave is there to prove my Savior lives.

How sweet to hold a new-born baby and feel the pride and joy he gives; but greater still the calm assurance: This child can face uncertain days because Christ lives.

And then one day I'll cross the river; I'll fight life's final war with pain; and then, as death gives way to victory, I'll see the lights of glory—and I'll know He lives.

Chorus: Because He lives I can face tomorrow, because He lives all fear is gone; because I know He holds the future and life is worth the living—just because He lives.

So the word of Jesus spoken to the women is the word for us—"Rejoice! Your Savior lives, Your Sins are gone, and your enemy is defeated. Rejoice in this great reality. Rejoice. Let nothing take your joy away from you. He is alive.