

# INFINITE JOY

SERIES: THE FINAL HOURS



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Matthew 28:1-10  
Final Message  
Easter Sunday  
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*Matthew 28:1-10*

Several years ago, a woman living in Philadelphia, while poking around in her attic, spotted an old helmet. She cleaned it up, and upon doing so, she wondered if it might be worth something.

For some of you, Jesus is like that helmet. He's been getting kicked around in the attic of your mind, maybe for years. If you've overlooked Jesus in the past, perhaps the time has come to take another look. It is Easter Sunday after all.

The common proclamation at worship services around the world on Easter Sunday is "He is risen!" Is it true? And if it is true, why does it matter?

Today we're going to explore the story of two followers of Jesus who made their way to his tomb on the first Easter Sunday, as reported in the Gospel of Matthew, the first book of the New Testament. Matthew, one of Jesus' original disciples, tells the story of the life of Jesus, who lived at the beginning of the first century.

Two questions: 1) Did Jesus rise from the dead? 2) If he did rise from the dead, why does it matter?

## What will we see?

**Matthew 28:1:**

**Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.**

These two women, both named Mary, are followers of Jesus, who was crucified on Friday outside Jerusalem. They watched Jesus being crucified, and they watched as he was placed in a tomb (Matthew 27:55, 61). Now early on the first day of the week, they go to "see the tomb." Mark and Luke, two other biblical authors, are more expansive about the women's reasons for setting out for the tomb, but Matthew's silence leaves much to the imagination.

Matthew thereby makes more room for each of us to enter the story. Each of us has made our way not to a tomb, of course, but to a worship service that commemorates what happened in a tomb. We are here on the first day of the week, just as the two women were there on the first day of the week. What will we see? Perhaps there is something you're supposed to see, even destined to see.

## A great earthquake

**Matthew 28:2-4:**

**And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. 4 And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men.**

What were the women expecting when they set out for the tomb? For sure, they weren't expecting an earthquake. For sure, they weren't expecting the stone to be rolled away from the entrance of the tomb. For sure, they weren't expecting to see an angel sitting on the stone. The angel flicks the large stone out of the way and then uses it as a lounge chair!

The guards, who had been posted to ensure that Jesus' disciples wouldn't steal his body and claim that he had risen from the dead, weren't expecting to see an angel, either. They're prepared to defend the tomb, but they aren't prepared to defend it against a lightning-like, white-as-snow angel from heaven. Upon seeing him, they tremble with fear and become "like dead men"—like the man they presumed to be dead inside the tomb.

## Another world

What were you expecting when you came here this morning? You probably weren't expecting an earthquake. You probably weren't expecting to see an angel. I have neither felt an earthquake nor seen an angel this morning. Then again, our worship service isn't over yet!

In any event, may I ask you: Do you have the sense, perhaps, that there is another world beyond the one you can see with your eyes—a world, perhaps, where angels dwell, a world that intersects with this one? Can you say there are no mysteries as you live out your days?

This other world—Jesus called it the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven—rocks our world from time to time and catches us unaware. I felt it when a nurse handed me a little girl, my firstborn, and I held her in my arms for the first time, gazing helplessly into her eyes. I felt it when I kissed my mother for the last time, the night before she died. I even felt it the next morning, when she died in my arms. I've felt it in countless and various moments between life and death. I felt it just a few weeks ago in the first whiff of spring, which opened my heart up not only to remember, with some wistfulness, springs past but also to anticipate, with intense longing, the endless springs to come, for the kingdom of God is eternal.

Have you felt it? In an unguarded moment, have you felt something from another world? If you have, such a moment is trying to open you up to the power and beauty—the joy!—of the kingdom of God, which, for now, you cannot see with your eyes. Such a moment can rock you every bit as much as the earthquake rocked the two women.

So, why did the angel rock their world?

## The angel speaks

**Matthew 28:5:**

**But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified.”**

The guards trembled with fear, but the angel advises the women, “Do not be afraid.” The earthquake, the dislocated stone, and the appearance of the angel are not reasons for fear, at least in the angel's reckoning. The angel assures the women that he knows why they have come to the tomb: they have come to “seek Jesus,” who was crucified. “Okay,” the women might be thinking, “thanks for assuring us, and thanks for getting that stone out of the way. Now, can we enter the tomb and see the body of Jesus, the one we seek?”

The angel continues.

## Good news

**Matthew 28:6-7:**

**He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you.”**

Can the women enter the tomb and see the body of Jesus? Yes and no. They can enter the tomb all right. In fact, the angel invites them to do so. But they can't see the body of Jesus in the tomb, because it is not there!

When the women went to the tomb to seek Jesus, they didn't expect an earthquake. They didn't expect the stone to be rolled away from the tomb. They didn't expect to see an angel. For sure, they didn't expect to hear an angel tell them that Jesus had risen from the dead!

The women had looked on as Jesus died on the cross. They had looked on as he was placed in the tomb. They had looked on as the stone was rolled against the entrance of the tomb. They assumed, of course, that Jesus was dead, and they had good reason to assume it. Now the angel says take another look. The angel has rolled back the stone not to let Jesus out but to let the women in.

The angel reminds the women that Jesus said this would happen: he said that he would rise from the dead on the third day (Matthew 12:40, 16:21, 17:23, 20:19). But no one believed him, at least in part because they didn't understand him. The popular belief, based on the Scriptures, was that God would raise his people from the dead at the end of the age, but no one expected him to raise one person from the dead before the end.

The angel then commissions the two women to bring the news of Jesus' resurrection to his disciples—and to be quick about it. With such good news, and with the disciples of Jesus having fled in fear after he was arrested, this is no time to drag your heels. Finally, the angel promises the women that Jesus will meet them in Galilee, in the north, where he gathered his disciples in the first place. Before he was crucified, Jesus told his disciples that after he had been raised, he would “go before” them to Galilee, as a shepherd goes before his sheep (Matthew 26:32). What Jesus said would happen to him has happened, and what he said he would do he is doing—after having been put to death!

The angel is insistent that the women “see.” “. . . see the place where he lay.” “. . . there you will see him.” “See, I have told you.” The angel even tells the women “. . . behold, he is going before you . . .” Remember, the women went to “see” the tomb. The angel wants the women to see something else.

## Take another look

Many people, like the women who set out for the tomb, assume that Jesus is dead, along with all the other revered men and women from ages past. They have good reason to think so, just as the women had good reason to think so. People who die tend to stay dead! When you came here this morning, you, like the women who came to the tomb, probably didn’t expect to see an angel and hear him tell you that Jesus rose from the dead. You may have expected to see a preacher and hear him tell you that Jesus rose from the dead. If so, let me fulfill your expectations. He is risen!

Is it true? If you don’t believe it’s true, may I say to you, as the angel said to the women: take another look.

If Jesus of Nazareth did not rise from the dead, why did people claim that he rose from the dead? What did they stand to gain for making such a claim if in fact, he did not rise from the dead? If you’re going to make something up and you want people to believe it, why not make something up that’s a little more believable? And if you’re going to make something up, wouldn’t you make something up that was less likely to get you persecuted and quite possibly killed? As Pascal says, “I believe witnesses that get their throats cut.” People die for a conviction, but they don’t die for a concoction.

Moreover, why did large numbers of people in the first century believe that Jesus rose from the dead? People stayed dead in the first century, just as they stay dead today. And why believe in the resurrection if doing so meant risking persecution and quite possibly your life?

The best, most rational explanation for the early and widespread belief that Jesus rose from the dead is that he did, in fact, rise from the dead.

If there is another world beyond the one you can see with your eyes, the kind of world where angels dwell, which intersects with and, from time to time, rocks this world, then believing that Jesus rose from the dead makes perfect sense, especially when his resurrection best explains the evidence.

The Philadelphia woman who found the old helmet in her attic took it downtown to an appraiser, who examined it and informed her that it was a sixteenth-century cabasset from Milan, Italy, forged from a single sheet of steel and covered with gold. Value? \$250,000.

Perhaps you have overlooked Jesus and underestimated him. But today is Easter Sunday. Look again. The angel was insistent that the women “see.” What do you see? Can you see what the women saw, that the tomb was empty? Can you see that maybe, just maybe, Jesus rose from the dead?

If Jesus did in fact rise from the dead, why does it matter?

## Great joy

**Matthew 28:8:**

**So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.**

The women obey the angel: they leave the tomb quickly and run to tell Jesus’ disciples the good news. Although the angel told them to fear not, they’re afraid nevertheless. They’re not trembling like dead men (or women) in the manner of the guards, but they haven’t yet completely grasped that the earthquake, the appearance of the angel, and the angel’s words are no cause for fear.

Perhaps they have not even yet grasped that the news that Jesus has risen from the dead is no cause for fear. After all, the last time Jesus was seen alive, he was put to death by the powers that be. If he actually is alive, what sort of risks would someone be taking if she began following him again? Many people who believed that Jesus rose from the dead and followed him the first century were killed for doing so. By A.D. 325, an estimated 2 million people had been killed for their faith in Jesus.

Even though the women leave the tomb with fear, they also leave with “great joy.” The “great” earthquake ends up being cause for “great” joy. If the women heard the angel right, indeed, they heard good news, and they are the bearers of good news—the first bearers of the best news the world has ever heard, in fact.

## Fullness of joy

The good news that the two women carried to the disciples reverberates through the ages and comes to us

today: Jesus, who was crucified on the first Good Friday, rose from the dead on the first Easter Sunday. Why does it matter?

My friends, it matters because Jesus died and rose for our sins—that is, for all the ways that we have turned our backs on God in favor of lesser, even self-destructive, pleasures—so that we may be reconciled to God and enjoy his presence, both now, in this world, and forever, especially when the kingdom of God finally and fully overtakes this world. We who follow Jesus are mostly looking forward not to going to heaven when we die but for heaven—that is, the kingdom of God—to come to earth, whereupon those who believe in Jesus will be resurrected, as Jesus was resurrected, for God’s eternal purposes in the new and eternal creation.

What do you think about that? We should “not marvel at this,” Jesus says, “for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs” will hear his voice “and come out,” either to “the resurrection of life” or to “the resurrection of judgment” (John 5:28-29). The apostle Paul, in the New Testament book of Thessalonians, says this of those who do not believe in and follow Jesus: “They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

Please note: those who do not believe in Jesus will not experience the presence of God. Of course, one might ask why would they want to experience the presence of God if they have turned away from him their entire lives. On the other hand, David, another biblical writer, says this to God in Psalm 16:11: “in your presence there is fullness of joy; / at your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:11).

Think about the best moments in the best relationship you’ve ever had. The Scriptures invite us to enjoy those kinds of moments and that kind of relationship with God—only the moments are better, and the relationship is better because, quite frankly, God is better.

The deepest joy in my life comes when I become aware of the presence of God. Sometimes I become aware of his presence in the company of others, and sometimes I become aware of his presence when I am alone.

It is possible to stop doing whatever you’re doing, whatever seems so important at the time, whatever you’re doing to fend off the anxiety that you fear would overtake you if just didn’t do anything for a few minutes. It is possible to put down your phone and sit by yourself for a few minutes. If you do, you may immediately feel

anxious, as if you have to do something, grab something, look at something. It is possible, though, to remain still, to allow yourself to feel what you feel: anxiety, emptiness, loneliness, whatever. It is also possible to remain still for long enough that you start to feel something else: something like peace, something like wonder, something like awe. I have experienced such moments— a fullness of joy in the presence of God—and they have taken my breath away.

## Turn from and turn to

The women came to the tomb because they were seeking Jesus. What do you seek? What do you want? What are your desires?

C.S. Lewis, the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, in one of his essays, *The Weight of Glory*, says this:

*Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.*<sup>1</sup>

Are your desires too weak? Are you too easily pleased? Are you making mud pies in a slum? How about a holiday at the sea instead? How about what Matthew calls “great joy,” what David calls “fullness of joy,” what C.S. Lewis calls “infinite joy”? It’s infinite joy because it starts now and expands into eternity. Beyond the blue horizon, the road stretches out forever, and Jesus, our shepherd, goes before us.

Jesus said, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). Maybe for you today the time is fulfilled. The time is right. Repent and believe. Turn from the lesser pleasures, accept the offer of forgiveness in Christ, and turn to God. Stop making mud pies in the slum. Instead, take a holiday at the sea. Then be baptized.

Why does it matter that Jesus rose from the dead? It matters because infinite joy is offered us. If eternity is at stake, one could make the case that nothing matters more.

Are you ready to meet Jesus?

## Unexpected meeting

**Matthew 28:9:**

**And behold, Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him.**

The angel told the women that they would see Jesus in Galilee. Surprise! As they leave the tomb, they see Jesus in Jerusalem, before they go to Galilee. They didn't expect to see an angel when they came to the tomb, and they certainly didn't expect to see Jesus as they left the tomb. They expected to see the body of Jesus in the tomb, not the risen Jesus outside the tomb. But here he is. By the way, the word translated “greetings” in verse 9 (*chairō*) is related to the word translated “joy” in verse 8 (*charas*) and is sometimes translated “rejoice.” If the women left the tomb with both fear and joy, Jesus greets the women with joy. He thereby validates and fulfills their joy with his presence. Joy triumphs over fear!

The women heard what the angel told them, but don't you think they wondered whether it was true? It's true! They see him. They hear him. They touch him.

First, the women came to the tomb. Second, they came to see the place where Jesus lay. Third, they left the tomb. Finally, they come to Jesus. They take hold of his feet, not the parts of a person's body you'd immediately think of touching, much less taking hold of—not today and especially not in the first century, before the invention of socks and Nike tennis shoes.

But this isn't just any person. This is Jesus. Later, Paul, in the New Testament book of Philippians, would say that “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10-11). These women don't need to wait for Paul's words. They see Jesus, and they bow before him.

Jesus greeted the women, but he, like the angel, also has some instructions for them.

## A whole new world

**Matthew 28:9-10:**

**Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.**

Jesus repeats the angel's command: “Do not be afraid.” Hearing such words for a second time, and hearing them from the mouth of Jesus, drives home the point. If they're still afraid, Jesus tells them to fear not. If they were at all hesitant to tell Jesus' disciples that he has risen from the dead, without actually having seen Jesus, well, now they've seen him.

Earlier, the angel promised the women that they would see Jesus in Galilee. Now Jesus, appearing to the women in Jerusalem, instructs them to tell his disciples that they will see him in Galilee, provided that they go to Galilee, of course. There's that word “see” again. This time Jesus calls them not disciples but “my brothers.” The disciples are part of Jesus' family. All who follow Jesus are part of his family.

Why Galilee? Galilee is where Jesus is from. It's where he gathered his disciples. It was called, both by the prophet Isaiah and Matthew, “Galilee of the Gentiles,” or “Galilee of the nations” (Isaiah 9:1, Matthew 4:15). Galilee, in the north, had a much higher concentration of Gentiles than the region of Judea in the south. In Galilee of the nations, indeed, the disciples would see Jesus, and he would command them to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19).

The disciples' journey with Jesus, then, would come full circle—and begin again, for they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them, and Jesus would command them to take the Gospel even “to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The Gospel comes today to us, in Palo Alto, California, which to a ragtag band of first-century Galileans would have seemed beyond the end of the earth.

For the two women and Jesus' disciples, a whole new world will open up to them. A whole new world can open up to you also.

## He speaks

On the first Easter Sunday, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were seeking Jesus, who had been crucified on the first Good Friday, and they found him. Did they ever!

If you expected to meet Jesus at all, maybe you expected to meet him not in Galilee, of course, but in your final days after you have done what you wanted with your life, or maybe in some sense after your final days, somewhere near the pearly gates or someplace like that. If you were to meet Jesus today, what do you think he'd say to you?

There are all the things we're doing that we think we shouldn't be doing; there are all the things we're not doing that we think we should start doing. Moreover, we all have things about us that we're ashamed of, things that make us cover up, things that keep us in hiding.

You can't hide from Jesus, though. He knows everything there is to know about you. Jesus, alive from the dead, is present with us today through his Holy Spirit. What does he say to you?

"Greetings! Rejoice!"

Jesus is pleased to meet you. Are you pleased to meet him?

Come to Jesus. Believe in him. Bow before him. The women didn't wait for Paul's words; don't wait for your final days, and for God's sake, don't wait for after your final days.

What is Jesus worth? \$250,000? \$250 billion?

Jesus told a parable, recorded earlier in the Gospel of Matthew, in which he likened the kingdom of heaven to a treasure hidden in a field. A man discovered the treasure and then sells everything he has in order to buy the field. In the parable, Jesus gives only one reason for the man's outrageous actions: joy. Listen: "Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field" (Matthew 13:44). Because of his joy, he gives up everything. What's so great about the kingdom? Camaraderie with the king! The fullness of joy in the presence of God.

What is Jesus worth? What is infinite joy worth? How do you quantify infinite joy?

## A trip to the zoo

He is risen! Yes, it's true. And yes, it matters. It matters because infinite joy is offered you, and it matters because your eternal destiny is at stake.

C.S. Lewis, before he wrote *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Weight of Glory*, was an atheist, a professor at Oxford University. Throughout his life, however, he had experienced what he called "stabs of joy," sudden, piercing pangs of longing, which he later came to understand as coming from another world and as

"pointers" to that world. In his thirties, he began to notice that the authors that he most enjoyed, such as G.K. Chesterton and George MacDonald, were believers in Jesus. Lewis put it this way: "all the books were beginning to turn against me."

He began to sense that there was another world beyond the one he could see with his eyes, and finally, he says, "I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed." But he did not yet believe in Jesus.

Lewis again: "I know very well when, but hardly how, the final step was taken. I was driven to Whipsnade one sunny morning. When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo, I did." <sup>2</sup>

Twenty centuries ago, two women set out for a tomb. Last century, C.S. Lewis set out for the zoo. This morning, you set out for a church. The women found Jesus. C.S. Lewis found Jesus.

How about you?

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 26.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 228-38.