

## Kingsway-Lambton United Church Lenten Bible Study

ZOOM: February 19, 2024 - April 1, 2024

**Mondays 9:15-10:15am, or Mondays 6:45-7:45pm (*Identical Sessions*)**

### THE RESURRECTION IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW —HOW DOES IT MAKE SENSE?

#### Introduction:

Jesus spoke about his resurrection ahead of time, during his ministry, and that is our focus here. His disciples initially had as much difficulty with it as we do. It did not make sense. The Hebrew scriptures promised a Saviour would come, the Messiah, a king appointed by God who would rule over all, destroy evil, and establish justice in a kingdom that would not end. The disciples thought in terms of earthly kingdoms with political and military powers. Jesus spoke instead of a “kingdom of heaven” that he would establish through his suffering and death. He would be resurrected, raised from the dead “on the third day”, to claim his kingdom and those who would be part of it would be marked by picking up their cross and following him.

In this study we examine our misunderstandings. How is it that bearing our suffering and sorrows, and that of others, contributes to Christ’s kingdom? How is it that Jesus’s death and sacrifice takes away our sin? Perhaps, no concept is as difficult or central to Christianity as the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Every church has a cross, a symbol that reminds us of the instrument of torture and death used by ancient Rome to punish criminals. How does that horrible device come to be a symbol of hope and promise? All of this is part of our journey in these sessions.

Jesus does not mention his death and resurrection until the second half of the Gospel of Matthew. If his disciples want to know him, it cannot be separate from these coming events, and Jesus prepares them for it. In the end, his resurrection is no longer a concept to understand, it is a power they receive from him through faith, enabling them to do God’s will. That the Spirit is given to us and is stronger than death itself, finally remains a mystery. It is also a reality that helps us make sense of the impossible, that Christ is alive today and present to us, making all things new. About the past, present, and future, there is nothing to fear.

We start each of our sessions with the trouble in each text, the things that are wrong and that people must do. We move to what the God is doing by grace to empower us to accomplish what Christ leads us to do. Too often when we read the Bible, we miss what God is doing. I hope you will join us for this Lenten journey. — Paul Scott Wilson

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## THE RESURRECTION IN MATTHEW'S GOSPEL—HOW DOES IT MAKE SENSE?

**Week 1. Matthew 16:13-28. Feb. 19, 2024.** *Please read the Bible passages in any version. The New Revised Standard Version is cited here.*

### 1) People's actions or Trouble

**Bible: People are divided over who Jesus is.** People are divided over who “The Son of Man” is (God’s messiah/king in Daniel 7:13-14). Some say he is John the Baptist, or Elijah upon his predicted return (Malachi 4:5), or an ancient prophet. Jesus uses the term for himself, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter confesses Jesus for who he truly is, “the Messiah, the Son of the living God”.

Jesus’s identity is now established in Matthew. Jesus speaks to what this identity means and what must happen to the “Messiah”. The disciples are “not to tell” others who he is — later the “gates of Hades” will attack “my church”. Now, Jesus must go to Jerusalem where he will suffer, die, and “on the third day be raised”—his first mention of resurrection in Matthew. Peter protests, but Jesus rebukes him as “Satan” and a “stumbling block”. The disciples, like Jesus, must “deny themselves and take up their cross”, they must lose their lives to save it. Those who “gain the whole world” may instead “forfeit their life”.

**Today: People are divided about Jesus’s identity in our world.** Who does the world say Jesus is? Where has Jesus caused division? The great commission at the end of Matthew says we are to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19), but Jesus’s original disciples are not to tell who Jesus is. What is the difference between then and now? When might we/you be like Peter as a “stumbling block” to others? Is the Messiah different from whom you want him to be?

### 2) God's actions or Grace:

**Bible: Jesus will overcome all opposition.** Jesus will overcome opposition in his suffering, death, and resurrection. God reveals to Peter Jesus’s identity as “the Messiah, the Son of the living God”, he could not know this on his own, and chooses Peter to be the first person to acknowledge Jesus in this complete manner. Jesus then appoints Peter as the “rock [on which] I will build my church”. (Jesus gave Simon the name ‘Petros’, Greek for stone or rock). Jesus reveals he will prevent the “gates of Hades” from prevailing against his church, and will give Peter “the keys of the kingdom of heaven”, to “bind” and “loose” people on earth. God will save the disciples who lose their lives “for my sake” and will “repay everyone for what has been done”. At the end of time the Son of Man will come “in his kingdom” together “with his angels in the glory of the Father” to reward the faithful. God’s justice will prevail.

**Today: Jesus overcomes all opposition.** We are told that the kingdom of heaven keeps breaking into our world. Are there current signs of Jesus’s kingdom, and if so, what are they? Do they

provide any evidence of Jesus's resurrection? In what ways does Jesus's cross and resurrection overcome opposition and establish a kingdom? What difference does his death and resurrection make to you/us?

**Week 2. Matthew 17:1-23. Feb. 26, 2024**

### 1) People's actions or Trouble

**Bible: The disciples misunderstand Jesus.** The disciples do not understand what it means that Jesus is transfigured and is seen with Moses and Elijah. Peter wants to preserve the moment by building monuments/tents—the full meaning of his earlier confession of “the Messiah, Son of the living God” (16:15) is still unclear to him. God speaks from a cloud and the disciples are frightened (no one can look on the face of God and live, Exodus 33:20). On the way down the mountain, Jesus tells them not to speak about their “vision” until “after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead” (the second announcement of his resurrection). They may still hope his death is far off, for Elijah must come first (Malachi 4:5). Jesus reveals that John the Baptist fulfills the role of Elijah. The disciples lack faith for they cannot cure the boy who has epilepsy and “suffers terribly”. Jesus condemns them and their generation as “faithless and perverse”. Their faith is not even as large as a tiny “mustard seed”. When he speaks of his resurrection again, “they will kill him, and on the third day be raised”, the disciples are distressed to learn that one of them will “betray” him.

**Today: We/many misunderstand Jesus.** What does it mean to you that Jesus is the “Son of the living God”? Or “Messiah”? Or that he must suffer and die to fulfill his mission? In this text, Jesus is revealed for who he is to the disciples, who both misunderstand and lack faith. Are we different from the disciples in continuing to have doubts about Jesus? Does your faith seem too small to do anything?

### 2) God's actions or Grace

**Bible: God leads the disciples to see Jesus in a new way.** God causes Jesus to be “transfigured...like the sun” and reveals him to be in conversation with Moses (= the law) and Elijah (= the prophets), in other words with the entire Hebrew Bible. God speaks from a bright cloud and declares Jesus to be “my Son, the Beloved”. Jesus comforts the disciples—“do not be afraid”—when they fall in fear of being in the presence of God. He demonstrates his divine authority by rebuking the “demon” and curing the boy “instantly”. He prepares them for his death and resurrection. Nothing is “impossible” for Jesus, or his followers, because he will conquer suffering and death. A second and third time (16:21, 17:12, 17:23) he prepares his disciples by predicting his own death (as “the Son of Man”) and resurrection “on the third day”.

**Today: God leads us to see who Jesus is.** God in Christ enters our suffering and death to defeat it—no one can understand Jesus's identity separate from his suffering, death, and resurrection. The disciples had a stunning vision and heard the voice of God. How does God reveal who Jesus is to us? Faith is God's gift not a human accomplishment (see Matthew 16:17). Does it seem to you that God gave you enough faith? What is more important, how much faith we have, or in

whom we place our faith? Does Jesus give us his faith in the Spirit? Have you experienced the transfiguration, when God allowed you to see Jesus not just as a person but as the “Son of God”? What we pray for in this world might happen to us unseen in the kingdom of heaven, secured by the promise of Christ’s resurrection already making all things new. What can we accomplish with our faith?

**Week 3. Matthew 20:1-18. Mar. 4, 2024**

### 1) People’s actions or Trouble

**Bible: The first workers are treated no better than those who came late.** The early laborers agree to work in the vineyard (Israel) “for the usual daily wage”. Workers at nine, noon, three, and five o’clock agree to work for “whatever is right”. At the end of the day, all the workers are paid a full daily wage. The ones who came first “grumbled against the landowner”. They worked longest, through the hottest part of the day, and think they deserve to be paid “more” than those who came last. “Envious” of those who came last, they presume to lecture the landowner. They were first but are last to be paid, and will be last into the “kingdom of heaven”: “the first will be last”. For a fourth time (16:21; 17:12, 23; 20:18-19), now with details, Jesus tells the disciples of his suffering, death at the hands of the “Gentiles”, and resurrection, and locates it in Jerusalem.

**Today: We tend to operate by what is fair by the world’s standards.** Moses set a standard for fairness in an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth (Lev. 24:19–21). Jesus goes beyond that. Our parable about laborers in the vineyard may be about, 1) Gentiles as latecomers to the kingdom and Jews as the chosen people. Does it surprise you that Jews are nonetheless still equally included in the resurrection? This parable can also be about, 2) the longtime faithful and those who repent and believe late in life. Does it seem fair that the last to believe, who perhaps did not go to church or help the poor, are given resurrection and entry to the kingdom? There are occasions when we challenge the sovereignty of God (God’s absolute right to any course of action). Can you remember when you did not like what God seemed to decide?

### 2) God’s actions or Grace

**Bible: God treats all workers in the kingdom equally.** The landowner has mercy on those hired late in the day. He is generous and wants each person to receive a full daily wage, in other words, enough to live on, God’s full blessings. The owner has the manager (Christ) pay the last workers first, “whatever is right”. The manager then gives the first laborers what was promised them. God is generous to all, including those who grumble resent him. God welcomes both the first and the last into the resurrection life—they are to take “what belongs to you”, what God has given them. Jesus will establish this kingdom by his death and resurrection in Jerusalem. The last to get work will be paid first —they will be first into the kingdom.

**Today: God rewards all workers in the kingdom equally.** In Matthew 18:12, the shepherd who finds the lost sheep “rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray”. That may apply here, all are loved, but some are treated first. God welcomes both first and last

into the kingdom. God gives us forgiveness and salvation. Is it fair by the world's standards, that is, is it what we deserve? What does it mean to be first into the resurrection, or last? If the first laborers are envious, what do you suppose the other laborers feel towards the landowner? What might that say about the kingdom of heaven? Jesus is first into resurrection life ("...Christ the first fruits, then at his coming [again] those who belong to God." 1 Corinthians 15:23.). Still, he takes the place of the last and the least in dying for us on the cross.

#### **Week 4. Matthew 22:23-40. Mar. 11, 2024.**

##### **1) People's actions or Trouble**

**Bible: The Sadducees reject resurrection.** The Sadducees (unlike the Pharisees) deny the existence of angels and say there is "no resurrection". They find no evidence of these in the first five books of the Bible (that they regard as the most authoritative, thought to be written by Moses). They bait Jesus with their joke about resurrection. The law of Moses required a brother to take as his own the wife of a brother who has died; if this happens in turn with each of the remaining six brothers, whose wife will she be in heaven (or will she be sleeping with all of them)? Jesus criticizes the Sadducees for thinking marriage is the only resurrection possibility, for not knowing scripture, that he then quotes, and for not knowing God's name and power. His response silences them. The Pharisees then try to trap Jesus about the greatest commandment. Jesus gives two as one: love God and your neighbour as yourself, a law that condemns them (and us). On these "hang all the law and the prophets" —in other words, all Scripture.

**Today: Many people today reject resurrection.** The resurrection of Christ is central to Christianity. Paul writes, "if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain." (1 Corinthians 15:13-14.) Most people have questioned life after death. Jesus might accuse people today who reject it, of not knowing scripture or the power of God. Belief in God is necessary for belief in resurrection, but many people doubt God's existence, or God's will, or even God's ability to offer them resurrection. Resurrection is key to Jesus's entire mission and depends on faith. If you fail at doing the great commandment, is there any hope of resurrection?

##### **2) God's actions or Grace**

**Bible: Jesus justifies resurrection.** Jesus knows both scripture and the power of God. He is resurrection. God will make people to be "like angels". God will unite all (in Christ) and there will be no need for marriage in heaven. God's use of the present tense (when Jesus quotes God from Exodus 3:6) indicates the patriarchs of Israel (and their descendants), though dead, are alive now: "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob". God has raised them from the dead. "He is God not of the dead, but of the living." In Jesus going to Jerusalem in obedience to God, in dying to offer through his resurrection life to all, he alone fulfills the great commandment. (See Matthew 5:17 about Jesus came to fulfill the law.) He alone completely loves God with all his "heart...soul...and mind" and his neighbour as himself.

**Today: Jesus offers us resurrection.** None of us can fully obey the great commandment. Jesus alone is sinless (2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15; 1 Peter 2:22). In dying for us and through our faith in him, he takes our shortcomings upon himself, and offers us his resurrection and eternal life. He is resurrection. ("I am the resurrection and the life", John 11:25.) This seems like such good news. Why do you think so many people reject it? Why are many Christians so hesitant to believe they will be accepted in heaven? Might the great commandment describe heaven?

## **Week 5. Matthew 25:31-46. Mar. 18, 2024**

### **1) People's actions or Trouble**

**Bible: Judgment is coming.** The Son of Man (the resurrected Christ), will come at the end of time to judge the nations, divided into the sheep and the goats. Christ appeared to both groups when he was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, and/or in prison. Neither group knew it. Both groups seem to know him and call him "Lord". On his left, the goats gave him nothing, and they are condemned to depart "into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels". By this parable, Jesus warns current goats to change their ways or face terrible consequences. Jesus tells both the sheep and the goats, what they do or do not do for "the least of these", they do unto him.

**Today: Judgment is coming to us.** Christ is present in the needy and we will be judged by how we care for them. The goats will not receive resurrection. Repentance is needed. On one hand, resurrection/salvation cannot be earned through obedience of the law. Paul says, "For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law." (Romans 3:28; see Galatians 2:16). On the other hand, our Matthew text comes close to suggesting justification is by works, and Jesus says we must bear fruit fitting of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 21:43). "Faith without works is....dead" (James 2:26). True faith demands love of God and neighbour, as the sheep demonstrate. Still, if we can never do enough good deeds to make us right with God, what hope is there? Both the goats and the sheep call Jesus, "Lord". What do you make of Jesus saying in Matthew 7:21 that not everyone who calls to him, "Lord, Lord", will receive resurrection and enter his kingdom?

### **2) God's actions or Grace**

**Bible: The resurrected Jesus redeems the righteous.** The resurrected Jesus is present in two ways in this passage: in "the least of these" and in the Son of Man coming on judgement day. He comes with "all the angels", and "will sit on the throne of his glory". He blesses the sheep on the right for their faith and attention to the needy. He redeems them and gives them the gift prepared for them "from the foundation of the world". He gives them "the kingdom"/resurrection/ salvation/"eternal life". Their faith in Jesus is motivated by love. (Had the goats known Christ was present, they might have changed their behavior, motivated by self-

gain.) Jesus is present even when the sheep and goats do not recognize him. Jesus welcomes “the righteous into eternal life”.

**Today: Jesus promises us redemption.** Resurrection starts with faith in Jesus. Can it be so easy, especially if one has lived more like a goat than a sheep? Who might qualify for not deserving love? Jesus welcomes the sheep, the righteous, but none of us is righteous on our own. By our faith in Jesus and what he has done on the cross, we are counted by God as righteous. Without Jesus, the nations would be divided into sheep and goats, but everyone would be a goat. On the side of the sheep there would be only one person, Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God (Isaiah 53:7; John 1:29, 36). He alone is sinless and innocent. In our baptism he takes his 100% lambswool cloak and puts it on each of us that we might look like and be counted as sheep.

## **Week 6. Matthew 27:32-55. Mar. 25, 2024**

### **1) People’s actions or Trouble**

**Bible: Jesus is crucified and scorned.** Just prior to this text, the people have shouted for the release of Barabbas, not Jesus, and Pilate has washed his hands. Now, Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus carry his cross to Golgotha. Jesus refuses to be drugged with “sour wine” and is crucified under a sign mocking him as “King of the Jews”, but he does not yet die. The passersby, the chief priests, and the two crucified “bandits” all scorn him as the “Son of God” who should save himself. They are deceitful, for Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel never says of himself, “I am God’s Son”—others say he is. God also says it (3:17; 17:5), and the people here dismiss it. Some of them misunderstand Jesus’s Aramaic cry, “Eli, Eli” (“My God, my God”) as a call for Elijah to prove he is the Messiah (see Malachi 4:5). They thus mock him further. At noon, and again around 3:00 p.m. when Jesus dies, various phenomena occur in nature as signs of divine judgment on those responsible.

**Today: We participate in Jesus’s crucifixion and death.** Jesus dies. Are the various people in this text to be judged for their disbelief that Jesus is God’s Son? Are we? (Luke 23:34 alone has, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,” and one of those crucified at Jesus’s side asks for salvation.) The twelve disciples say nothing if they are present (the women followers were there, vv. 55-56). The Romans killed Jesus, so why do we say we did? The old spiritual asks, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” If you had been there, seeing him put to death, would you still believe he was “the Son of God”? Would you still trust or blame God? What about today when you see terrible world events?

### **2) God’s actions or Grace**

**Bible: God vindicates Jesus.** Jesus on the cross is faithful even in his cry of abandonment. He quotes Psalm 22:1, that then turns to profess God’s faithfulness. When Jesus is crucified and scorned as the “Son of God”, God vindicates him not least with various signs of protest in nature. God darkens the sky at noon. At Jesus’s death cry around 3:00 pm, God causes the

temple curtain to tear in two (signifying an end to the separation between the people and the Most Holy Place (i.e., God's presence in the Ark of the Covenant; see, Leviticus 16:2). God sends earthquakes and opens tombs (Jesus said in Luke 19:40, if the disciples were silent about his kingship, "the stones would cry out"). Matthew jumps ahead in commenting that, "After his resurrection" Jesus raises saints who had died and they "appeared to many". God causes a Roman centurion, to be the first person brought to faith by Jesus's death: "Truly this man was God's Son."

**Today: God vindicates Jesus to us.** God still reveals to people today the identity of the man who died on the cross and rose again for them. What means God does use for this revelation? The centurion's confession of Jesus may be ours, "Truly this man is God's Son." Is the centurion's faith complete, or must he like the disciples await the resurrection fully to comprehend the Messiah? With the symbol of the torn curtain, people now have direct access to God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Can you think of any specific instance of this in your life?

## **Week 7. Matthew 27:62-28:10. April 1, 2024**

### **1) People's actions or Trouble**

**Bible: Jesus's opponents continue to think they have power over him.** On Saturday/the sabbath/Passover, the religious leaders report to Pilate that Jesus said he would rise three days after his death. To prevent Jesus's disciples from stealing his body and claiming him risen, Pilate sends Roman guards with the leaders to make the tomb "as secure as [they] can" and to seal the stone. Worldly powers still think they can control Jesus.

At dawn on Sunday, Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" (mother of disciple James the younger and Joseph, of whom we know little; see Mark 15:40), approach the guarded tomb of Jesus. They were present at both his crucifixion (27:56) and burial (27:61). They are frightened by an earthquake, the Roman soldiers become "like dead men", and an angel appears who rolls the stone away and tells them that Jesus is risen and gone "ahead" to Galilee. They leave "with fear and great joy".

**Today: Many today think Jesus is powerless.** The two grieving Marys expect nothing, only "to see the tomb". When we see death around us in the world, is that what we expect? The guards become "like dead men"—the opponents of Jesus and his resurrection are the ones who become powerless, not Jesus. Does that say anything about the future of those who would oppose God? As you consider events in your own life or the world, are there any in which Jesus seems to be powerless? What stone/s do you need rolled away? Can "Jesus is risen" be trouble as well as good news for some people?

### **2) God's actions or Grace**

**Bible: Jesus Christ is stronger than death itself.** On Easter morning, God raises Jesus from the dead and causes the earth to shake, the guards to be powerless, an angel to be present who is



brilliant as “lightning”, the sealed tomb to be opened, Jesus to be departed, and a message of “great joy” to be proclaimed. The angel says, “Do not be afraid” (as to Joseph, 1:20), and commissions the women to preach to the disciples that Jesus is risen and gone ahead of them into Galilee. Jesus himself meets them as they run along the way, and says, “Do not be afraid”. His word is powerful, thus at his word, fear is banished and “great joy” remains. He allows them to kneel before him, touch his feet, and worship him. Jesus repeats what the angel promised, that he goes ahead of the disciples to Galilee and “there they will see me.”

**Today: Jesus Christ is stronger than death in our world.** Earthquakes mark both Jesus’s death (27:50-54) and resurrection. God alters the foundations of the world with this ground-shaking event. What is different for you because of the resurrection? What should be different in our view of our own death? Or of world events? Why do both the angel and Jesus say, “Do not be afraid”? Is there not much of which to be afraid? Might fear be the opposite of faith? What is in Galilee and why do you think Jesus will meet them there? What is our Galilee? Does Jesus meet us there and if so, where or in what?