

Read Matthew 28:1-10.

Now, there are some interesting things to notice about the people in this text. After the Sabbath, so after the day of rest, the two Mary's—Mary Magdalene and likely Mary, the mother of James and Joseph—go to *look at* the tomb.

Now, think back to Friday. Day one. Jesus has died. And at the crucifixion, witnessing his last breath and the strange events that proceeded it, are a group of women, including the two Marys.

Then later, when Joseph of Arimathea comes to take the body, these two women are there watching him place it into a new tomb that had been cut out of the rock.

There they sit, opposite the tomb. Weeping. Wondering. Waiting. That was day one.

Day two. It's the Sabbath—so no Jewish follower of Jesus is allowed to visit the tomb. The women can't yet go to offer spices, or do any kind of post-death ritual to care for Jesus' body.

But the women wouldn't be able to get to Him anyways. Because having heard concerns from the pharisees that Jesus' disciples might try to come and steal the body, Pilate orders for the tomb to be secured with a seal, and for guards to be stationed in front.

So on day two, the Romans are working, the women are waiting, and the body of Jesus is resting.

And then day three. The text says that the women go *to look at* the tomb. And the Greek word used here can mean to look, to perceive, to experience, or to *watch closely*.

In other words, they go to the tomb to weep, to wonder, to wait, perhaps. And to *watch closely*.

Because maybe, just maybe, after all the desertion that Jesus experienced, the deception, the betrayal, the failures—one after another—of His disciples in denying Him and abandoning Him.

Maybe these two women are yet clinging to a mustard seed belief that it isn't really over?

Even if clouded in doubt, their faithfulness is rewarded. Because their arrival at the tomb is what seems to be the catalyst, for God to do His finest work. They are the first to witness an event that will completely change the course of history, alter the world's beliefs about death, and reorient forever the way we think about the crucified Jesus.

A violent earthquake occurs. And remember, this is the second earthquake. The first occurred when Jesus was on the cross. So the whole earth is experiencing the power of this holy weekend. It trembled at Jesus' death, and now it trembles in anticipation.

It also participates in shaking the stone free of its seal—so that when the angel of the Lord enters the scene, he can roll the stone over as if it's made of styrofoam and make Himself comfortable. It's a rather quaint image.

But His appearance is like lightning—the text says. His clothes are white, and the guards are so terrified that it appears as if they both have a fainting spell. Pilate's mighty soldiers are rendered completely helpless, looking like dead men.

And yet here again the women remain. They're not missing any of this. Because the angel has come specifically to speak to them.

“Do not be afraid,” he says. Those incredibly comforting words that are spread over the entirety of Scripture. The words that the women were desperately waiting to hear.

“Do not be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified.”

Why did they come to look at the tomb? Because they were looking for Jesus. Yes, we know from John's gospel that they had brought spices to anoint His body, in the despairing case that nothing had actually changed.

But Matthew's gospel seems to indicate that there may have been a small seed of hope in these women. To wonder. To wait. To watch. And maybe subconsciously, to hold on to the hope that what Jesus had said to His disciples back in Matthew 16 *might yet come true* in some capacity.

It says this: *“From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”*

He literally told them how it was going to happen. And yet *only two* are here at the tomb. Only two had enough courage to move beyond disappointment and trust that Jesus was perhaps still more than a failed Messiah. That He was worthy of more.

That maybe, just maybe, He was up to something beyond appearances.

These women were looking for Jesus—even in death—and are therefore the first to hear the blessed words of the angel: *“He is not here. He has risen, just as He said.”*

Can you just imagine these two women—overwhelming emotions just bursting out of them, the ugly kind of crying, just sobbing as the angel shows them that the place where Jesus' body was laid is now vacant, the place where *they watched His body be laid*.

And what's more, they're not just the first to see the empty tomb. Look at what happens.

"Go quickly," says the angel, *"and tell his disciples: He has risen from the dead."* In other words, you have been His faithful witnesses, and now *you* must go and bear that witness.

As you might be aware, the testimony of women in the ancient world was functionally useless. They didn't have a public say as witnesses in any regular law court or tribunal. Simply because it was believed that you couldn't count on a woman's witness of an event. They were unreliable.

And yet the angel of the Lord is entrusting the transmission of the resurrection message to *two women*. Two people who would have otherwise been deemed entirely inadequate, unqualified, and unhelpful. Yet two people who, despite appearances, held on to Jesus, even in death.

"Tell his disciples: He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him."

Interestingly, this too Jesus had already told his disciples. Just three days before at the last supper, on that Thursday evening, after He predicts that they will all fall away, Jesus says to his disciples in Matthew 26, *"But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."*

He literally told them—not just that He would rise—but that He would rendezvous with them *in Galilee*. So you would think that after Jesus' death, the disciples would pack their bags, hop into a caravan, and check into a hotel in Galilee. You know, just in case.

But no. They're not there. Because the women have to go and tell them. They women have to remind them—direct orders from the angel—that Jesus will meet them in Galilee.

But before He does, Jesus blesses these women—not only with the honor of being the first to see the empty tomb, and not only with the honor of being the first to spread the good news—but also to be the first to see Him. To see the resurrected Jesus.

Because as they hurry away, shaking from the encounter with the angel yet bursting at the seams with joy, v.9: *"Suddenly Jesus met them."*

I mean, can this day get any better for these two women? Clearly the interaction with the angel would have been more-than-enough to give them the courage to spread the news. And yet Jesus still meets them, face-to-resurrected-face, and finally receives the worship that He was always worthy of. The worship that these women have longed for days to give Him.

And He echoes the words of the angel, *"Do not be afraid."* This is real. So tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me, just as you have. There they too will understand, just as you have.

This story just never gets old. This account—this testimony—never fails to catch us off-guard. There’s always more to unearth, to learn, to relearn, to hear again as if for the first time.

I mean, do we even realize how revolutionary this is? How the resurrection of Jesus—and the hope in resurrection—is literally the solution to humanity’s greatest fears? How the testimony of these women reshapes *everything*?

Consider, just for a moment, how much we concern ourselves with death and dying. How much of our lives and energy is spent preparing for ‘worst-case-scenarios’? How much we ache and grieve about the fragility of our human bodies. How much we worry about the pain or sting of death—either our own, or someone else.

Henri Nouwen once wrote this: “Some people say they are afraid of death. Others say they are not. But [let’s be honest], most people are quite afraid of dying. The slow deterioration of mind and body... becoming a burden for your friends, losing control of your movements, being talked about or spoken to with half-truths, forgetting recent events and the names of visitors—all of that and much more is what we really fear. It’s not surprising that we sometimes say: ‘I hope it doesn’t last long.’”

Whether we want to admit it or not, death is a frightening thing. And as one scholar put it: “Nowhere is [our] *faith* more threatened than when dying.”

It’s our greatest mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual hurdle in life, and its power over us in moments of vulnerability is frightening. Because it entices us to doubt and question whether the love of God is actually strong enough to break the sting of death.

Is His love more powerful than death? Can we hold onto hope in Jesus’ resurrection while death still stares us in the face?

Our text for this morning—and the whole point of this service—is to offer us a resounding ‘Yes!’ And it’s why Pope John Paul II once said to the church, “Do not abandon yourselves to despair. [Do not crumble in the face of death, he says.] We are the Easter people, and hallelujah is our song.”

In other words, like the women, we do yet weep and wonder and wait and watch—because our bodies still remain in this fragile state where death is a reality.

But *now*, because of the resurrection, we also *witness* to the glorious reality that the God who we are called to grasp onto and worship, the God who meets us in the risen Jesus and commissions us to share the news—despite our reputation or ‘unreliability’ in the world’s eyes—that this God’s love has in fact conquered our sin, and yes, even death itself. And what a life-changing reality it is.

A few weeks ago, a pastor in Vancouver, whose congregation I had attended for a bit while studying, passed away from cancer. He had been diagnosed with a brain tumour back in early 2025.

And a few months ago, when they knew the direction that this illness was going, he and his wife stood up in front of their congregation to speak for the last time. And he said this:

“I mean, none of us wants to be weak, do we? There’s something about being strong that is a wonderfully invigorating thing. And I just felt God speak to me and he said, “In your weakness, I am strong. We have learned that in the past 24 months, that God has been our strength when we’ve not felt strong. And in the wonder of what he’s done, he’s been so good to us.

“So in one sense we want to invite you, not to consider your strength, but to consider your weakness. To consider that it’s the grace of God who steps right into our weakness with us and provides what we need in that moment.”

For those two women who had witnessed Jesus’ death, endured the aching silence of the day after, and then wept in dire hope as they approached the tomb on that Sunday morning, they couldn’t have come in greater weakness. Death had crippled them, and grief had overwhelmed them.

But I think Matthew’s made it very clear why these women were given the history-making privilege of being the first to witness to the resurrection.

Because God repurposed their fragility. In choosing them to spread His good news, He gave yet another example of how His strength is made perfect in our weakness. Our inadequacies and insufficiencies give way for *His* resurrection power.

A power that is made perfect in weakness. A resurrection power that is made perfect, yes, even in death.

And so believing in resurrection means that we believe in something that goes beyond our despair. Believing in the resurrection means that no matter how we feel or how things appear, we know in your knowest of knows that there is hope.

Believing in the resurrection means that no matter how inadequate or unqualified we feel, there is something yet at the core of our being that says, “This isn’t it.”

Why? Why do we hold onto this hope?

Because we are an Easter people, and hallelujah is our song.

There one's more testimony I want to share with you. It's a short story written by someone who I studied with in college and who lost his wife—Charis—to cancer just over a year ago.

Prior to her death, he had been regularly offering updates through a 'Caring Bridge' blog. But three months *after* her passing, he wrote something quite special—a story of life in the new creation. It was a way for him to put into words how he was imagining the future, how he was holding on to the risen Jesus and the hope of life beyond the grave.

And yes, how he—even in grief—was testifying to the hope of resurrection.

He titled it, "A Vision of Eternity."

"What do you think of this one?" she asked. The question calls me out of my quiet thoughts and I open my eyes. The view before me is so stunning that it takes my breath away even though I've been looking at it all morning: a serene glacier lake, brilliant blue, ringed by snow-capped mountains in the distance. The rocky shore on which I sit is half-covered with lupins, their bright purple petals standing out against the grey rock.

"I look over to see Charis, crouched by a bunch of lupins, looking back at me with a questioning look on her face.

"It is beautiful', [I reply] 'with the yellow color different from all the others. My favorite is the large one over there that seems to spiral toward the sky.'

"She smiles back, seemingly satisfied with my answer. We have come to this place together to take in its beauty, without the pressures of time that we had when we last visited long ago. We are on the shore of Lake Tekapo in New Zealand. Or perhaps I should call it 'new' New Zealand, for that is what it is. This is the New Zealand of the new heaven and the new earth, where God's great plan of redemption has reached its eternal consummation. Here the mountains are larger, the sky bluer, the water clearer than Lake Tekapo ever was on the old earth. Here it has been perfected. Gone are the crowds of tourists, for on this side of eternity we all have the time to enjoy God's new creation and the patience to let each other do so at our own pace.

"I watch as Charis walks among the lupins down to the water's edge. She dips her feet in the water and laughs, an act so quintessentially *her*.... I am struck by God's incredible mercy and grace, that He would save Charis and me, once sinners, and unite us with each other and with Him in this place of perfection....

"The time of sorrowful separation after her death barely registers in my mind, replaced by the joy of an eternal friendship. God has given us tasks to do here, some together and some apart. I think that when we are together using our gifts to glorify Him, that is beautiful indeed.

“... The skin at Charis’ neck is smooth, without the scar that she had for years in her life on the old earth. She now has a working thyroid. Her hair is long and her liver works flawlessly. I recall (without pain or loss of joy) the cancer that had taken her life on the old earth. She now has an ageless grace that her youth on the old earth could only hint at.

“Most beautiful by far, however, is the name that she has written on her forehead—the name of God. She has seen His face, and her face reflects it.... We talk, we laugh, we remember, and we praise God together. Tomorrow we will do the same. What a priceless gift.”

What a priceless gift, indeed, is the hope of resurrection into a new creation because of salvation in Jesus Christ.

In all our weaknesses and inadequacies, frailties and fears, can we witness to this priceless gift? Can we watch for it? Look for it? See it in everything? Can we see the new world that salvation in Jesus has opened up to us? One where resurrection isn’t just hope but an *assumption*. A lived reality. An eternal reality.

All along the way, Jesus was offering signposts that this was where things were headed. “Watch closely,” He was saying. Because all of this is going to climax into something that the world has never seen and *needs* to hear. I need you to be my witnesses, because the whole earth is trembling, waiting to see this come to fruition.

And I don’t want you to miss it.

Come and see, He says. *I’m not in the grave*. I have risen. I’ve gone ahead of you.

And that I’m coming back to bring you to be where I am.

That is the hope of resurrection.