JESUS HAS RISEN

Matthew 28:1–20

Key Verse: 28:6

“He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.”

Unstoppable. Sometimes that can be a bad thing, like when a person can’t stop talking, or can’t stop doing something irritating. But unstoppable can also be a good thing. Today’s passage is about the resurrection of Jesus. Matthew’s account of it shows us is that Jesus is unstoppable. The religious leaders tried to stop his ministry and his message, but they couldn’t. Of course his resurrection was good news to his followers, but it’s also good news to all people of the world. It’s not just a theological idea, or dogma; his resurrection actually applies to our daily lives. When we believe Jesus has risen, we too become part of God’s unstoppable work in the world. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his words today.

Look at verse 1. As in all four Gospels, the first people to witness Jesus’ resurrection were women. Mentioned here are Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary,” meaning the mother of James and Joseph. They both had been watching when Jesus died on the cross; both had been watching when he was buried in the tomb (27:56,61). Now they’re coming to “look at” the empty tomb. Why is their being there during Jesus’ death and resurrection so important? It’s not just to show us the beautiful devotion women can have; it’s to help us believe.

In any death investigation today, ordinary details suddenly become way more important to get at the truth of what happened. Having eye-witnesses is especially powerful. And if two of the eyewitnesses actually agree on what they saw, on what happened, then their testimony becomes indisputable. As we’ve already seen, there were many people who hoped to disprove that Jesus would rise from the dead (27:62–64). Many today still try to do so. But these women’s eyewitness testimony, which is actually preserved in all four Gospel accounts, is precious evidence that Jesus really did die, he really was buried, he really did rise from the dead. These truths are at the core of all Christian faith; they’re the gospel, the good news. And we believe them not because we’re being emotional or deceived, but because they’re true.

Matthew goes on to give us some vivid imagery to corroborate the eyewitness testimony. Look at verses 2–4. The violent earthquake, the angel who looked like lightning, whose clothes were white as snow, and the tough guards shaking with fear all show that something amazing had happened. They give us a glimpse of heavenly glory and of the almighty power of God. The eternal Creator who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen, is still there (1Ti6:16). This glorious God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ kept his promise. He asked his Son to die on the cross for the sins of the world, but he raised him from the dead on the third day. It was all part of God’s plan to break the power of sin and death, which are like a deep, dark shadow over all people. The seal on the tomb, the heavy stone at the entrance, the scary guards and the sorrow and despair surrounding Jesus’ death seemed so permanent, so overwhelming. But in light of who God is, they all fled away. No one and nothing could stop Almighty God from doing what he planned to do. The strong grip of sin and death and Satan were all broken when Jesus was risen. This Jesus is able to save completely those who come to God through him (Heb7:25).

Then Matthew tells us of the angel’s encounter with the women. Read verses 5–7. God used his power in such a tender way, to comfort and reassure these troubled women. The angel told them, “Do not be afraid.” This is one of the most powerful meanings of Jesus’ resurrection in our daily lives. Because Jesus has risen, we no longer need to be afraid of any thing or any one. If we’re honest, fear plays a pretty large part in our lives, and it takes on various forms. We can be afraid of death, or the dark, or other obviously scary things, But also, we can be afraid of failure, afraid of success, afraid of intimacy, afraid of loneliness, afraid of being judged, afraid of making a choice, afraid of losing what we worked so hard to gain. But believing that Jesus has risen makes us fearless people. It makes us fearless as his witnesses, and fearless in living our lives. Since Jesus has risen, we have nothing to fear.

As we saw earlier, the top disciple Peter fell into fear when Jesus was arrested. Because of his fear, he denied Jesus three times. But after witnessing that Jesus has risen Peter changed into a fearless man. In his first sermon he preached the death and resurrection of Jesus to his enemies, saying, “But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. David said about him: ‘I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body will also rest in hope, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, you will not let your holy one see decay. You have made known to me the paths of life, you will fill me with joy in your presence’” (Ac2:24–28). Fear can still seep into us as we live in this world filled with problems and the power of death. We may not even be aware of how fearful we’ve become. But as believers in Jesus it’s not right to be fearful. We need to be reminded often of the good news that Jesus has risen. And we need to ask ourselves honestly, “Am I fearful, or fearless?” The fearlessness that Jesus has risen makes us unstoppable.

Read verse 6 again. Here the angel emphasizes the evidence that Jesus has risen. The evidence is both the empty tomb and the words of Jesus. The angel said, “Come and see the place where he lay.” His body was gone. It was another important fact that these women had witnessed with their own eyes. Nobody had stolen his body; God raised him from the dead.

The angel also said, “He has risen, just as he said.” In all the drama of Jesus’ arrest, trial and horrible crucifixion it was hard to remember what Jesus had said. The emotions of fear and sorrow became so powerful and clouded the minds of these women, and of all his followers. The drama of life can still do that to us, too. But the angel reminded these women of the words of Jesus. For the past six months Jesus had repeatedly predicted that he would rise from the dead (16:21; 17:23; 20:19). The disciples, the women, even the religious leaders had heard about it (27:63). But why is it so important to know that Jesus had talked beforehand about his being raised? Again, it’s to help us believe. The evidence of the empty tomb alone isn’t really enough. As Jesus said earlier, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (24:35). Over the past 2,000 years so many things have changed, and the world seems completely different. But the words of Jesus have not changed. The truth of his resurrection has not changed. We can be absolutely sure of the truth that Jesus has risen, because he predicted it, and it happened, just as he said. We need to believe based on the words of Jesus.

Read verse 7 again. Here we see another aspect of how his resurrection changes people. These women would become his witnesses. Over the centuries some people have brought male domination into Christianity. But in all four Gospels we see that women were the first people to bear witnesses to the truth that Jesus has risen. God would use the testimony of these women preciously to help his disciples.

Look at verse 8. It took time for them to process what was happening, but basically they obeyed what the angel told them. And the news that Jesus has risen began to fill them with heavenly joy. This is another powerful meaning of Jesus’ resurrection in our practical lives. It fills us with joy. Sometimes life can be so sad. When we see people’s sufferings and loss, we feel sorry. When we personally experience suffering and loss, we can lose all our strength. But the good news that Jesus has risen fills us with new joy and new strength. As Jesus told his disciples in John’s Gospel: “So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy” (Jn16:22). We need to ask ourselves honestly, “Am I sorrowful, or joyful?” The joy that Jesus has risen also makes us unstoppable.

Read verse 9. The women were on their way to tell the disciples, but it wasn’t really about just using them to get a job done. The Risen Jesus personally met them. He’s not a businessman; he’s our personal Risen Lord who cares deeply for each person. By personally meeting the women he was erasing all the fear and sorrow from their hearts. He was also giving them a new direction, the same direction the angel had given them. Read verse 10. It tells us again that Jesus’ discipleship ministry was most important. And, based on their personal experience with him, the Risen Jesus wanted these women to go and witness to his resurrection and help others meet him, too. What a beautiful life, helping people to personally encounter the Risen Jesus! It’s the best love, the best way to help people. We also notice here that Jesus calls his disciples “my brothers.” Discipleship is about obedience, but it’s not about hierarchy; it’s about relationship, friendship, genuine love. When we receive the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection, we become brothers and sisters with all God’s people.

Finally, we notice that these women “clasped his feet and worshiped him.” And Jesus didn’t refuse it. Jesus who has risen is worthy of our worship. This is the final aspect of resurrection faith in our practical lives: we worship Jesus. In this world many try to act self-sufficient, like they don’t worship any thing or any one. But we all do. If it’s not people or material things, we can be worshipping ourselves. It’s all so meaningless, and misdirected. But worshiping our Risen Lord Jesus is the best direction in life we could ever have. It gives our lives the greatest satisfaction. We have to ask ourselves, “Who or what am I worshipping?” Worshiping our Risen Lord Jesus makes us unstoppable.

In verses 11–15 Matthew uniquely tells us about the religious leaders’ second attempt to discredit the good news that Jesus has risen. This time they try to use money and lies. So much of the time this is how the world operates, based on money and lies. But even these powerful things could not stop the good news that Jesus has risen.

Read verses 16,17. The disciples accepted the women’s message from Jesus and acted on it by going to a certain mountain in Galilee. When they saw him, they worshiped him, too; but some doubted. How honest the Bible is! Doubt is the opposite of faith. Doubt plagues people still. It’s so hard to overcome our doubt. But the news that Jesus has risen ultimately prevails over all our doubt.

Read verse 18. Throughout this Gospel account Matthew has been emphasizing the authority of Jesus. Now, after Jesus has risen, he’s been given all authority in heaven and on earth. His authority is unstoppable. His authority is the basis for discipleship ministry. Read verse 19. Jesus who has risen commands his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. This was the fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham (Ge12:3; Mt1:1). This is the most practical application of resurrection faith. If we really believe, we will help others to also believe and follow Jesus. We won’t settle in our own comfort zone or in our own form of nationalistic pride; we’ll make God’s world salvation purpose our own life purpose. It’s what the Risen Jesus wants most. It can seem so hard to do, especially for weak and doubting disciples like us. But when we believe that Jesus has risen, we can do it. To baptize people in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit isn’t just a ritual; it’s helping people experience God in the deepest, most life-transforming way. It’s also helping people make a total life commitment to him.

Read verse 20a. This may be the most practical aspect of making disciples: teaching people to obey everything Jesus commanded. We shouldn’t be teaching people our own ideas or traditions or culture, but teaching people to pay attention to all that Jesus commanded and to put his teachings into practice. The religious leaders wanted to stop the Jesus movement, but through the discipleship ministry of his followers, his movement was truly unstoppable.

Read verse 20b. This may be the most precious promise of our Risen Lord Jesus. As we fearlessly and joyfully witness and worship him and make disciples by teaching what Jesus commanded, the Risen Jesus is personally with us.

Read verse 6 again. May God bless us to believe the good news that Jesus has risen. May he make us his fearless and joyful witnesses who worship him. And as we believe that he has risen, may he help us make disciples of all nations. May God make us unstoppable like him.