

**April 19, 2020**  
**What Next?**  
**Matthew 28:16-20**

Jesus has risen from the dead! That's the good news of Easter.

Last week, Easter Sunday, we read Matthew 28:1-10. Early on Sunday morning, as the new day was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went out to visit the tomb. Suddenly there was a great earthquake. An angel of the Lord came down from heaven, rolled aside the stone, and sat on it. His face shone like lightning, and his clothing was as white as snow. Then the angel spoke to the women. *"Don't be afraid!"* he said. *"I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He isn't here! He is risen from the dead, just as he said would happen. Come, see where his body was lying. And now, go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and he is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there."*

The women ran from the tomb to give the disciples the angel's message. They were very frightened but also filled with great joy. As they hurried along, Jesus, Himself, met them. They ran to him and worshiped him. Jesus said to them, *"Don't be afraid! Go tell my brothers to leave for Galilee, and they will see me there."*

Today we continue the story:

*"Then the eleven disciples left for Galilee, going to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him – but some of them doubted!"*

Wait a minute. Some of them "doubted"/"were uncertain"/"hesitated"? What's the problem?

Neither the Marys nor the disciples nor anyone else is expecting a resurrection. They had totally missed Jesus' promises to that effect. Even if they recalled Jesus' assurance of His rising from the dead, the horror, brutality, and finality of the crucifixion had crushed those hopes. The disciples had seen Jesus suffer and die. They had seen the tomb sealed. They had seen the Roman guard posted. They were sure their dream was over – done – finished.

Now they see what looks like Jesus, but is it real? It's too incredible. Too unimaginable. So much has happened so quickly it's not surprising the disciples are struggling. What is this going to mean for them? What are the implications? What's going to happen next? Their minds are going in a million different directions.

Let's be honest. There are times when we all struggle/doubt/are uncertain/hesitate.

Going back in time, when I first came to faith in Jesus, there was an excitement, a feeling of joy and peace. I knew for a certainty Jesus was risen. I believed in Jesus; life was good.

But there was a certain level of disappointment, too. Initially it was disappointment that all my problems didn't magically disappear. I wasn't suddenly in the popular crowd at school. I still struggled with a low self-image. I still had to face the very real challenges of passing

physics. As time went by, I found I was disappointed with church, too. There were politics ... the new pastor was a dull preacher ... The music was a bit stuffy ... Church people were not always nice. Or always what I thought was "Christian."

One a 5-point scale, where 1 is "very disappointing" and 5 is "exceeds all expectations" both my own spiritual experience and church experience were probably somewhere in the 2 range.

What do we do, when there seems to be a disparity between what some people seem to experience (this wonderful, joy-filled, peaceful, empowered, "Praise-the-Lord"-filled life in Jesus), and my experience? When we doubt/are uncertain/hesitate?

What do we do in 2020? As we're isolated? Alone? Discouraged? Fearful? How do we keep the "fire" burning bright?

The objective truth of Easter is this: Jesus HAS risen! The Kingdom of God HAS come, death HAS been defeated, our sins HAVE been forgiven, the church HAS been established, we ARE the people of God, filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit. We ARE, to quote Peter, *"a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that we may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once we were not a people, but now we are the people of God; once we had not received mercy, but now we have received mercy"* (1 Peter 2:9-10). Those are all wonderful objective truths.

But I don't always **feel** that in my life. As the Spirit-filled, Jesus-led, Creator-empowered people of the resurrection, what's with that? Where's the problem???

*"Jesus came and told his disciples, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth."*

The disciples needed to hear that. The Romans were still in control. The Jewish leaders were still in control. But through this handful of disciples – people who would believe in and follow Jesus literally to the ends of the Earth – Jesus would change the world. It wouldn't be them, in their own strength, who would change everything. But Jesus' Spirit within them would encourage them, inspire them, and empower them to transform the world. That would happen gradually as the disciples simply, obediently, consistently live out their faith ...

We need to be reminded today that all authority in heaven and on earth still belongs to Jesus. That doesn't mean God **causes** all things to happen. In a [thought-provoking piece in Time magazine](#), New Testament scholar, Tom Wright comments, *"No doubt the usual silly suspects will tell us why God is doing this to us. A punishment? A warning? A sign? These are knee-jerk would-be Christian reactions in a culture which, generations back, embraced rationalism: everything must have an explanation. But supposing it doesn't?"* Sometimes bad things just happen. That doesn't mean Jesus does not have authority.

Wright goes on, *"Perhaps what we need ... is to recover the biblical tradition of lament. Lament is what happens when people ask, "Why?" and don't get an answer. It's where we get to when we move beyond our self-centered worry about our sins and failings and look more broadly at the suffering of the world. It's bad enough facing a pandemic in New York*

or London. What about a crowded refugee camp on a Greek island? What about Gaza? Or South Sudan?

*"At this point the Psalms, the Bible's own hymnbook, come back into their own, just when some churches seem to have given them up. "Be gracious to me, Lord," prays the sixth Psalm, "for I am languishing; O Lord, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror." "Why do you stand far off, O Lord?" asks the 10th Psalm plaintively. "Why do you hide yourself in time of trouble?" And so it goes on: "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever?" (Psalm 13). And, all the more terrifying because Jesus himself quoted it in his agony on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22).*

We think we would like a God who micromanages every detail of life. To think God causes everything, And will keep us from stubbing our toe. But Scripture reminds us time and time again, God allows life to swirl around us. Moses faces Pharaoh and his army. David faces Goliath. Jesus cries, *"My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken from me."*

What Moses learned, what David learned, what Jesus knows is that the insurmountable challenges they are facing are, in fact, surmountable. Jesus has all authority. That does not mean Moses will not Pharaoh, David will not face Goliath, or Jesus will not face the cross. It DOES mean, that when we're standing on the shore of the Red Sea and the Egyptian Army is charging down on us – God will provide a way. When we're facing Goliath and see no hope – God will provide a way. When we cry out to God, *"My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me,"* we may suffer, but He will provide a way. It does not mean God will instantly destroy coronavirus; it does mean He will get us through.

Jesus is not saying the world is as He intends it to be – yet. He is saying that He is working to move it from corruption, greed, and every kind of wickedness – and bring it, by slow means and quick, under the rule of His life-giving love. And how is He doing this? Here is the shock? Through us, His followers, as we simply live out our faith. Read on ...

*"Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey all the commands I have given you."*

Most of us who are taking part in this service, today, have at least some passing experience with reality of the risen Jesus. I hope you have. If not, then I invite you to sincerely ask Jesus to make Himself known to you. Pray to Him. Read His words. Try walking with Him.

Those of us who have that experience – I hope – know something of the hope, comfort, guidance, encouragement – and joy – that come from Jesus, even during hard times. This is the experience that leads the psalmists who lament to move from despair to hope and faith. Through their intense suffering, they found God in new, profound, and very real ways. Their faith was tested. Tested in ways we cannot imagine. And it was hardened into steel.

But now imagine you don't know God. You don't know Jesus. You are facing this pandemic with no hope and no strength beyond what you muster in your own soul. Imagine the fear. Imagine the alone-ness. Imagine the hopelessness. Having had some experience in that

world, I can tell you that it is a bleak, hollow, lonely, desperate place to be. Especially in this current situation, there is no hope. Only fear. Only despair. Only pain.

We would hope that times like this would bring people to recognize their need for God.

Our privilege, our calling, is to be people of hope. We, as the people of God, have genuine good news for these times. We know God. We have a Saviour. His Spirit is within us. We have good news this world desperately needs right now.

That won't mean giving trite answers: pasting a smile on our lips and pretending all is right with the world. It means lamenting with people; BUT we have a God who understands dark valleys. It means sharing we're struggling too; we're not happy either, but we have a God who knows loneliness and is with us. It means walking with people; yes, we're ALL having a tough go, but we have a Saviour who has suffered for us and understands our challenges. It means encouraging people; helping them find a Saviour who has walks with them through dark valleys; who endured loneliness, pain and suffering, and is with us in our tough times.

Our privilege and challenge is to help people find Jesus. His Kingdom comes – His authority and presence become real – as we are His Presence in the world. By each phone call we make. By each little act of love we do. By each word of encouragement we give.

*"And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*

I come back to this verse many times in my own life.

- As I have struggled with doubt.
- As I have wondered about the power and authority of God in tough times.
- As I have struggled to find the courage to share my faith with people around me.
- As I have sat with people in hospital who are suffering for no clear reason.
- As I have sat with people who are dying.
- As I have talked with people on the phone who are desperately lonely.
- As I talk with people who are fearful for their loved ones in lodges and care homes.

I need to know this truth. We all do. We all need to hear it again and again.

What changed my personal spiritual experience – and church experience from a 2 to a 4-5 was coming to know Jesus, more personally and more profoundly – in my life. It took me a while to realize that no pastor could do that. No church could do that. No musician could do that. No author could do that. I had to spend time in prayer. Spend time in Scripture. And spend time consciously trying to walk with Jesus at all times. At times it was wonderful. At times it still is hard work. Perhaps this time – this time of disruption when we have to slow down and cannot be with other people – is the time when we need to spend with Jesus? To consciously ask Jesus, "What does it mean to be your disciple, to walk with you at all times?"

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First Baptist Church  
1614 – 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue South, Lethbridge, AB T1J 0W3  
(403) 327-2082  
[bruce@firstb.net](mailto:bruce@firstb.net)