

Explore the Bible Series for April 16: Live a life filled with resurrection power

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Live a life filled with resurrection power

- Matthew 28:1-20

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Easter has long been the high point of the Christian year. Long before Christmas was celebrated, Christians gathered every Sunday to commemorate the day of the week on which Jesus was raised, and the anniversary of the Resurrection every spring was the day when new, baptized Christians entered the church, following a period of instruction.

For those today who follow the Christian calendar, Easter comes at the end of seven weeks of Lent, a time when Christians are encouraged to take a spiritual inventory of their lives and recommit themselves anew to follow Jesus wherever he leads. Though it is a story we are all very familiar with, Easter continues to inspire, amaze and challenge Christians to live lives filled with resurrection power in the 21st century.

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Matthew 28:1-10

One of the most contentious issues in many churches is the question of the role of women in the ministry. Some believe in a sharp separation of men's and women's duties, with ordained ministry reserved exclusively for men. Others think the New Testament teaches men and women are equal before God and both are called to a variety of ministries, including pastoral ministries, without regard to gender. Both groups can quote Scripture to back up their claims.

In light of this debate, it is interesting to consider the resurrection appearance of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. The angel at the tomb announces Jesus' resurrection first to two women, Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" (Mark calls her "Mary the mother of James") and tells them to go tell the disciples.

Then, on the way from the tomb, Jesus appears to them and entrusts them with a message for the male disciples (Jesus calls them "my brothers"). It is clear from this account, as indeed from the other gospels as well, that the initial message of Jesus' resurrection was put into the hands of some of Jesus' most faithful followers, who happened to be women.

Matthew 28:11-15

The story of the empty tomb has been controversial since the earliest days of Christianity. No one could dispute that Jesus had died on the cross, but what was one to make of the contention he had been raised from the dead?

Early Jewish Christians latched onto the story wholeheartedly, while many other Romans and Jews rejected the story as fiction. When confronted with their inability to produce a body, the story circulated in some circles that the disciples had stolen it in order to fool people.

Matthew, uniquely among the gospels, records the preparation to guard the body (Matthew 28:62-66) and the contrivance of the theft story to account for the fact the body was now missing. So what happened to Jesus' body? Was he raised from the dead, as his followers claimed, or was his body stolen, as the authorities stated?

By the nature of the evidence, people in the first century were going to believe what they wanted to believe, and the same is true today. It is unlikely a person who does not believe will be convinced by logical arguments, but it is a testimony to the power of the gospel that stories like the disciples' theft of the body were unable to stop the spread of Christianity in the first century.

Matthew 28:16-20

In September 1796, as George Washington prepared to leave the office of president of the United States to which he was elected twice, he delivered a farewell speech to the nation, and particularly to its elected representatives. He urged the people to think of themselves as one nation, united in liberty, and to avoid sectional, sectarian and partisan rivalries.

On a mountain in Galilee, Jesus offered farewell instructions to his followers as well. The disciples were fearful, nervous and even doubtful, but Jesus encouraged them to continue the work he had started.

The Great Commission Matthew records is a succinct overview of the Christians' mission. First, Jesus commanded them to go. The good news of Jesus Christ does not spread itself. It must be carried by those who believe in it to those who need to hear it.

Second, Jesus commanded them to make disciples of all the nations. Getting people to assent casually to a set of beliefs is relatively meaningless. The gospel can progress only when it is promoted by people who have invested their lives in it. The last phrase, "of all nations," also is important, for the gospel is directed to all humanity, not just people from a certain geographical region or who hold a certain worldview.

Third, Jesus commanded them to baptize. Baptism is an external sign of an internal change. It is a mysterious picture of the divine-human encounter, whose function as the symbol of unity in Christ—regardless of differences of opinion, social status, ethnic background, or nationality—is paramount.

Fourth, Jesus commanded them to teach their new followers to obey the commands of Jesus. Christianity was first called "The Way," and it is indeed a way of life more than a set of beliefs. Medieval mystics like Bernard of Clairvaux rediscovered the value of studying and meditating on the life of Jesus, which offers guidance to us in every situation in life.

Washington's farewell to his country has been preserved, reprinted and read by numerous Americans over the past 200-plus years. Jesus' words to his disciples have been preached, heard, read and acted upon for almost 2,000 years, and they continue to give us guidance today.

Discussion questions

- What is your favorite Easter tradition? Why?
- In light of the first resurrection appearance of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, what do you believe is the distinction between the roles of men and women in regard to evangelism, if any? How do you regard people or churches whose opinion differs from your own?
- Is your belief in the resurrection more affected by logical arguments or by observation of the power of the gospel? How would you deal with a person who acknowledges the surprising growth of the church throughout the ages but had difficulty accepting a literal resurrection?
- Does your view of evangelism focus on people agreeing to a certain core group of beliefs or on people experiencing life-transforming changes?
- Does the common view of evangelism as inviting people to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior fully encompass all that is meant by the phrase “proclaiming the good news”? What was the content of Jesus’ proclamation of the good news throughout his ministry?



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