

Matthew 27:57-28:20: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Matthew chapter 27 verse 57 to chapter 28 verse 20. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

The next day, that is, after the day of preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, Sir, we remember how that imposter said, while he was still alive, after three days I will rise.

Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest the disciples go and steal him away and tell the people he has risen from the dead. And the last fraud will be worse than the first. Pilate said to them, You have a guard of soldiers, go, make it as secure as you can. So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.

[1 : 31] His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified.

He is not here, for he has risen as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead. And behold, he is going before you to Galilee.

There you will see him. See, I have told you. So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and said, Greetings.

And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.

While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers and said, Tell people, his disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.

[2 : 44] And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble. So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him, they worshipped him. But some doubted.

And Jesus came and said to them, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. We have reached the conclusion of the Gospel of Matthew, in which Jesus is buried, rises from the dead, appears to his disciples and gives them the Great Commission.

Rather a lot of ground to cover. Joseph at Arimathea comes at evening, asking for the body of Jesus. And Arimathea seems to be the same place as Samuel came from, which we see in 1 Samuel chapter 1 verse 1.

[3 : 53] Jesus is the Davidic king, and it seems fitting that a figure associated with Samuel is bearing him into the chamber from which he will come forth as the risen Lord. That Joseph of Arimathea is a rich man and a disciple is also an interesting detail of this narrative.

Throughout Matthew's Gospel, the theme of riches and money has often come up, and here it comes up again. But now, although the earlier rich man, who wanted to become a disciple, failed to do so, here is one that has.

It's an encouraging note towards the end of the Gospel. The presence of two Josephs, remember earlier Mary is the mother of James and Joseph, and two Marys in the account of the burial of Jesus, brings our minds back to the beginning of the story of the Gospel, which also began with a Joseph and a Mary.

Jesus is placed into a new tomb, a virgin tomb, and the connection between the womb and the tomb is important throughout Scripture. You can see this in places like Isaiah chapter 26, verses 16 to 19.

O Lord, in distress they sought you. They poured out a whispered prayer when your discipline was upon them, like a pregnant woman who writhes and cries out in her pangs when she is near to giving birth.

[5 : 08] So were we because of you, O Lord. We were pregnant, we writhed, but we have given birth to wind. We have accomplished no deliverance in the earth, and the inhabitants of the world have not fallen.

Your dead shall live, their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy, for your Jew is a Jew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead.

Just as the Gospel begins with the opening of the virgin womb, it will end with the opening of the virgin tomb. The sudden presence of Joseph's and Mary's should alert us to this association.

Also the emphasis upon the presence of the women adds weight to birth themes here. The body is carefully taken care of by Joseph. He wraps the body in a clean linen shroud, like the clothes of the high priest on the Day of Atonement.

And the presence of this rich man at this particular junction might also cast our minds back to Isaiah 53 verse 9, one of the passages that is often referred to in these stories of Christ's suffering.

[6 : 12] In fulfilment of that prophecy, Christ has his grave made with a rich man. It's cut into the rock, like stones taken from a quarry. We can maybe think back to Isaiah chapter 51 verse 1.

Listen to me. You who pursue righteousness, you who seek the Lord, look to the rock from which you were hewn and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you.

For he was but one when I called him, that I might bless him and multiply him. Christ is the great stone that will become the chief cornerstone of the new temple. The great stones of the temple of Solomon are described in 1 Kings chapter 7 verse 9 following.

All these were made of costly stones, cut according to measure, sword with saws, back and front, even from the foundation to the coping, and from the outside to the great court.

The foundation was of costly stones, huge stones, stones of eight and ten cubits, and above were costly stones, cut according to measurement and cedar. The great court had three courses of cut stone all around and a course of cedar beams.

[7 : 20] So had the inner court of the house of the Lord and the vestibule of the house. A stone is placed over the mouth of the tomb. It's a blocked up entrance that will have to be removed.

And the women's presence at the burial and the tomb is noted by Matthew. They're present at the cross, they're present at the burial, and they're present on the morning of resurrection. They are the heart of the faithful community.

While we can often focus upon the male apostles as the appointed leaders and guardians of the people of Christ, Christ himself wants us to attend to the women and the children at the heart of the community of faith, as models of faith.

And here we see them singled out once more as figures to pay attention to. The chief priests, who were largely Sadducees, and the Pharisees, both joined together to ask Pilate to set a guard at the tomb and to seal it.

And it seems that having Jesus as a common enemy makes unlikely friends. The opposing sects of the Sadducees and the Pharisees and the Roman governor Pilate are all united in this.

[8 : 22] Also, the guard on the tomb makes clear that the prophecy that Jesus would rise again on the third day was widely known, even before Easter morning. They knew that Jesus had said that he would rise again on the third day.

This is not something that was said later on and placed back into the story. There was a guard present at the tomb because the resurrection was foretold by Christ, right down to the day on which it would occur.

Furthermore, the presence of a guard upon the tomb, which is a strange thing indeed to have a guard at a tomb to prevent its occupant from breaking out, also makes us think of the tomb as a prison and the resurrection as a great prison break.

Christ is the one who's trapped in the bonds of death. And we'll see a number of stories of prison breaks in the book of Acts, stories that often take the resurrection as their pattern.

Acts chapter 12 being a good example of that, where Peter is delivered from prison by an angel of the Lord and then appears in a sort of resurrection appearance to the disciples and appearing first to a woman who is not believed by the disciples but then appearing to them all.

[9 : 31] Death and its servants hold Jesus in their custody, but they are incapable of holding on to him and he breaks free of their clutches. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, probably Mary, the mother of Jesus, come to the tomb on the first day of the week.

It's the start of a new week and as we'll see, the start of a new creation. Once again, as at the beginning of the gospel, there is an appearance of an angel of the Lord and a descent from heaven, reminding us both of the appearances of the angel of the Lord to Joseph and of the descent of the spirit in the form of a dove at Jesus' baptism.

The description of the angel is also similar to the description of the transfigured Christ. The descent of the angel from heaven, the lightning of his countenance, the earthquake with which he comes are also features that pick up elements of Jesus' description of his coming and the day of his power in the Olivet Discourse.

And perhaps we should see this as a foreshadowing of that, that there is a coming of Christ here in his return from the grave. The earthquake also connects with the earthquake described in the previous chapter.

The presence of the angel of the Lord here might also invite us to think of the tomb of the risen Christ as the beachhead for heaven's invasion of earth. The gods, the opposing forces, tremble and collapse like dead men.

[10 : 55] The angel of the Lord presents the empty tomb as evidence that Christ is no longer there to the women and then sends them to tell the disciples that he has risen from the dead and is going before them to Galilee.

And as the women leave the tomb, in great fear and joy, they are met by Jesus himself and they take hold of his feet and they worship him. Jesus then commissions them to tell his brothers to go to Galilee where they will see him.

They are returning to the site where it all began. But as the women are bringing news to the disciples, there's another message being sent to the chief priests by the gods. As the disciples will later be, the gods are entrusted with a message to spread, a false gospel of the authorities that is opposed to the message of Christ.

It's important to consider that the chief priests and the elders have a first-hand report of the resurrection and choose to reject it because they know what it means. They have received a sort of gospel and their first concern is to pervert and undermine the message for the sake of their power. And the exchange of money in order to buy the silence and the lies of the gods is also a reflection upon the character of their message and of their power and authority. They had previously used money to get Judas to betray his lord.

[12 : 13] And now they've used money to buy off their gods, to get them to tell lies. In all of these cases, we're seeing something about the corrupting power of money again and the way in which both the love of money destroys the rich and also enables them to corrupt others.

This warning about money should be taken very seriously. The disciples worshipped Jesus in Galilee on a mountain to which they've been directed. Jesus' teaching began on a mountain and now it ends on a mountain.

The Great Commission is like the calling of the prophet Jeremiah in Jeremiah chapter 1 verse 8 to 9. Do not say, I am only a youth, for to all to whom I send you you shall go, and whatever I command you you shall speak.

Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord. The disciples are being given a prophetic calling to go out into the world as a prophet and to declare the word of the Lord, the risen Christ.

