

Sermon

I Am With You Always

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His is risen!

In keeping with our series, we're looking to the Easter story as we find it in Matthew's Gospel. If you're visiting with us today, welcome! We've been walking through the Words of Jesus (those red-lettered words as they are printed in some versions of the Bible) found in Matthew for several months now, and we'll pick up where we left off next week in chapter 7.

But today, on this Resurrection Sunday, we're jumping to the end of the book. How many of you have that habit of jumping to the end of the book... long before you've *earned* it? At our house there are two voracious readers. Donny and I are *mere mortals* when it comes to reading... but Laurie and Alex love to read... a lot... and they read really fast.

So, from time to time, I'll notice that Laurie is finishing up a book that it seems like she just started... and, from time to time, I'll remark with amazement "are you finishing that already??!!?"... and, from time to time, she'll *fess up* that she hasn't exactly read all the middle just yet. Laurie is one of you who can't wait to read through to the end, but often **cheats** and jumps to the back of the book.

So, today, that's what we're doing... jumping to the back of the book. But we're not cheating; we have a really good reason to jump ahead. It is Easter, Resurrection Sunday, and we simply must tell this story!

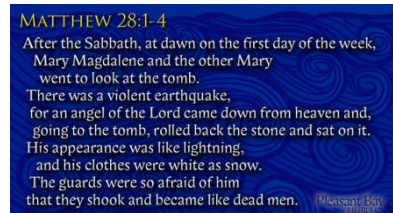
Usually, when I want to tell this story from the Gospels, I go to Luke or John, because they tell more of the story. Here in Matthew we have a sort of an abridged version, just these 20 verses that comprise chapter 28.

I'm glad for this shorter version this morning... not because I have anything more pressing to attend to (not even that ham and coconut cream pie), but because sometimes a more compressed version helps us see the big picture. I'm trusting that this version in Matthew will provide for us a great perspective on the wonders of this great day.

The report starts on Sunday morning.

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.¹

Jesus was unjustly charged, tried and executed on Friday, just two days before.



¹The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 28:1.

Saturday was the Jewish Sabbath, a day of rest that would not allow for such tending to the dead. But now on this third day, mourners were on their way to the borrowed tomb that held the body of Jesus.

The Sabbath day that passed probably did little to comfort their pain, or satisfy their confusion. None of this made sense. Just one week ago, Jesus was hailed by the crowds with songs and shouts of hosanna! This should be a day of the ongoing celebration... but what started as a week of triumph, quickly turned to days of horror, and ended on that Friday when the One they thought would conquer the tyrannical oppression thrust on God's people by an evil government and wicked religious leaders was crushed Himself in the most cruel and disgusting way. This was all supposed to be so very different, so victorious... but, instead, these mourners were defeated and confused with nothing left to do but mourn the death of Jesus. Other Gospel accounts teach us that the women were prepared to anoint Jesus' body for burial.

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

²There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. ⁴The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.²

I'm not sure what the women expected to find when they arrived at the tomb. I doubt they expected to find Roman guards; that would be highly unusual. In every other case, the work of the Roman's was done when criminals breathed their last breath when crucifixion's work was done. Who cared about a criminal's mangled dead body? Why would it need to be guarded? But this was a different case since the sinister leaders speculated that the followers of Jesus might not give up so easily and make up some sort of story associated with this dead body.

Maybe the women knew that the guards were there, and hoped for some help to unseal the tomb by rolling back the stone. Why wouldn't they? Let the silly women deal with the dead body of their supposed Messiah. They certainly couldn't expect that stone would be rolled away... and certainly not in such a spectacular way. The ground shook under the footsteps of God's angel, and this radiant, awesome figure, upon rolling back the stone, sat on it as if to mock the schemes that set out to destroy Jesus.

The men that were stationed there to guard against the fabrication of some fanciful myth were now eye witnesses to God's supernatural act, early on that Sunday morning. No weapon they had, no strength they could muster, not even the force of

²*The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 28:1-4.

the government they served was any match for the power of God that overwhelmed them.

And as if it were not enough for the *sight* of all of this, God's messenger spoke.

⁵The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.

⁷Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."³

"Do not be afraid." That's a mouthful. These women must have been afraid when they set out on this task so early in the morning. Jesus was executed among the worst of the worst criminals. Who would be next? Would they be next? Were these Roman guards stationed to gather up followers of Jesus so that they could be jailed, or worse? And now this... this spectacle that reduced the guards to a shaking heap on the ground. Of course they were afraid.

But now... what unbelievable news:

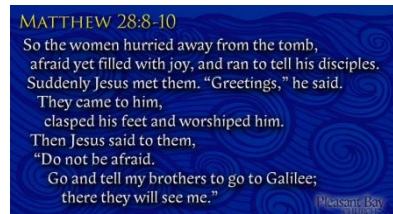
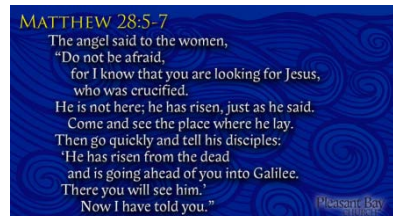
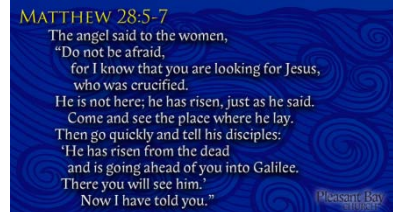
"Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay."⁴

Yes, Jesus was crucified... executed like a criminal. But don't you remember? He said He would be killed, but on the third day He would be raised to life.

They heard it... but didn't believe it. Their hopes were crushed when everything went so wrong. But now God's angel could not be denied... and if they would not take the angel at his word, they could *see* for themselves that Jesus was nowhere to be found. "He has risen, just as He said?"

⁸So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁵

There's a great little phrase there in this description of how the women obeyed the instructions of God's messenger: "afraid yet filled with joy."



³The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 28:5-7.

⁴The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 28:5-6.

⁵The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 28:8.

We often use the phrase “walk of faith” to describe our Christian lives. But sometimes, maybe a lot of the time, it is not so much a “walk of faith” as it is a “run of faith.” Whether it is an urgency derived from our circumstances, or an urgency that comes from God’s own leading, we can often find ourselves in a “run of faith.” Anybody in the midst of a “run of faith” today? I find that times like these, a “run of faith,” are times when I too am “afraid yet filled with joy.”

When we can deliberately “walk in faith” I suppose that we can step with sober confidence. But a “run of faith” seems to be accompanied by exhilarating extremes, both joy and fear. If you are on a “run of faith” accompanied by a bit of fear “yet filled with joy” you are not alone.

The women had the words of God’s angel to propel them, as well as what they saw with their own eyes in that empty tomb. But what came next fulfilled all their hopes.

⁹Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him.

¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”⁶

It is true! Jesus is alive and they could see Him, touch Him, and hear Him!



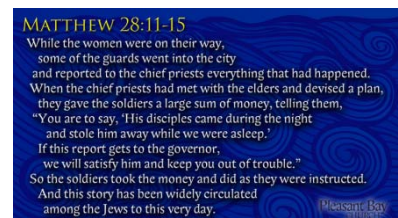
Their fear must have been dispelled when they heard it from the mouth of Jesus: “Do not be afraid.”

But what of the others who were afraid at that tomb?

¹¹While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. ¹²When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money,

¹³telling them, “You are to say, ‘His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ ¹⁴If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.”

¹⁵So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.⁷



Is it any different today? There are all sorts of ways to explain all this away. Whether by an elaborate scheme or just simple unbelief, this story can mean everything to folk like us... or just be treated as some sort of fairy tale. I believe that today’s celebrations commemorate with the “hinge of history,” the single most important event of all time... and the most important event for me, as I place my trust in Jesus,

⁶The Holy Bible: Today’s New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 28:8-10.

⁷The Holy Bible: Today’s New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 28:11-15.

my Risen Savior. But for others, we know that Easter is merely about colored eggs and marshmallow peeps, a celebration of spring with family and friends.

In our culture, the vast majority of folk are participating in some sort of Easter celebration today... even if it is thrust upon them by tradition, earnest friends and family, or just the fact that the places that might otherwise occupy them are closed for the holiday. But while most everyone is celebrating, not everyone believes... and it is easy enough not to believe today, as it was that very day 2,000 years ago.

Word got to the closest followers of Jesus, the disciples that He handpicked to found His church.

¹⁶Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ⁸

MATTHEW 28:16-20
Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee,
to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go.
When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.
Then Jesus came to them and said,
"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
Therefore go and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son
and of the Holy Spirit,
and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.
And surely I am with you always,
to the very end of the age."

It may be startling to see that still **some doubted**. Even those closest to Him, standing there in His very presence, still could not entirely believe. We could find that startling; or we could find it encouraging.

When we read more of the story, we find that the doubt did not last for these eleven. All of these disciples exhibited unwavering faith as they went on to spread this Gospel of Jesus Christ and build the Church. Most were martyred for their faith. If there was doubt, they would have escaped rather than suffer death.

So when we have doubt, take courage. Jesus is not startled by our doubt and unbelief. It is ours to believe as best we can; leave it to God to deal with our doubt. Leave it to God to grow the small beginnings of our faith. Give Him the faith you have, especially if it is small and weak, and allow God to cause your faith to grow.

Finally, we come to these last words in Matthew's Gospel... and these last words are red-lettered words, words of Jesus.

¹⁸Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."⁹

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And surely I am with you always,
to the very end of the age."

God's plan was more clearly revealed. This was not going to be merely the triumph of a king for a moment in Jerusalem; this would be the start of a force that would multiply through these followers, around the world and throughout all time.

⁸The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 28:16-17.

⁹The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 28:18-20.

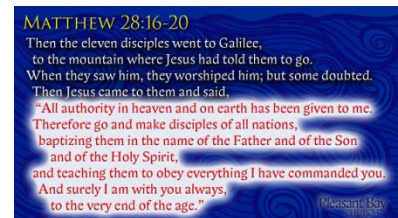
Let's pause for a moment and ask ourselves that all important question: so what?

How can we take this report from this page in Matthew and apply it squarely to our lives?



We've been working through these red-lettered words of Jesus for several months now. We might start a discussion about which of these red letters are the most important. If we had to pick just one verse, one saying of Jesus, one phrase... which red letters would we choose?

Would we find the most significant red letters in this passage? It would make sense, wouldn't it, that the final words recorded in Matthew's Gospel would be among the most important?



"All authority" – These are certainly important words. If we are going to devote ourselves to Jesus, we want to know that we've picked the right one. Who would choose to serve anyone or anything without the promise of power and authority? The Resurrection of Jesus, that which we celebrate today, is the most significant mark that Jesus is worthy of our trust and devotion.

"Go and make disciples of all nations" – important words too. This is our charge, to do our part to make Christ known, baptizing and teaching as others come to faith.

But I think if pressed to pick the most significant red letters today, I will choose these at the very end of Matthew's Gospel.

I am with you always.

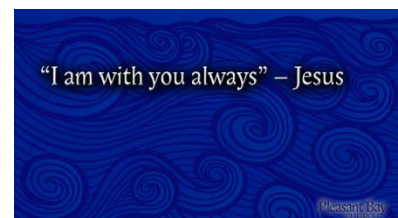
These are the words of the resurrected Jesus to His disciples on that mountain in Galilee... and they are His words to us today on the Easter morning:
I am with you always.



What more could we possibly want to hear? Jesus is with us, always... surely, to the very end of the age.

These words are certainly among the best we could possibly embrace on this Easter morning.

"I am with you always" – Jesus



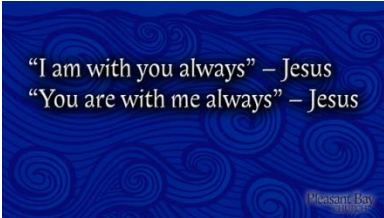
This is the message of Easter. Jesus is alive. He has conquered death and now lives forever. We said it together again this morning as we declared specifics of our faith, reciting the Apostles' Creed: On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

Not captive by death, no longer in the grave, not merely preserved in our memories or lore as one who lived long ago... but alive, victorious over death, resurrected to live forever... with us always.

Not only is He with us, He has made the way so that we can be with Him. By saying "I am with you always" Jesus is also saying:

"You are with me always."

This is the remarkable story of Easter... not just that Jesus lives forever, but that He made the way for us. Easter is an invitation. Jesus calls us to be with Him always.



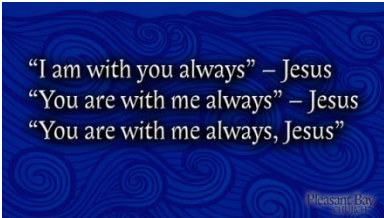
"I am with you always" – Jesus
"You are with me always" – Jesus

Sin separated us from our Holy God, but Jesus, the sinless Son of God, suffered the penalty of our sin on the cruel Cross of Calvary. Not only was the price paid on *Good Friday*, but on *Easter Sunday* Jesus declares His authority over the penalty for sin... Jesus conquered death. Not just *His* death by His resurrection, but He conquered death for us all, always.

Jesus declares, by His power over the grave, "you are with me always."

Which, in turn, allows us to respond: "You are with me always, Jesus."

We believe that the real presence of Jesus is among us by His Spirit. He lives to lead us, and intercede for us eternally. Jesus lives, and is with us... with us always.

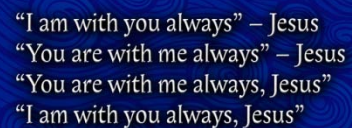


"I am with you always" – Jesus
"You are with me always" – Jesus
"You are with me always, Jesus"

No matter what our circumstances may say, and no matter how we might feel, we are not alone. Our God cares for us; we can know that Jesus is always with us. We can say, "You are with me always, Jesus!"

And these profound realizations call us to respond: "I am with you always, Jesus."

If there is one thing we ought to **hear** from God today, it is this Easter message that Jesus is with us always.



"I am with you always" – Jesus
"You are with me always" – Jesus
"You are with me always, Jesus"
"I am with you always, Jesus"

Likewise, if we were to **say** one thing in response, it is the same words. Can we say it today? Thank God for His mercy and grace that we can dare say “I am with you always, Jesus.”

Jesus chose us; will we choose Him on this Easter Sunday?

In the face of our fear and confusion, grappling with our own doubts, can we believe as best we can today and say “I am with you always, Jesus”?

These are the words on this Easter Sunday.

Hear them from Jesus... and say them to Jesus.
I am with you always.
Would you say them with me out loud?
I am with you always.



We have the opportunity this morning to celebrate the presence of Jesus in a special way.

Throughout the ages, the Church has followed the instructions of Jesus by coming to His table. Our Church, here at Pleasant Bay, is like a lot of churches, celebrating communion on the first Sunday of the month. A first Sunday like today.



Here's the story as it is found in Matthew 26.

²⁶While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.”

²⁷Then he took the cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. ²⁸This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”¹⁰

With these tangible symbols, this bread and this cup, we celebrate the presence of Jesus.

We remember His **work**, with the bread representing His broken body and the cup representing his spilled blood, this work that paid the penalty for our sin.

We remember His **presence** now, which is as real as this is in our hands, and as real as it is when we make it part of ourselves, Jesus is present among us and in us.

¹⁰The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 26:26-29.

We remember His ***promise*** of eternity with Him. We remember that sin has been paid for, death has been vanquished, and we will be with Jesus always.

Before we distribute communion this morning (today we'll bring it to you and we'll all take part together) I want to lead you in prayer.

Our Father, on this Easter morning, this Resurrection Sunday, we are grateful for this promise, that Jesus is with us always... surely, to the end of the age.

And we are grateful to respond saying "I am with you always, Jesus."

I wonder if there is anyone here today that may be saying that in a new, maybe more meaningful way today. Are you here today hearing this promise from Jesus in a new way, and are you wanting to respond with resolve. Could you be feeling the Spirit's call to believe? To place your trust in Jesus and walk with Him?

If that is you, and you would like someone to know and pray with you, even now, while we are all in this moment of prayer, catch my attention and I will be glad to pray with you especially today. Jesus chose us, saying "I am with you always;" are you here today and want to choose Jesus?