

# **Easter 2022**

## **“The Hill that Must Be Defended”**

**Text: Matthew 28:1-15**

*He is arisen! Glorious word! Now reconciled is God, my Lord;  
The gates of heaven are open.  
My Jesus did triumphant die, and Satan's arrows broken lie,  
Destroyed  
- hell's direst weapon.  
Oh, hear what cheer!  
Christ victorious riseth glorious,  
Life He giveth--  
He was dead, but see, He liveth. Amen (TLH #189)*

Dear Christians, this is the day, this is the morning where our Lord, finding us still lying prostrate at the foot of the cross and still mourning over our sins and the damage we have inflicted, there gently takes us by the hand, lifts us up, and says, *“Get up, dry your eyes. I am alive and my suffering is at an end. Your sins are forgiven.”* Dear Christians *this* is the day that the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it! Amen.

The text that will guide our thoughts and hearts on this happy morning is found recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, the 28<sup>th</sup> Chapter, beginning thee with the First Verse:

**<sup>ESV</sup> Matthew 28:1-15** *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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. <sup>4</sup> And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. <sup>5</sup> But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. <sup>6</sup> He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. <sup>7</sup> 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.” <sup>8</sup> So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. <sup>9</sup> And behold, Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. <sup>10</sup> Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.” <sup>11</sup> ¶ While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. <sup>12</sup> And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers <sup>13</sup> and said, “Tell people, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ <sup>14</sup> And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” <sup>15</sup> So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.*

These are the Words of our God. We believe, teach, and confess that the author of these words was not a human being but God himself, who communicated to us through the Apostles and Prophets of old. In humble and joyful thanksgiving we thank our God for these words of unparalleled comfort and peace, and asking him to refresh us spiritually through his Word this morning, so we pray, **“Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth.”** Amen.

Dear Fellow Heirs of the Gift of Forgiveness:

We seem somehow to have passed beyond the time of unconditional surrender. Wars today never really seem to end, at least not in the well-defined way they used to end. We don't see a Robert E. Lee surrendering to Ulysses S. Grant in the Appomattox Courthouse, or a Japanese delegation signing their unconditional surrender on the USS Missouri. Today we see Korea, the Middle East, Afghanistan – conflicts with seemingly no definable beginning and no discernible end. The struggle just goes on and on.

Frustrating as such things are, we can use it as a model of the sort of war that Satan wages. We can use it to teach ourselves just what to expect from the forces of the Evil One. Until the final Day of Judgment, the devil will never rest, never capitulate, never quit the struggle. Easter proves as much. A crushing defeat

was delivered to Satan and his allies when Christ gave his life on Good Friday and was raised from the dead on Easter Sunday. The defeat was so complete, so absolute, so terrible and devastating that it is inconceivable that the forces of evil could or would offer any further resistance; unthinkable that they would even *consider* trying to carry on the struggle.

They were, after all, fully aware of the meaning of the empty tomb. The fact that the tomb was empty on the third day stood as permanent, irrefutable proof that Satan's power was broken – for all time and eternity. The debt owed for the sum total of all mankind's sin had been paid in full. God, in view of what Christ had done, declared the world's sin debt forgiven. Satan could never again use sin to accuse, let alone condemn, even one human being. All sin had been erased from God's ledger. That's what Jesus did on the cross. That's what **"It is finished!"** meant and means. Man could only therefore be condemned for rejecting that payment. Only unbelief could now damn.

And who would ever do such a thing? Who would ever refuse to personally benefit from the full and complete forgiveness won by Jesus Christ? Who would deny such an incredibly priceless gift, and such irrefutable evidence that that gift had been given?

Here again we learn something of our great Adversary. The devil makes today's most blood-thirsty, never-say-die mercenaries look like 60's Flower Children in comparison. He knows nothing of surrender, ever. Howling in rage at his crippling defeat on Good Friday, proclaimed to the world on Easter Sunday, he is determined to fight on. He knows nothing else. He will continue to rage until God's Day of Judgment.

That is why, despite the magnitude of Satan's defeat, it is nonetheless absolutely necessary that we continue to defend this truth – that we defend the truth of exactly what happened on that hill outside of Jerusalem, and then also on the following Easter morning. While the shackles of our slavery to sin and Satan have been broken, our great Enemy still prowls about like a roaring lion with but one purpose in mind – to destroy the soul of every single human being in hell. If he hopes to have any success in this most wicked of all pursuits, he has but one option left to him: *he must sow the seeds of doubt that Jesus actually did what he said he did*. In other words, since Christ destroyed not only the power of sin but also our fear of death, the only thing left to Satan is the great lie. He has to convince the world that it never happened.

From our text for this morning we learn that the devil wasted no time in launching his counteroffensive to the news of Christ's resurrection. He knew that all he really had to do was to sow the seeds of doubt in the minds of silly human beings – souls that seem all too eager to accept even the most preposterous lie. Need evidence? Look around you today at what so many actually believe, as well as the reality they deny. So it was that Satan began with a lie that, at the time, must have seemed like pure desperation – an untruth so ridiculous and contrary to the obvious facts that no one would ever believe it. The lie? *Jesus didn't really rise from the dead*.

Pure desperation. Who would ever believe such a thing? Hundreds upon hundreds of men and women saw Jesus after his resurrection. Imagine how easy it would have been to disprove such a lie in any court of law. Witness after witness could be called – hundreds of them – all giving the same testimony: *"I saw Jesus, with my own eyes, after he rose from the dead. Yes, I'm sure it was Jesus. Yes, he was very much alive."* Remember, these witnesses had nothing to hide and nothing to gain by lying. They were basing their own eternal souls, and the souls of their loved ones, on the truth of their testimony. What possible motive could they have to base their faith on a lie? Would you? Would anyone? Why would they later refuse to recant their testimony, even in the face of terrible persecution and death? Such conviction could never exist on the basis of something they knew to be false. The only conclusion we can draw is that all of those eye-witnesses weren't lying. Jesus Christ physically, bodily, rose from the dead.

Yet here we also learn something about unbelief, about just how deeply it can sink its claws into the human soul. Think for a moment about the situation from the perspective of the Jewish leaders who bribed the guards. Think of the illogical, irrational determination it would take for them to perpetuate this lie. *They knew the truth*, having heard it firsthand from their own select and trusted guards. They knew for a fact that the body of the innocent man they had falsely condemned had not been stolen. Even faced with that

truth, they were so intent on preserving their own temporal, earthly power and reputation that they were willing to sacrifice the truth itself. They were willing to do anything, *anything at all*, except repent and believe that Jesus Christ was exactly who and what he claimed to be. Nothing in the world is as stubborn as unbelief, and unbelief's greatest ally is always the lie.

We would fully expect *the godless* of every age to believe the lie that Jesus didn't really rise from the dead. That lie just makes sense to their rational, skeptical minds. The godless are actually incapable of believing spiritual truths. That's exactly why we are supposed to reach out to them with God's Word. Only those who have been brought to faith by the Holy Spirit can believe such truths. Scripture tells us in fact that ***"the person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit."***<sup>NIV(1 Corinthians 2:14)</sup>

But that's the godless, from whom we expect no better until the Holy Spirit shatters their unbelief by the power of his Word. But what about Christians – those who *have* been brought to faith and therefore *are* now capable of comprehending and believing spiritual truth? How can it be that so many *Christians* have bought into this lie? How could those who profess to believe in Jesus Christ now claim that Jesus rose only "spiritually," that his "resurrection" was not physical but rather he "rose" in the *hearts and minds* of those who resolved never to forget him? Although Satan is very comfortable with this explanation, Scripture is not. ***1 Corinthians 15:14-19: "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. <sup>15</sup> We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. <sup>16</sup> For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. <sup>17</sup> And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. <sup>18</sup> Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished."*** Scripture is very clear here. If Christ didn't actually rise from the dead – if he only rose "in our minds" – then all is lost. In fact that passage goes on to say, ***"If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied."***

Unfortunately, that original lie is actually still gaining ground. The Jews told the guards to spread the story that ***'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.'*** Today it could, in fact, be said that many of the "disciples of Jesus" are doing just that – stealing the true, resurrected Jesus Christ from their people. To deny the bodily resurrection of Jesus is to make Jesus a failure, and to transform Christianity into just another social, self-help cult.

Don't buy into the lie. Not for a second. This is the hill we absolutely need to defend, and on which, if necessary, to die. Of course Satan is going to try to convince you that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was not what it seemed. He has no other options. The resurrection of Jesus Christ stands as the permanent, irrefutable evidence that Jesus paid our sin-debt. It was, in fact, the great test established by God the Father himself. If Christ did not rise, bodily and truly and on the third day, that would have been God's pronouncement that Jesus' mission was a failure and that all is lost. If, however, Christ *was* raised on the third day – if the tomb was empty – that serves as God's declaration that he has in fact accepted Christ's perfect life and innocent death as the full and complete payment for all of mankind's sin.

Dear Christians, the tomb is empty. Christ has risen. Your sins are forgiven. Peace has been established between you and your God. Having removed your sin, you – believing simply that Jesus did what he said he did – you now stand holy, perfect, sinless in his sight. Because the tomb is empty, you won. Eternally.

Good Friday taught us the horrible consequences of our sin and the love of the Savior that bore that punishment. The empty tomb confirms Jesus' victory. On this sure promise, this *truth*, we stake our eternal futures. Though those who believe Satan's lie live in abject fear of God's vengeance on the Day of Judgment, let the victory of Good Friday, as verified by the empty tomb, grant you the peace and comfort that our God certainly intends on this great day. The time of mourning and despair is at an end. Rejoice. Celebrate. Let your joy and your confidence be evident to all. Yours sins are forgiven and your Savior lives. By this truth we live, and in this faith we die - but only to rise again. As *he* rose. Amen.