

Easter Sunrise Service 2026 **The People of Resurrection Morning**

We are all quite familiar with the story of Resurrection morning as recorded in all the gospels. This year, I would like for us to think about how those characters felt. We are two thousand years after the fact, they were in the moment. We know how the story unfolds, they were in various states of confusion. I do not want to ridicule their various manifestations of unbelief, but rather to think about how their confusion is often the same as ours. But yet, knowing the rest of the story, seeing the tremendous success they had after putting it all together, can remind us that, even when we get sucked into one or more of the depressed levels of unbelief, we are not stuck there. The people we read about in that oft repeated recounting of resurrection morning overcame and their faith succeeded spectacularly. So, let's get into it.

The first group are those who, on that fateful Sunday morning, were on their way to perform a sad duty, to prepare the body of Jesus in the tomb, since there had not been time to do so on the previous Friday before sundown and the start of the Sabbath. Certainly, they could have gone earlier, since the Sabbath ended on what we call sundown on Saturday, but trying to do the burial preparation in a tomb by candle or torch light would have been terrible plus, security was pretty much lacking.

Like Mark 16:1 – 3, “Now when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, that they might come and anoint Him. Very early in the morning, on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen. And they said among themselves, “Who will roll away the stone from the door of the tomb for us?”

Several times in His career, Jesus had announced His own resurrection (Matthew 16:21, 17:22 – 23, 20:17 – 19 and parallels). But almost no one had picked up on it. These disciples should have, because Jesus' enemies picked up on it, which is why they asked for a armed guards for the tomb. Peter, in Acts 2, quoted Psalm 16:8 – 11 to the crowd and expected them to remember that David had been writing about the resurrection of the Messiah, which was mildly ironic, since Peter had not picked up that concept on that resurrection Sunday either.

These women set out to accomplish their sad duty, to prepare His body for burial. They were doing the right thing even though they were in deep grief and more than a little confused. For some time, they had been traveling with the entourage of Jesus. They had heard the messages. They had seen the miracles. Now, with the crucifixion, it seemed all was lost. Their greatest friend was dead. Their hopes were dashed. But they still went to do their duty.

In my 50 years in the church, I have known a discouraging number of people like that. They got into the church scene, but at some point, it did not turn out the way they expected. Some were disappointed in how God answered their prayers, or, perhaps they thought that God had failed to respond to those prayers. Or other people in the church were less than helpful, but rather more judgmental. The relationships they encountered were superficial instead of spiritual. Whatever their experience, Christianity had not measured up to their expectations. They knew that there was something good there, but not as they had hoped. So, they settled back into doing their duty. They showed up. They did what was expected of them, but peace and hope and the power of God just had not materialized. The people of resurrection Sunday teach us that an explosion of faith is out there, once we figure out how the resurrection fits into all of this. As we go through these scenarios of the confusion of that day, remember that the fact of the resurrection was the turning point. Our religion is the only one that is built on plain, objective facts. All others believe in belief without a factual foundation. To escape the sad duty point of view, we

need to figure out how our expectations ran afoul of the factual promises of God, how, perhaps our expectations did not quite match up to what God actually said.

In a few minutes, these women had their disappointments turned into unbelievable claims. I say unbelievable because, as we read the accounts, they did not leap from sad duty to walking by an indestructible and joyous faith, but rather, in their confusion, hope was rekindled, although only a small flame in a high wind. Something was beyond their expectations or their understanding. They did not see how all of it fit together, but they let themselves hope again.

Have you ever been there? Overwhelmed by possibilities that do not yet make sense? Here are a few of those reactions from the Scriptures:

[When the women reached the tomb, found that the stone had already been rolled away, with an angel sitting on it,] (Matthew 28:5 – 8) “But the angel answered and said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come and see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and indeed He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him. Behold, I have told you.’ So they went out quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to bring His disciples word.”

Mark has much the same information, but he adds at the end of the story, in 16:8, “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for they trembled and were amazed. And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

When we look back on this story from our vantage point 2000 years later, we can look at these women and wonder how they could have been so overwhelmed. They now had proof that Jesus was truly the Messiah. The gospels say, “They had fear and great joy.” “They were troubled and amazed. And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

But, as with the previous scene as the women were approaching the tomb to do their sad duty, and here where they had great joy, but were terrified. Remember, these same people, later in the book of Acts, displayed tremendous confidence. But that truly remarkable faith did not blossom instantaneously. At least months if not years went by for that transformation to happen.

Many church people today are in the same boat. Many have started following something that looked promising, but it went in a very discouraging direction. But, while still in that discouragement, they saw something unbelievably fantastic. Today, many people are taught bits and pieces of the gospel, but it fails them when they need it most. Then suddenly, they see the promises of God in the Scriptures in a much clearer way. They rejoice, but are still a bit hesitant. They are afraid of being disappointed again. Remember those who experienced resurrection Sunday. That transformation into the faith of Jesus took a while. From their example, we can rejoice, and have the courage to risk it all again. Matthew 28:17, describing when the disciples followed the directions of the angel to go to Galilee and met Jesus there, “When they saw Him, they worshipped Him, but some doubted.” Remember that for a lot of people who had followed Jesus on earth and had seen His miracles and heard His teaching firsthand, yet for some it took decades for them to finally get it straightened out in their minds. In Acts 15, about 20 years after resurrection Sunday, they were still arguing over what to do with Gentiles. Instead, draw courage from their slow development. While we can see that great joy is available, our hesitance to make that big jump to a whole new way of thinking and living is entirely understandable. Some really great people of faith who went before us had those same fears. They overcame. So can we.

But why would God use such a slow-acting formula? If I were the one doing the plan for salvation, I would have chosen something that acted more explosively. In the history of the

church, do we not see that human desire for quick results played out again and again? We want one big sermon to flip the allegiances of a lifetime or of centuries of culture. God built an evidence-based system on purpose. As Paul expressed it in 1 Corinthians 15:3 – 8, “I delivered to you first of all that which I also received; that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and He was buried and that He rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep.” To Paul that which was of greatest importance about the gospel was that it was accompanied by overwhelming physical evidence. Why use something so slow to catch hold? Because evidence is the only thing that lasts. Emotionalism, our own preconceptions and expectations, tradition, culture all change over time and fall apart. Evidence will survive.

The next group on my list among the people of resurrection Sunday are those who heard what the women from the tomb said, but just dismissed it as outrageous.

Mark 16:11, “And when they heard that He was alive and had been seen by her [Mary Magdalene], they did not believe.” Luke 24:11, “And their words [the women who had talked with the angel at the tomb] seemed to them like idle tales and they did not believe them.”

The women reported what they saw and heard, but their best friends, those with whom they had shared the experience that was Jesus while He was on earth, just did not believe such an outrageous claim.

Have you ever had a church friend who suddenly went a little overboard with church stuff? From the point of view of the larger group, that person became uncomfortably enthusiastic about the gospel. Don't we give them a wide berth? When the evidence breaks through our expectations and reveals a whole new level of hope, we can get a little excited. Those who have not come to appreciate evidence as the only way we can sort out the meaning of life are frightened by the possibilities. All my assumptions about what is important are being threatened. So, most people stick with what they have always believed and let the evidence float by.

Of course, different people react differently. We have looked at those who were stuck at the “sad duty” stage, those who are overwhelmed at whole new way of thinking, those who think that anything so radical could possibly be correct. But, at least two of them decided to investigate the outrageous. Luke 24:12, “But Peter arose and ran to the tomb; and stooping down, he saw the linen cloths by themselves and he departed, marveling to himself at what had happened.” And, John 20:3 – 8, “Peter therefore went out, and the other disciple [John], and were going to the tomb. So they both ran together, and the other disciple outran Peter and came to the tomb first. And he, stooping down and looking in, saw the linen cloths lying there; yet he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb; and he saw the linen cloths lying there, and the handkerchief that had been around His head, not lying with the linen cloths, but folded together in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who came to the tomb first, went in also; and he saw and believed.”

Peter marveled. John believed. Out of all those who were closest to Jesus on that resurrection morning, John believed. And, just as a reminder of the essential characteristics of Biblical faith, Paul wrote that the evidence of the resurrection was the most important of that faith. In the rest of the New Testament, other essential characteristics are (2) recognizing the need for a sacrifice, which implies understanding what a Biblical sacrifice is, (3) accepting the Word of God as true, (4) a realistic hope, not a wishful hope, of heaven, (5) trust in the promises of God, which implies knowing what those promises are, (6) taking on the divine nature, also called the obedience of faith, (7) evangelism, and (8) growth.

John was open-minded enough to let the reality of the scene defeat his own expectations and disappointments. That's how it should be, but few can win that battle between what we have always accepted as the way things are, versus that which turns everything we thought we knew upside down.

We might think that God would have turned to a faster-acting formula after that first Sunday, but if you read through the book of Acts and outline all of the sermons there, you will find that the early Christians had only two sermon outlines: one for Jews and one for Gentiles.

For the Gentile audiences, they always started with the evidence of God in nature, because that's what they knew (Acts 14:17, 17:24 – 29). To prove their logical argument, they used the historical evidence of the resurrection (Acts 10:40, 17:31, 25:19, 26:8, 26:23).

For the Jewish audiences, they always started with the evidence of how Jesus met all the predictions of the prophets concerning the Messiah, a subject about which Jews were expected to be knowledgeable, whereas Gentiles were not (Acts 2:16 – 21, 2:25 – 28, 2:34 – 35, 3:18, 3:22, 3:25, 4:11, 8:32, 13:29 – 41, 17:2, 18:28). Then the big finish was always the historical fact of the resurrection (Acts 2:24, 2:30 – 32, 3:15, 4:10:13:30 – 37, 17:3).

Of course, it would be silly to argue the predictions of the prophets with Gentiles, since they did not know about that. Paul summarized the arguments about the evidence of God in nature in Romans 1:19 – 20, “What may be known about God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and divine nature.”

We have the best of both worlds. We can easily learn the predictions about the Messiah that were written by the Old Testament prophets, and we can observe the nature of God from His creation. Plus, we still have the evidence of the resurrection.

Of course, many over the centuries have tried to disprove the resurrection and have offered various theories about how such a deception could have been perpetuated. And, of course, he who controls the school textbooks and the media will convince the unthinking general public. But in every case, the explaining away of the resurrection is based on illogical assumptions. Many books have been written on this subject, so I will just give a brief summary.

Some claim that the disciples stole the body, which, by the way, is exactly the fake news story put forward by the Sanhedrin, as recorded in Matthew 28:12 – 13. This assumes that the civilian disciples could outwit armed professional soldiers, soldiers who would lose their lives for losing the body, and could outrun those highly motivated soldiers while carrying a dead body.

Others claim that Jesus was not really dead, but just unconscious. That He came to in the tomb and escaped. The problem is that there are no handles on the inside of the tomb, and that the tomb doors typically weighed more than a ton and a half and had to be rolled uphill to make an opening. Based on the angle typically used for the door ramp, it would take at least 775 lbs of force to move the door at all, all while not disturbing the armed guards. Secondly, Roman troops knew dead. They were professionals at death.

Others claim that the reports of resurrection were just lies perpetuated by the disciples, or perhaps a mass hallucination. First, two governments, the Roman government and the Jewish government were desperate to recover that body so they could quell what they thought would soon turn into an armed rebellion. Both sets of investigators failed. And all the witnesses had the same story. Chuck Colson, one of the Watergate plumbers who went to prison for stealing the election campaign plans of the Democratic party for then-President Nixon, had time on his hands in prison, so he read the Bible. What convinced him that the resurrection was true was this conclusion. He said, “I was in a group that was perhaps the most powerful in the world, and we

couldn't keep our story straight for ten days." Those people did it for a lifetime despite terrible persecution.

Resurrection Sunday truly is something to celebrate. In it, Jesus proved who He said He was, God come to earth, the Messiah, the one who paid off the justice system so that we could be judged by our faith rather than by some arbitrary batting average of good behavior. God is not asking us to "just believe." God has approached us with concrete evidence so that we can base our thinking on logic and physical proof, not on theories or hype or feelings.