

“Four Words for Easter Morning”

Matthew 28:1-10 ¹

It's early morning, that quiet time just at dawn, on Sunday, April 3, in the year A.D. 33. Soldiers sit around a fire, trying to fight off sleep, boredom, and the damp, dark cold of dawn. Guard duty is often dull at best, but to spend the night among the tombs is no fun at all. The firelight glints on swords and helmets, and illuminates the Seal of the Roman Empire—which it is death to break—on an enormous stone. The guard has been set against grave robbers, for the one entombed here was the victim of a political murder, and more violence is feared.

As darkness becomes twilight, we see two women walking toward the guards. They walk briskly because of the cold, yet there is an air of sadness about them. The dead man was dear to them, and they, in that grief that has brought us all to the tombs in heartbreak and sorrow, are coming to mourn at the grave.

Suddenly, the earth begins to tremble, and then it begins to heave with the awesome and terrible movements of a violent earthquake. The women—and the guards with them—are thrown to the ground. Seemingly out of nowhere, a person—perhaps a “being” would be a better description—appears at the sealed tomb! Words cannot describe his appearance. He looks as though his very body (if such it is) is made of lightning.

The being is an angel—a messenger of God. The angel goes to the tomb and effortlessly rolls away the stone that seals its door—a stone that six men could not have moved. Now he has sat down on it. The guards are so afraid of him that they shake and faint, becoming like dead men.

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

So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. “[Rejoice!] he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me” (Matthew 28:5-10).

The truth of the matter is that these women did not expect a resurrection. But while the Jewish leaders had missed most of what Jesus had said to them, they heard it loud and clear when Jesus said that He would rise from death, so they posted the guard against grave robbers who might then perpetrate such a story.

The women and the disciples had heard the same words but they, too, had missed the message. As far as they were concerned, it was over. Jesus was dead. But now the angel said, “Don’t be afraid. I know what you were expecting to find here, and I know that the glory of heaven upon me is frightening to you. You are looking for the cold, dead body of your Lord. But He isn’t here. He has conquered death, just as He said He would. Come. Come and see!”

The women were given four “words” in the misty morning of that first Easter, and these words ring down the corridors of the centuries until they reach our own ears today. The first word for Resurrection morning is, “**Don’t be afraid.**”

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on April 8, 2012.

Don't be afraid of what? Well, first of all, the angel tells us not to be afraid of the Glory of God. From Genesis to Revelation, when heavenly beings appear to humans, the first thing they always say is, "Don't be afraid!" When you and I sense even the smallest part of that burning brightness that is the Glory of God, our first response is terror.

As Isaiah said when he encountered God's Glory in the temple, "*Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty*" (Isaiah 6:5). When Martin Luther became a priest and celebrated his first Mass in 1507, he was so afraid of the Presence of Christ in the bread and the cup that he trembled so violently that he nearly dropped them.

But the angel says to us, as he said to the women in the garden, "Don't be afraid of the God who sent me, because He loves you! God IS out to get you, but not in the way you think! God's love pursues you so that you may share His Joy! Don't be afraid because of the evil you have done and because of what evil has done to you. Don't be afraid of the memories that haunt you. Don't be afraid and anxious, borrowing imagined troubles from the days ahead. *The Lord your God is with you. He is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you. He will comfort you with his love. He will rejoice over you with singing!* (Zephaniah 3:17). You don't need to be afraid anymore."

"He isn't here!" the angel said. "His body had vanished long before I moved the stone. The bars of death are broken. Heaven's gates are open wide! He has risen, just as He said He would. Here, come and see where His body was lying." Easter's second word is to "**Come and see.**" We need to come and see in two ways. For some of us, what we need to investigate is the question of who this Jesus actually is.

There are many who try to dodge the question of who Jesus is by calling Him a "great moral teacher." After saying this, these folk congratulate themselves on being very "open minded," "intellectual," and "inclusive," and, after "tipping their hats" to Jesus in this way, they then feel free to ignore Him as they go about their lives. But the truth of the matter is that a truly intellectual approach to the question absolutely excludes the position such persons have chosen. Thinking of Jesus as a "great moral teacher" is not one of the options available. Why not?

The Jewish leaders killed Jesus for many reasons, but one reason was central. Jesus was killed because He claimed to be God. Even a cursory reading of the four Gospels confirms beyond a doubt that Jesus said He was God.

Now there are three—and only three—possibilities if a person claims to be God. The most likely option is that the person is mentally ill. Our psychiatric hospitals have many patients who think that they are God. When I served as a chaplain in Central State Hospital near Louisville, I talked with many of them.

The next most likely option is that a person who claims to be God knows this to be a lie, but uses this claim to gain power and influence over persons who can be persuaded that this is true. History is full of charismatic cultic leaders who destroyed entire communities through such evil influence.

The only other choice—the only other choice—is that a man who claims to be God is who he says he is. "Great moral teachers" have many things to teach us, but they don't claim to be God. The angel calls us to look at the evidence for ourselves and to decide whether the Jesus we meet in the Bible is crazy, whether He is a manipulative liar, or whether He is in fact God.

Once we have been persuaded that Jesus truly is God, the second dimension of this second word is to “Come and see” what Jesus can do in your life. Jesus calls you to “Come and see what I can do for you and in you. I know that the gift I offer is so wonderful that it seems too good to be true, and yet it is true. *Come and see.*”

More than a hundred years ago, a group of fishermen were relaxing after work in a Scottish seaside inn. As a server was walking by with a pot of tea, one of the men made a sweeping gesture to describe the size of the fish he claimed to have caught. His hand hit the teapot and sent it crashing against the whitewashed wall, where its contents left a huge, ugly stain.

As the innkeeper looked at the mess, he said, “That stain will never come out. The whole wall will have to be repainted.” “Maybe not,” someone said. All eyes turned to the stranger who had just spoken. “What do you mean?” asked the innkeeper. “Let me work with the stain,” said the stranger. “If you like my work, you won’t need to repaint the wall.”

The stranger picked up a box and walked over to the wall. He took pencils, brushes, and some jars of oil and pigment out of the box, and then began to sketch lines around the stain, filling it in here and there with color and shading. Soon a picture began to emerge, as the random splashes of tea were transformed into the image of a stag with magnificent antlers. After finishing his transformation, the stranger signed his name on the wall, paid for his meal, and walked out.

When the innkeeper walked over to read the signature, he was stunned. “Do you know who that man was?” he said in amazement. “That was Sir Edwin Landseer, the famous wildlife artist!” In much the same way, your Heavenly Father wants to take the stains and disappointments of your life and turn them into something beautiful.² To you, too, Jesus says, “Come and see what I can do with your life.”

Lee Strobel is a well-known Christian author and apologist, but for many years he was an atheist, and a profane one at that. Lee tells his story this way, “What difference has God made in my life? Well, my daughter Allison was five years old when I became a follower of Jesus, and all she had known in those five years was a dad who was profane and angry. I remember I came home one night and kicked a hole in the living room wall just out of anger with life. I am ashamed to think of the times Allison hid in her room to get away from me.

“Five months after I gave my life to Jesus Christ, Allison went to her Mother and said, ‘Mommy, I want God to do for me what he’s done for Daddy.’ At age 5! What was she saying? Allison had never studied the archeological evidence [regarding the truth of the Bible]. All she knew was her dad used to be really hard to live with. [And if what happened to her daddy] is what God does to people, then sign her up. At age 5 she gave her life to Jesus. God changed my family. He changed my world. He changed my eternity.” God can do that for you. Don’t be afraid. Come and see.

Easter’s third word follows hard on the heels of the second. It is the word to “**Go and tell.**” What kinds of things do we tell to others? Well, we tell about things that we find interesting, or noteworthy, or funny. If something is really important to us, we can hardly keep from telling about it. We tell about big adventures and successes. We tell about important ball games. We tell about the fish that got away. We tell about our children and we tell about our grandchildren. The persons to whom we tell these things are persons with whom we have relationships, and the more important the relationship, the more we tell.

² Citation: *Mistreated. Leadership*, Vol. 12, no. 3.

If I were to ask you what the most important word in the world is, many of you would probably say that this word is “love.” But I think the most important word may really be something else. I think the very most important word may be “relationship.” Relationship is the track over which love travels. Relationships are what life is all about.

This third word, to “Go and tell,” is not only a word from the angel in the garden; it is also the final instruction that Jesus gave His disciples—and that includes you and me. This third word presupposes that we ourselves enjoy a relationship of trust and love with this risen Jesus, this Jesus who is alive today! This word also instructs us to be about the business of building relationships with the persons in the circles of our daily lives, and then to allow God’s wonderful, liberating, empowering love to flow through us to them. People need many things, but what they need most of all is to know that the tomb is empty! Jesus is alive! We have been set free! Go and tell!

The final word for Easter morning builds once again upon the previous word. The final word is “**Rejoice!**” Many versions of the Bible translate this word as “Greetings,” “Hello,” or “Good morning,” and these are not incorrect . . . they just say less than Jesus said. The word Jesus used as He greeted the women in the garden was χαίρετε, which literally means, “Rejoice!”

When my friend Allen Walworth was Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Huntsville, Alabama, he was preoccupied with his Easter sermon while on a walk with his children around the neighborhood.³ Perceiving his inattention, Allen’s children called out, “Daddy, can you do this?” as they skipped along the road. “Yeah, I can do that,” Allen responded absentmindedly. The response was inadequate. “No, Daddy, can you really? We’ve never seen you skip.” “Well, of course I can skip!” And Allen’s children threw down a challenge: “Then show us.”

“I hate to be beaten by the kids,” Allen said, “but I couldn’t go skipping. I’m an adult. I have a Ph.D. I’m the Pastor of the First Baptist Church, and we have members who live in this neighborhood. I can’t go skipping around down the street. Now my children were singing, ‘Na-na-na-na-na. You can’t do it.’ So I looked around, then I did it.”

And then Allen said, “I can’t remember why I ever stopped skipping as a child. It’s not hard on your knees. It’s easier than jogging, and you can get a lot of distance. Maybe it’s because adults just aren’t that happy any more, not that carefree. Unless they get hold of Easter. Unless Easter gets hold of them.”

The angel comes again today, but today the angel says, “How long has it been since your heart has been skipping? **Don’t be afraid! Come and see! Go and tell! Rejoice!**”

³ Allen Walworth, “Running through the Cemetery,” *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 151.