

“The Midnight Cry”

Matthew 25:1-13 ¹

Once upon a time there was a railway drawbridge above a river. Most of the time, the bridge was open to allow ships to pass freely, but at certain times of the day, trains of various sorts needed to cross the bridge. The switchman’s job was to make sure the bridge was down according to the railway schedule, and then up again after the train had passed.

On one fateful day, the switchman saw that it was nearly time for a passenger train to arrive, and he began to operate the controls to lock the bridge in place. As he saw the approaching lights of the train, the switchman double-checked the drawbridge, only to see that the locking mechanisms weren’t holding as they should. If the locking mechanism was not actually locked, the train would jump the tracks when it came to the mechanism, falling into the river below.

Fortunately, there was a manual control for the locking mechanism, and the switchman quickly moved outside his control room to activate it, a maneuver that required him to hold onto the lever until the train had passed. All seemed well, until the switchman heard a sound that made his blood run cold: “Daddy! Daddy! Where are you?” It was his five year-old son, running across the tracks toward him.

“Run, boy, RUN!!!” the father shouted, but the train’s thunder carried his words away.

The switchman saw in an instant that there was not enough time to rescue his son and get back to the lever. If he didn’t hold on to the lever, all of the passengers on the train would be thrown into the river below when the train hit the unlocked bridge. With a loud cry of agony, the switchman closed his eyes and held on desperately to the lever.

No one on the train saw what happened. No one on the train heard the sobs of the switchman as he fell to the ground. No one on the train knew the cost at which their lives had been purchased.²

Now while this story is unlike Good Friday in hugely important ways—God was not taken by surprise on Calvary, and Jesus was not the unwilling victim of an accident of fate—the story does perhaps give us a deeper understanding of why our heavenly Father’s heart turned away in agony as Jesus died (Matthew 27:46).

Calvary was no accident. As we saw on Friday night, Jesus is “*The Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world*” (Revelation 13:8); and not only this, but for those who are in Christ, the day will come when we hear our Risen Lord say to us, “*Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world*” (Matthew 25:34).

When you know these truths, and at the same time, touch the fringe of the agony that Love bore to set us free, it’s no wonder that the writer of Hebrews asked, “*How shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?*” (Hebrews 2:3).

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on April 5, 2015, Resurrection Sunday.

² The story, “To Sacrifice a Son: An Allegory,” was written by Dennis E. Hensley, and was first published in the *Michigan Baptist Bulletin* in 1967. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=6eP0iGYkgKs (there are links to many similar short films on the right side of the screen); www.snopes.com/glurge/drawbridge.asp; <http://hubpages.com/hub/Choices-That-Fathers-Make>.

My friend, Verlin Kruschwitz, said that Jesus made four things out of the rugged, bloody wood of Calvary's cross: (1) He made the balance beam of a scale on which to show the eternal worth of every person created in His image; (2) He made a coffin in which to bury sin and death forever; (3) He made a ladder that takes us to heaven, let down from the top; and (4) He made a throne on which He Himself will reign forever as King of kings and Lord of lords!

My friend, Jesus chose to die so that you might live, and He has loved you that much since the very foundation of the world; but the story gets better yet. The reason we know this about Jesus, the reason we've gathered here this morning, and the reason that you and I can live our lives in Hope, is that although Jesus died, **God raised Him from the dead!**

After completing thorough research into the matter, Dr. Luke wrote that "*During the forty days after his crucifixion [and resurrection], [Jesus] appeared to the apostles from time to time and proved to them in many ways that he was actually alive. On these occasions he talked to them about the Kingdom of God*" (Acts 1:3).

Now it's not my purpose this morning to rehearse the many compelling evidences of Jesus' resurrection. Let me simply remind you that eleven of the twelve disciples were eventually executed for their unwavering testimony that Jesus had returned from death. And, as Chuck Colson put it, "Men do not choose to die for something they know is a lie."

So what difference does it make that Jesus is alive today? Lee Strobel, former Legal Editor for the *Chicago Tribune*, skeptically examined the evidence for the resurrection, and finally had to conclude that:

1. Jesus' resurrection proves that Jesus is indeed who He said He was—God in human flesh.
2. Jesus' resurrection proves that God really does love you.
3. Jesus' resurrection means that Jesus is alive today, and that you can know Him personally.
4. Jesus' resurrection proves that everything Jesus said, did, and promised is True, and that you can confidently build your life upon these things.
5. Jesus' resurrection means that God really does have a purpose for your life.
6. Jesus' resurrection proves that Jesus has a just claim to your allegiance, your obedience, and your worship.
7. Jesus' resurrection means that there is an objective standard for morality and human behavior, a rock-solid foundation for daily decisions, and a standard by which we will all be judged.
8. Jesus' resurrection means that because you can be forgiven, you can also forgive.
9. Jesus' resurrection means that you have nothing to lose and everything to gain by putting your life in His hands.
10. Jesus' resurrection proves that this life is just the prelude, just the preparation for the Real Story that is to come.³

And yet, as wonderful as all this is, it gets better yet, through what I sometimes call "the MacArthur Effect." The old timers among us will remember that during World War II, General Douglas MacArthur famously told the Philippine people on March 11, 1942, "I shall return." And he did.⁴

³ Modified from Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), p. 267.

⁴ "The President of the United States ordered me to break through the Japanese lines and proceed from Corregidor to Australia for the purpose, as I understand it, of organizing the American offensive

Far more importantly, just moments after Jesus ascended into heaven, angels told His disciples, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11).

Jesus Himself had told His disciples this in many ways, but they had not understood the clues. The title of this sermon comes from one of those clues, which Jesus gave in what we call “The Parable of the Ten Virgins.” It’s found at the beginning of Matthew 25:

¹ “At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish and five were wise. ³ The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. ⁴ The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. ⁵ The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

⁶ “**At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’**

⁷ “Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’

⁹ “‘No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’

¹⁰ “But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

¹¹ “Later the others also came. ‘Lord, Lord,’ they said, ‘open the door for us!’

¹² “But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.’

¹³ “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

The picture Jesus gives is of ten young women who were apparently waiting at the bridegroom’s door because they wanted to be part of the wedding feast. When the bridegroom didn’t come when they expected him, they became drowsy and slept. Suddenly, there was a cry at midnight, “Look, the bridegroom is coming! Come out and welcome him!” Those women who had prepared well for the bridegroom’s arrival, who had “kept their lights shining,” were allowed in, but the others were shut out—indeed, they were locked out.

There are three points in this parable. Jesus’ first point is that His arrival, His Second Coming, will be sudden. Second, preparation for that “midnight cry” cannot be bought, and it cannot be borrowed. Entrance into the Kingdom can’t be secured through financial contributions, nor can we ride the coattails of our parents or grandparents into the Banquet of the King. Finally, while Calvary is witness to how deeply God desires that all persons be saved, there will come a time when the day for choosing has passed. As Peter put it,

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare (2 Peter 3:9-10).

As Jesus Himself said, “So if anyone tells you, ‘There he is, out in the wilderness,’ do not go out; or, ‘Here he is, in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it. For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. . . . so you also must be

against Japan, a primary objective of which is the relief of the Philippines. I came through and I shall return.” www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/macarthur/filmmore/reference/primary/macspeech02.html.

ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him

(Matthew 24:26-27, 44).

You may know the Gospel Song, “The Midnight Cry,” which is founded on this parable.⁵ The first part of the song goes like this: “I hear the sound of a mighty rushing wind, and it’s closer now than it’s ever been; I can almost hear the trumpet as Gabriel sounds the call, at the midnight cry, we’ll be going home. When Jesus steps out on a cloud to call His children, the dead in Christ shall rise to meet Him in the air; but then those that remain will be quickly changed, at the midnight cry when Jesus comes again.”⁶

Jesus told us that the stunning suddenness of His return will be like that of a thief in the night, like lightning in a terrible storm, like the rain that became Noah’s flood, like the terrible judgment that fell from the sky on Sodom. And Jesus’ most important statement on the subject is this: **“The Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him”** (Luke 12:40).

Doug Mendenhall told a parable that makes this point. It goes like this: “Jesus called the other day to say He was passing through and wondered if He could spend a day or two with us.

“I said, ‘Sure. Love to see you. When will you hit town?’

“I mean, it’s Jesus, you know, and it’s not every day you get the chance to visit with Him. It’s not like it’s your in-laws and you have to stop and decide whether the advantages outweigh your having to move to the sleeper sofa.

“That’s when Jesus told me He was actually at a convenience store out by the Interstate. I must have gotten that deer-in-the-headlights look, because my wife whispered, ‘What is it? What’s wrong? Who’s that?’

“So I covered the receiver and told her Jesus was going to arrive in eight minutes, and she ran out of the room and started giving guidance to the kids—in that highly-effective way that Marine drill instructors give guidance to recruits.

“My mind was already racing with what needed to be done in the next eight—now seven—minutes so Jesus wouldn’t think we were reprobate loser slobs. I turned off the TV in the den, which was blaring some weird scary movie I’d been half watching. But I could still hear screams from our bedroom, so I turned off the reality show that TV was tuned to. Plus, I turned off the kids’ set out on the sun porch, because I didn’t want to have to explain *Jon & Kate Plus Eight* to Jesus, either . . . six minutes from now.

“My wife had already thinned out the magazines that had been accumulating on the coffee table. She put *Christianity Today* on top for a good first impression. Five minutes to go.

“I looked out the front window, but the yard actually looked great thanks to my hard work, so I let it go. What could I improve in four minutes anyway?

“I did notice the mail had come, so I ran out to grab it. Mostly it was Netflix envelopes and a bunch of catalogs tied into recent purchases, so I stuffed it back in the box. Jesus doesn’t need to get the wrong idea—three minutes from now—about how much online shopping we do.

⁵ Tom Fettke and Russell Mauldin, *This We Believe: Christ Died . . . Christ Arose . . . Christ will Come Again* (Nashville: Lillenas, 2010).

⁶ “The Midnight Cry,” by Chuck and Greg Day; sung by John Starnes.

“I ran back in and picked up a bunch of shoes left by the door. Tried to stuff them in the front closet, but it was overflowing with heavy coats and work coats and snow coats and pretty coats and raincoats and extra coats. We live in the South; why’d we buy so many coats? I squeezed the shoes in with two minutes to go.

“I plumped up sofa pillows, my wife tossed dishes into the sink, I scolded the kids, and she shooed the dog. With one minute left I realized something very important that I’d never quite understood before: ***Getting ready for a visit from Jesus is not an eight-minute job.*** Then the doorbell rang.”⁷

Or how about this alternate scenario? Robby Robins was an Air Force pilot during the first Iraq war. After his 300th mission, he was surprised to be given permission to immediately pull his crew together and fly his plane home. They flew across the ocean to Massachusetts and then had a long drive to western Pennsylvania. They drove all night, and when his buddies dropped him off at his driveway just after sun-up, there was a big banner across the garage—“Welcome Home Dad!”

How did they know? No one had called, and the crew themselves hadn’t expected to leave so quickly. As Robins told it, “When I walked into the house, the kids, about half-dressed for school, screamed, ‘Daddy!’ Susan came running down the hall—she looked terrific—hair fixed, make-up on, and a crisp yellow dress. ‘How did you know?’ I asked.

“I didn’t,’ she answered through tears of joy. ‘Once we knew the war was over, we knew you’d be home one of these days. We knew you’d try to surprise us, so we were ready every day.”⁸

“When Jesus steps out on a cloud to call His children,
the dead in Christ shall rise to meet Him in the air;
but then those that remain will be quickly changed,
at the midnight cry when Jesus comes again.”

Can you hear the trumpet warming up, my friends?

“READY OR NOT,” Jesus says, “HERE I COME!”

Are you ready?

⁷ Doug Mendenhall, “Getting Prepared for the Arrival of Jesus,” www.reporternews.com (September 24, 2009).

⁸ Lee Eclov in the sermon, “Heaven,” www.preachingtoday.com.