

This morning we, once again, are going to meditate upon the most amazing news in all the world.

**Jesus died, but His tomb is empty!**

In Matthew's gospel, we find a stunning juxtaposition of four different sorts of people and the empty tomb.

But, first, let us remember what has happened.

Jesus had been teaching and doing miracles for three years... then He began talking about His death.

He came to Jerusalem and, after a promising beginning to the Passover week, was secretly arrested and put on trial.

He was convicted by the religious leaders, beaten, handed over to the Roman governor, Pilate...

because they wanted Jesus dead and were not allowed by Roman law to perform executions.

Jesus put up minimal defense before Pilate and was then sentenced to death, even though Pilate said He was innocent.

He was tortured, made to carry His cross to Golgotha, and crucified.

Everyone saw it happen... and then He died.

**Matt. 27:62-66**

The Religious leaders were concerned about what might happen. Pilate clearly understood their concern.

They need not have been concerned. The disciples were all hiding in fear for their lives.

And then, on the third day, at dawn... the tomb is discovered empty.

No! More than that. There had been an earthquake, the stone is thrown some distance away, angels are hanging around, the Roman soldiers are scattered about, and the tomb is empty.

What does this mean for the world? And In answer to the question I want to consider four different points of view.

**I. For the Roman empire vss. 1-4**

It is the soldiers here who represent the political-military power of the world.

And, in order to understand just who they are and who they represent, a little history is in order.

The social-political-military situation in Jerusalem was just about as complex as it gets.

The supreme ruler of the civilized world is Caesar Augustus, the first Caesar to have declared himself a god.

He had been the adopted heir of Julius Caesar, but, following the murder of Julius, he left Rome for his own safety.

He soon was commanding an army and maneuvering politically.

Within 17 years his armies gained him victory and he assumed power with the Senate in Rome.

5 years after this he gained ascendancy over the senate, called himself emperor...

it was the year 19BC and Rome became the capital of an empire rather than a republic.

Twenty years before Augustus came to Rome to rule, Herod began his kingship in Jerusalem, called by himself "the Great."

He was a builder of fortresses and had renovated the Temple in Jerusalem.

He did this all by forcing the Hebrew people to work for him as slaves.

Herod grew increasingly paranoid as he neared his death, killing a number of his wives and sons.

Caesar Augustus said about him, "It is better to be Herod's pig than to be his son."

Near the end of his life he surmised from magi from the east that a king had been born near Bethlehem...

and so he slaughtered all the children there.

Herod owes his power entirely to the Romans, and so he will tolerate no possible trouble that will upset his precarious position.

He needs to keep the peace to keep the Romans happy. There can be no dissent, not even from a hope in a baby king.

After Herod's death, the kingdom is split up into four parts by Caesar Augustus.

Philip the Tetrarch ruled the region around the Jordan river.

Herod Archilaeus ruled two sections in the center (Samaria) and south (Judea) including Jerusalem.

Archelaus proves to be even more brutal than his father...

and is finally removed by Caesar after his murderous nature becomes unmanageable.

Jerusalem and the south and center of Palestine will now be ruled by governors... called prefects.

Herod Antipas ruled the part that was called Galilee.

Antipas became a master at doing what the Romans wanted... while doing what he wanted, and acting mostly Jewish.

Antipas is the one who murders John the Baptist. He is also in Jerusalem for the Passover when Jesus is crucified.

In AD14 Tiberius Caesar begins his reign. Antipas kisses up to him as well.

He was a general of Roman legions who had married Julia, the daughter of Augustus.

He will try to be a Caesar like Augustus, but will have increasing problems with the Senate and political intrigue.

Also he will have to deal with uprisings throughout the empire and battles in the north with the Germanic peoples.

He has to teach the empire that no one opposes the power of Rome.

In AD26 Pontius Pilate is named by Tiberius Caesar as the fifth prefect of Judea. His job: to keep the peace.

Pilate would stay in power as long as he made sure that people respected Rome, paid their taxes, and were not too uppity. This is why he ordered Jesus to be crucified.

Jesus was causing trouble. Yes, He was innocent, truthful, even wise and spiritual feeling... his wife had warned him. But, people wanted Jesus dead... important influential people.

And, there was this business about Jesus claiming to be a king... at least He didn't claim that He hadn't claimed that.

And, Rome cannot tolerate other kings. So, Jesus had to go. Unfortunate, yes, but power is power. Rome rules. Jesus dies.

Except now... Jesus is alive.

All the power of the Roman soldiers, of the prefect, of Caesar himself cannot keep Jesus in the grave.

Rome finds that it cannot compete with the power of Jesus. No nation on earth can.

Within a few hundred years the entire Roman world would be overrun by people calling themselves Christians.

Even today this is true...

The USSR sought to suppress Christianity and could not kill it.

The Chinese government is currently trying to control Christians and the Christian faith is growing daily.

In our own nation many people seek to suppress Jesus. The name itself sometimes causes panic.

Throughout the world people are discovering that Jesus is alive. No government or army can stop Jesus.

## II. For the women vss. 5-7

Joanna: a friend of Mary Magdalene

Mary the mother of James and Joses: We know virtually nothing about her.

Mary Salome: We don't know much about her either... possibly the mother of James and John

Mary the mother of Jesus...

Mary's sister: John 19:25

Mary the wife of Clopas: We know little about her beside that she watched Jesus die. John 19:25

Mary of Bethany (probably there): Luke 10:38-42

Martha may have been there as well.

Mary Magdalene: Luke 7:36-50, 8:2

What all of these women share is this: They all loved Jesus and followed Him.

When we think of the disciples of Jesus we usually think of the 12 apostles... and that's fine.

Jesus picked them out to be with Him and to be sent out by Him.

But, we forget sometimes that there were many others who followed Jesus and called themselves His disciples.

And, then there were these women who followed Him as well and learned from Him and were seeking salvation from God.

We don't know much about the details of their lives... as we know little about even most of the apostles.

But, I would guess that each of them had a story... someday we will learn the stories.

Maybe a few others were like Mary who loved to sit at Jesus' feet and just listen and learn... to ask Him questions...

Or maybe others were like Mary Magdalene, demonized, living an immoral life, and then Jesus rescued her.

She lived for Jesus now, amazed at the forgiveness and salvation that God offered her... thankful for her new life in Jesus.

His death was crushing. Nothing could be worse. How could He die? He was from God, they all knew it.

So, they felt "fear and great joy."

Of course He could not stay in the grave... but what does this mean?!

It means that things are not going to be the same. The one they love and who loves them is alive!

## III. For the disciples vss. 8-10

Here we think principally of Peter. Peter had denied Christ three times. Imagine the overwhelming guilt that he felt.

And, the others, they were no better... maybe worse...

For when Jesus was being arrested they all fled, they didn't even follow like Peter did. They just abandoned Jesus.

But, then, what could they have done anyway... they were mostly fishermen, no power, no influence.

Peter had had a sword, but he was no soldier.

They had spent three years with Jesus, and now He was dead. Was it all wasted?

Think of the worthlessness and hopelessness they felt along with the guilt.

But, He wasn't dead.

It was too much to take in... some of them just worshipped. Others had trouble believing it was really true, that it was really Jesus.

But, Jesus would convince them... and their lives would be forever different.

First of all, it meant that their failure wasn't final... and this is always true for us as well.

In Christ, if Peter can be forgiven and used to change the world... so can you.

Jesus was alive. He is alive.

Nothing compared to this... the power over the grave, salvation, eternal life... it was all true.  
They would become fearless... even threats and death itself would not stop them. Jesus' power extended beyond the grave.  
What can man do to us!

**Acts 4:8-20** "They were amazed, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus."

**Acts 17:2-7** "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also."

This is what happens to people and through people who know that Jesus is alive.

#### **IV. For the Jewish leaders vss. 11-15**

We read that some of the guards reported to the chief priests.

How I would have loved to be there for that report.

These guys were scared, they had failed in their duty. On their watch they had lost the body.

Actually, it was far worse than that. You could imagine that they wanted some answers as well... spiritual answers.

They knew the stone had been moved.

Maybe they saw the angels.

They knew the body was gone and that the disciples didn't do it.

Who is this God who is greater than the Roman Empire?

But, what did they get from the religious leaders? Nothing. Nothing but a lie and some money.

Oh, maybe they would be saved from punishment by the political maneuvers of these priests. Maybe.

But, you would think that these religious leaders might have thought a little more about what had happened.

Who were these people who opted for deception when the truth was staring them in the face?

Joseph Caiaphas is the High Priest in Jerusalem.

Pontius Pilate may be in charge of Judea and has the power of Rome behind him...

But, Caiaphas is the one who runs the city. If not for him Pilate would find it impossible to control the Jewish people.

Then, Pilate would lose his job. Actually, this is exactly what happens about 4 years after Jesus' death.

Pilate loses control and is recalled to Rome to be replaced by a sixth prefect.

Jerusalem is a tough place to control... to maintain power.

But, Caiaphas knows how to do it. He has mastered the art of playing people off one against another.

He knows how to manage the crowds, to keep their respect even when he is manipulating them.

He has his ceremonial robes, people see him as a holy man. He is rich, that helps. God blesses holy people.

He announces forgiveness to the people. They know they need that.

Caiaphas has everything worked out just so...

The priests need him to keep Pilate out of their business and to help them to live well and make money.

Pilate needs him to keep the people under control.

The people need him to stand before God for them... and to keep Rome from getting violent.

Caiaphas manages the Pharisee party. They need him as well, even though they disagree.

Caiaphas is a Sadducee. He doesn't believe in a resurrection.

The last thing Caiaphas needs is a Christ, a Messiah calling Himself the King of the Jews.

During the trial he has coached the Jewish crowds in the courtyard,

a very different bunch than the one that shouted Hosanna on the road into Jerusalem earlier in the week

No, this crowd was one of his own making.

He coached these Jews to shout, "We have no king but Caesar." It is heresy to say that. But, such is real life.

Yes, killing Jesus was an unseemly affair, but stability had to be maintained. After all, Caiaphas himself had said,

"It is expedient for you that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish."

So, they crucified Him.

But, now the tomb is empty... which presents a huge problem, particularly for religious people who don't want a living Lord.

It presents a theological problem for a Sadducee who does not believe in a resurrection.

It presents a political problem for a Politician who carefully manages his reputation.

It presents a financial problem for one who depends on Temple income. What if people go off following Jesus?

Even today Jesus who is risen from the dead presents huge problems for those religious people who are not interested in a risen Lord.  
They would rather have a dead god who can be used and manipulated for personal gain.

They don't want a live God who tells them what to do, who changes lives, who demands repentance and faith and all of our devotion.

What the resurrection of Christ mean to these sorts of religious people?

It means that they are in big trouble... and they would rather make up a lie than think about it deeply.