

“The Story Is Still Told”

Matthew 28:1-15

Easter Sunday

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The symbolism of last Monday’s burning of the Cathedral of Notre Dame, after the Basilica of St. Peter’s in Rome, the most renowned building in Western civilization, the iconic symbol of Western Christendom, is hard to miss.

It is as if God wanted to warn us in the most unmistakable way that Western Christianity is burning- and with it, Western Civilization.

Since the onset of the 20th century, every major Western social, political, and intellectual force has conspired to rid Europe of Christianity and the civilization it produced.

Ironically it was the French Enlightenment- the intellectual force behind the 1789 French Revolution and the modern West- that sought to replace religion with secularism and faith with reason.

The great Parisian Cathedral named for “Our Lady”- who carried and gave birth to the Christ-child- took 200 years to build and has stood for another 800 years, leading those who cross its threshold to a profound experience of the divine.

Known as “the poor people’s book,” the structure itself spoke salvation’s story through the images, paintings, and stained-glass windows for those generations who could neither read nor write.

However, we should not shrink from
the hard core truth about what Notre Dame
de Paris has become.

Many millions who have visited it in
our post-modern age perceive it
more as a historical monument than
a spiritual space to commune with
the transcendent.

Notre Dame is, in many ways, closer to
Istanbul's Hagia Sophia-a museum.

It has become a historical and beautiful
curiosity that signals a time, now past,
in which those who once worshiped there
truly believed Christianity's story.

That story originates from the account
we just heard from Matthew's gospel.

The evangelist's narrative of the resurrection
of Jesus from the dead is full of
joy and glory.

It is good news that the first witnesses,
the women, must "go quickly and tell" (28:7).

But first they are invited to see
the evidence for themselves.

The angel bids them, "Come and see
the place where he lay" (28:6).

Moments later, the women see the
risen Jesus with their own eyes
and touch him with their hands (28:9)

From the beginning, Christians said
the resurrection is no mere story;
there is evidence for its veracity.

From the beginning, critics and skeptics
have denied or distorted the report
of the resurrection.

Matthew is well aware of this change
and eager to join the debate.

His account is glorious but also polemical

At its core is the awesome, joyful,
earth-shattering experience of the resurrection.

The body of Jesus died at his crucifixion,
his body was buried and sealed in a tomb,
and the Father, who conceived him,
raised him to life again.

He did not lapse into a coma
and wake up fully revived.

His disciples did not steal his body
under the noses of a detached Roman guard.

He arose just as he said he would,
even if his frightened and forlorn
disciples initially forgot his prediction.

Before and after this central proclamation,
Matthew seeks to put to rest an old
criticism that I have added to the
reading of the Easter text, one that
says Jesus did not rise, that his
disciples stole his lifeless body,
and that the Christian faith therefore
rests on a lie.

Critics will admit that Jesus was
a charismatic figure, a brilliant teacher
They typically admire his ethic of love,
from "Love your neighbor as yourself"
to "Pray for your enemies" to "Do to
others as you would have them do to you"
to the parable of the good Samaritan.

But critics object to the supernatural.

When I enrolled in seminary in 1969,
I was assigned readings from modern
scholars like Rudolf Bultmann,
who denied Jesus' physical resurrection
from the dead.

In essence, he inferred that we as modern
people cannot have angels above, demons below,
and miracles breaking out- like corpses
returning to life-in today's world.

Such ideas violate the laws of science.

Jesus was a great man, like any other.

He lived, he died, he was written about,
and he lived on in memory, nothing more.

The first Christians heard these attacks and like Matthew, they responded to them.

On the day after the crucifixion,

“the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, ‘Sir, we remember what that imposter said while he was still alive. ‘After three days I will rise again.’

Therefore, command the tomb to be made secure until the third day, otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, ‘He has been raised from the dead’ and the last deception would be worse than the first’ (27:62-64).

This passage makes several interesting contrasts.

Sadly, the enemies of Jesus remembered his promise of resurrection better than his disciples did, but since they assumed that the disciples also remembered, they suspected that they would stage a mock resurrection by stealing the body.

Perhaps they worried because a follower buried his body.

Nevertheless, the Jewish authorities asked Pilate to join in preventing a theft.

He responded, “So, make the tomb as secure as you know how.

So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guards” (27:65-66).

The authorities plan worked to this extent:

No one stole the body or ever tried.

Yet the body did disappear because of the resurrection.

Afterward, Matthew tells us, “the guards went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened.

After the priests had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money

to the soldiers, telling them,
‘You must say, ‘this disciples came by night
and stole him away while we were asleep,’
If this comes to the governor’s ears.
we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.”
So they took the money and did as they were directed,
And this story is still told among the Jews.
to this day (28:11-15).

There is a delicious irony here.
The authorities try to cover up the resurrection
by advancing the very story that they had
wanted to prevent!
They posted a guard so no one would steal
the body and say he had risen.
Now they instruct the guard to say they fell asleep
and the disciples came and stole the body.
In this way, they actually do spread the story
or the empty tomb
The authorities also demonstrate their deception
Earlier, they had demanded that Jesus perform
a sign that would let them believe
Jesus said they would let them believe
Jesus said they would get no sign
but his resurrection (12:38-40).
Now they have the sign they wanted,
but instead of believing,
they attempt to destroy the evidence.

Matthew connects the crucifixion, burial,
and resurrection by repeating certain terms:
behold, quake, and fear.
The women “behold” the crucifixion,
watch the burial, then behold the tomb (27:55;28:1).
Matthew also repeats the term “quake” or “shake”.
Before the women arrive on Sunday morning,
there is an earthquake.
On Friday the earth quaked and rocks spit
when Jesus dies on the cross.
On Resurrection Sunday, “there was a great
earthquake “that precipitated the angel descending
and the rolling back of the seal stone that

covered the entrance to the tomb “where he lay.”
Also, we are told that the angel’s entrance and
appeared terrified the guards so that they
“shook and became like dead men” (28:3).
What Matthew is communicating to his readers,
is that the resurrection is an earthshaking event.
One set of soldiers were seized by fear when Jesus died;
a second group became fearful at his resurrection.
The women were afraid too, but their fear was
an awe tempered by joy.
The soldiers’ who slept while on duty or
deserted their posts out of fear faced
a punishment known as a *faustuarium*-
a beating by sticks and stones.
If they survived this torture, they were
dishonorably discharged and remained
outcasts and exiles for life.

Beloved people of God,
the vain efforts of the enemies of Jesus,
to seal and guard the tomb,
to devise false stories to bide the truth,
contrasts with the power of God to open it
and the women’s joy to tell of his resurrection.

Who is telling the truth?

The political and religious establishment
with their trumped-up charge.
and fake narrative?

Or is it Matthew, the angels, and the women?

Which story do you believe-

the story of the critics or the story of the apostles?

There is no need to depend on blind faith.

There is historical evidence to investigate

The true church has always had the answer:

Christ is risen, he is risen indeed!