

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY OF THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW – PART TWENTY-NINE

The King was dead. His followers were in shock and grieving. Only His enemies took the idea of resurrection seriously, so the tomb was sealed and guarded. Three days had passed from Thursday, not Friday as traditionally taught, to early on Sunday morning. The two Marys came 'as it began to dawn'. Looking carefully at the accounts of the visits to the tomb it becomes apparent that they actually described 4 visits at 4 different times in the order John 20, Matthew 28, Luke 24 and Mark 16. First Mary Magdalene came alone, now with Mary the mother of Jesus, then Joanna was added to the group, and finally the two Marys came with Salome. What they saw and heard caused a mixture of fright, amazement and excitement as it gradually became clear to a widening circle of women that Jesus really was alive. On this occasion, as described by Matthew, the two Marys met an angel who following another earthquake had rolled away the stone and sat upon it waiting for visitors. He had scared the guards almost to death!(28:1-4)

The angel's first task was to overcome the women's fear which would otherwise have left them as paralysed as the guards. He achieved this first by telling them Jesus was risen and then by showing them. In the same way, for us, fear is turned to faith when we hear the truth and then see it demonstrated in the lives of Christians and in our own circumstances. He invited them to enter the tomb and see the evidence of the resurrection for themselves. He then sent them to tell what they had seen. John later described what motivated him and the other apostles to risk, and eventually to give, their lives sharing the gospel, 'What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands touched, concerning the Word of Life...'.(I Jn.1:1) Jesus Himself invited His disciples to come to Him for instructions before going to proclaim His message.(Matt.10:1-6) The angel instructed the women not only to tell the news to the disciples but to send them to a meeting place in Galilee where they would be able to see Him for themselves. Faith begins with hearing the word, (Rom.10:17) but it is strengthened by personal experience as we meet Jesus for ourselves in real life. In the next few days Jesus would meet with individuals or small groups of followers but it would be in Galilee that, according to I Cor.15:6, He would be re-united with 500 friends who, together, would provide the solid core of convinced believers who would begin the task of reaching the world.(28:5-7)

With a sense of urgency they ran to do what they had been told. For the moment their emotions were mixed. There was still fear because the news seemed too good to believe. At the same time there was a joy welling up within as certainty started to grow that the news was true. Because they obeyed instructions, as they ran they met Jesus. As we start to respond to the truth we have read or heard, we too meet Him in life. At last the resurrection was not just a great idea but a personal reality. They responded with worship at His feet. They were presenting themselves to the King for further instructions, which is true worship.(Rom.12:1) Jesus Himself took away the last traces of fear as He confirmed the angel's command. Worship is demonstrated in obedience.(28:8-10)

Meanwhile back at the empty tomb, the guards were recovering sufficiently from their paralysing fear to think how they could save their own skins. As Roman soldiers they knew that the escape of a prisoner, even a dead one, could lead to their own

execution.(Acts 12:19) As the women ran off with the good news, the guards ran to the chief priests with the bad news that they had failed. The chief priests felt as threatened by the news of the resurrection as the soldiers. Their power and prestige among the people was at stake if the Jews came to believe in the resurrection of Jesus. The priests tried to solve the problem of both groups in the way they normally did, with money and a lie.(Matt.26:15,59) The story they agreed on was that the disciples had stolen the body of Jesus while the guards had slept. They chose to ignore logic. If they had been asleep they would have had no way of knowing what had happened. People will tell and believe any lie that suits them, however ridiculous. The presence of the guards at the tomb and their subsequent behaviour, far from preventing the resurrection, provided further compelling evidence of its truth. God has a wonderful way of turning seeming disaster into triumph.(28:11-15)

The remaining 11 disciples struggled to believe the story of the women but they did what they were told. When faith and doubt are mixed, the simple solution is to obey God's instructions and let Him deal with doubt. It is interesting to wonder on which mountain Jesus told them to meet Him. Was it the mountain on which He had first delivered His statement of His government's policy?(5-7) Could it have been the one on which He was transformed before Peter, James and John, thus demonstrating how His policy to change His followers from the inside would work?(17) It is possible, but we are not told, that both mountains were the same place. Even when they met the risen Jesus for themselves, there was still a mixed reaction at first. Some worshipped and were ready for more instructions. Others still doubted, as Thomas had,(Jn.20:24-29) and for the moment they could have no part in the Lord's plan. The Lord perseveres with doubters encouraging them to address their doubts to Him until finally faith overtakes doubt.(28:16,17)

The risen King now reminded them of His total authority over heaven and earth. In the light of His authority He gave them four instructions. First, they were to go wherever He sent them. Second, they were to make disciples, not of themselves but of Jesus. They were to bring people into that relationship with Jesus where they followed Him, not man. Third they were to baptise with water picturing how trusting Jesus meant that we have placed ourselves under the Father's command, become part of the Son who died, rose again, returned to heaven and will return, and received the Spirit into us to live Jesus' life from within.(I Cor.12:13) Fourth they were to teach the whole message of Jesus, Old and New Testament.(Col.1:25-29) Finally He gave them a promise which would be the key to success in His plan. He would be with them always, right to the end. His presence would be the secret of His Great Commission working out. It still is.