

from **Death** to **Life!**

Matthew 28:1-10

Pastor Jim Rademaker
based on a message by Norman Nagel

Luke records the question the angel posed. "Why?" *Why do you look for the living, among the dead?* "Why? What are you talking about? Who's looking for the living? We're looking for Jesus, and He's certainly not alive."

The women were bringing burial spices to finish a hasty burial from Friday afternoon. And as they're coming to the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, they see that the large stone had been rolled away! And the tomb is open! And Jesus isn't there! His body is gone!

Imagine it's your loved one who had died and was buried. What would you be thinking? The hole's been dug up. The casket is lying empty on its side. What would you think? Grave robbers! Someone stole his body! What else could it be! Who's looking for the living? We're looking for the dead.

And so, it is for us in life. We're looking for the dead. That's how life goes. The minute you're born, you're heading to the grave. From life to death. That's how it goes. Despite what we might tell ourselves, the future's not bright. From life to death. And we feel bits of that death throughout life. The sufferings. The heartache. Sin, and the wages of sin. It ends the same for everyone. From life to death. Everything's going from a state of order to a state of disorder. Everything decays and dies and is no more.

The women were on their way to the grave, the same road we all travel. From life to death. It was the same old story. They had hoped *He* was different. They had met something in Jesus they had never met before. He had cared about the wreck of a woman that was Mary Magdalene, cleaned her up, and made her live again when she was all washed up. What about the other Mary? Who was she? Why did she so love Jesus?

All that life given to the women in Jesus was over. They came to weep out their grief at the grave, and to do what their love might do for Jesus. He had done so much, that it might not be the same old story. One person put it well, "Amid the powers that push us around, Jesus had walked with a breathtaking freedom, the way it is to be alive, unchained, uncrumpled, not scared. Jesus had looked all His accusers in the eye, slave to none. But in the end, they closed in on Him. Jesus had defied them, and they got Him in the end. The end. The same end as for us all. Now the finality of the grave." (Nagel)

Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. What is more real? What is there that you can be more sure of than the grave? Now you can be even *more* sure, for Jesus, in whom they had hoped, had come to the same end as the rest of us. Crucified. Dead. Buried. And so, the women are perplexed! They're confused! They're scared! Their *minds* and *hearts* are racing! Jesus is dead. From life to death. And now His body is gone! What where they supposed to think? And yet, the question, "*Why do you look for the living, among the dead?*"

The angel *knew* why. It was because the women had forgotten. The voice of the angel to one betrothed in marriage, "*She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*" "*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.*" "*From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*" (Mt 16)

Angels. At His birth. At His temptation in the wilderness. In Gethsemane. The angels strengthened Jesus, who went on to Calvary, was forsaken of God, as was our lot for our sins. He bore them. Answered for them, crying, "It is finished!" Now the resurrection messenger sits on the stone, as in victory, the stone that should close tight the grave. The angel sits on it and bids the women to no longer be afraid, for they are seeking Jesus who was crucified. *He is not here, for He has risen, as He said!*

On New Year's Eve 1970, Gloria Gaither sat alone in the dark quiet of her family living room in Alexandria, Indiana. It had been a difficult year. Gloria's husband Bill was still recovering from a long and exhausting bout of mononucleosis. Problems in their church had led to divisions and personal attacks against them. It was the height of the Vietnam War. The drug culture was in full swing. Racial tensions divided the country.

And Gloria was pregnant. Both she and her husband wondered openly about the wisdom of bringing a child into such a world. Gloria later wrote, "Who in their right mind would bring a child into a world like this? I thought, 'The world is so evil. Influences beyond our control are so strong. What will happen to this child?'"

As she sat alone in the dark, her thoughts soon turned to Jesus' resurrection. "Gradually, the fear left," Gloria recounts, "and the joy began to return. I knew I could have that baby and face the future with optimism and trust. It was the Resurrection affirming itself in our lives once again." Gloria Gaither soon put her confidence to words, and together with her husband Bill, composed a song which has become one of the most popular hymns of the 20th century: "*Because He Lives*."

"God sent his Son, they call him Jesus. He came to love, heal and forgive. He lived and died to buy my pardon. An empty grave is there to prove my Savior lives."

On July 12, 1971, Gloria Gaither gave birth to her first son, Benjy. Gloria, however, no longer worried about her infant son's future. "*How sweet to hold a newborn baby and feel the pride and joy he gives, but greater still the calm assurance this child can face uncertain days because he lives.*"

You and I were born into the same uncertain world into which Benjy Gaither was born. Wars still rage. Our country is still divided. Illnesses plague our families and divisions plague our churches. But we don't have to be afraid. We don't have to worry about tomorrow. (Pastor Andrew Schroer) "*Because he lives I can face tomorrow. Because he lives all fear is gone. Because I know he holds the future and life is worth the living just because he lives.*"

"Why do you look for the living, among the dead?" The angel knew why. It was because the women had forgotten. They had forgotten Jesus' words and His promises. And they weren't the only ones to forget. We, too, forget, don't we? That's what reason, by itself, unaided by faith does. It doesn't remember God's Word. It forgets, for it only believes what can be seen, and heard, and touched. But faith sees beyond such things. Faith sees what reason alone cannot. *Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.*

Like the women that Easter morning, we need someone to preach God's Word to us. To *remind us* that Jesus is alive and stop living as though He were still dead. And as He *promised* before He ascended, He is *with us* always, to the very end of the age. We need to be continually reminded of that - daily grounded in the truth of God's sure Word, so that when dark days come, and (like the women at the tomb) they are *sure* to come, we will *remember*. We won't be blinded by the hard circumstances of life, as if *that's* all there is. (William Cwirla)

So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."

"Greetings. Rejoice and be glad!" From the lips of He who was crucified, and now is risen. Everything is transformed, so "Be glad. Rejoice!" His words draw the women out all their fears. The fear that God had quit on them. The fear of slavery to sin and death. The fears of the same old story, that the world is just one big cemetery. Do not be afraid. *Now*, there is nothing in all the world that you can be more *sure* of, than Jesus crucified *for you*, risen *for you*.

Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip ... and asked him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." ... And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." (John 12)

So do not fear. The future *is* bright! Because of the empty tomb, because Jesus rose from the dead - sufferings, heartaches, sin, death, are *not* the last word. It *doesn't* end the same for everyone. "*Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life!*" (John 5:24) From life to death ... and in Christ, to **life!** In Christ, everything's going from a state of disorder to a state of order. Re-creation. New life!

As Revelation 21 puts it, "*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth ... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people ... He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."*

"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor 15:55-57)