

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Role Players in the Spotlight

The Story Above All Stories - Jesus!¹

Study #5

Introduction: THAT changes everything...

Have you ever experienced a “THAT changes everything” moment?

Given enough years, most of us are able to look back and identify moments or seasons that have fundamentally changed the trajectory of our lives.

I’ve had a few of these, and some of them have been delightful. The day I married Kathy changed my life - for good; no, for EXCELLENT! - nearly thirty four years ago. The births of each of my three children were, likewise, wonderful game changers.

I look back on the days when I have met certain people as the days that began new and blessed chapters in my life.

And, of course, there have also been dark days that changed everything. Days when a friend’s medical diagnosis shattered the illusion of control and broke my heart; days when news of a full-scale tragedy changed everything for the scarier; days when, I have personally received devastating news.

¹ Matthew’s account of the resurrection includes some facts about that first Easter Sunday and His subsequent appearances that the other gospels don’t. This is what we would expect from four accounts. Slightly varying, but not at all contradictory records of an event from four vantage points. What Matthew records, though, is skillfully woven together to build our faith, and to challenge us to faithfulness.

On some of these momentous days I’ve even had the thought, “Well, *THAT changes everything.*”

“*That changes everything*” can be applied to good times and bad, to technology or economics, health and relationships.

Well, today is Easter. And today, as we consider the historical heart of our faith, we’ll see the one event that changed everything, forever, for good, for real, for us.

Over the past four weeks, we’ve looked at “role players” who have had their moment in the spotlight: Mary Magdalene, Simon Peter, Judas Iscariot, and the Apostle Matthew.

Now we’ll turn to Matthew’s Gospel and let him guide us through the story of the Star of the show: Jesus.

We begin by re-capping the story we have been tracking throughout this long weekend.

Re-cap: From “Good Friday” Forward

Jesus’ death - for you and me

Jesus was put to death by crucifixion by the Romans.

The hours leading up to His death were torturous. Having endured betrayal, denial, false accusation, trials and condemnation, a brutal beating and a death walk, Jesus was nailed to the cross on a Friday morning.

He died in the middle of the afternoon on what we call “Good Friday.” It was good for us. We never forget that when Jesus went to the cross it was FOR US.

As the prophet Isaiah wrote,
***[53:4] Surely our griefs He Himself bore,
 and our sorrows He carried...
 [5] But He was pierced through for our transgressions,
 He was crushed for our iniquities...
 By His scourging we are healed.***

Jesus' burial

After He yielded up His spirit and died, He was buried in the borrowed tomb of a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea.²

It took guts for Joseph to make his tomb available for Jesus' burial. This action identified him as a disciple. And, be assured, right after Jesus was crucified, there was not a long line of people signing up to be or to declare themselves Jesus' disciple.

The Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, gave Jesus' body to Joseph, and He was buried late on Friday afternoon.³

Mary and Mary at a closely guarded tomb

Two Marys - Mary Magdalene and the Mary known only as "**the other Mary**" - stayed at the tomb long after Joseph left. They watched as the Romans soldiers sealed the tomb and then rolled a great stone in front of the entrance.

It appears that while the disciples had forgotten all about Jesus' resurrection predictions, His enemies had not.

So, sealing the tomb was one way to deal with the threat of an empty tomb. Another way was to post a guard, and on the day following Passover (Saturday), the religious rulers took action to ensure that Jesus stayed put.

Little danger of "body-jacking" from the disciples!

Honestly, they weren't concerned about resurrection. They just wanted to make certain that Jesus' disciples didn't steal the body.⁴

² Joseph had requested the body of Jesus quickly so that the land would not have been guilty of having a body hanging after dark on a Sabbath. "***A hanged man is accused by God; you shall not defile your land which the Lord your God gives you.***" (Dt. 21:23). The poor were buried in the ground or in natural caves. Burial in artificial caves was reserved for the rich

³ Matthew says nothing about Jesus' body having been prepared with spices.

⁴ They referred to Him here only as "***that deceiver***"

If those guys did that, it would look to some that He had actually been raised from the dead.

So, they approached Pilate to get an official Roman guard for the tomb, in addition to the Jewish Temple guard already in place. Pilate seemed to agree with their concerns and gave them the guard they requested.

Thus, in addition to the tamper-proof seal and the stone in front of the tomb, there were two sets of guards - Roman and Jewish - to ensure that nobody stole Jesus' body! (and nobody did... ☺)

From the vantage point of the Jewish leadership, there was no telling to what lengths those disciples might go to promote faith in Jesus.

But, really, the disciples were in no mood to try anything tricky.

They had seen their own most fervently held convictions die when Jesus was arrested, scourged and then crucified. The cohesion of the apostolic band had been broken by Judas' betrayal, and then further crushed by Peter's denials.

In short, they had experienced the death of hope. And with the death of hope there would have been zero energy to concoct a scheme to try and make people believe in a living Jesus when they knew He was dead and gone.

If you've ever experienced the death of hope, you know what it's like.

If you've ever seen hope die, you know what it was like for the disciples on that Friday and Saturday. You know that "body-jacking" to get others to believe in Jesus would have been the last thing on their minds.

Friday was awful. Saturday, if possible, was even worse, because the disciples were all scared out of their wits at the prospect of being arrested for having been associated with Jesus.

But, now Saturday is past and Matthew brings us to Sunday morning. He traces the steps of the two faithful Marys who had been the last to leave the tomb on Friday.

The Scene at the Tomb (vv. 1-10)

The Angel's Message (vv. 1-8)

The Marys' startling Easter Sunday morning discovery!

They arrived at the tomb where Jesus had been buried two nights earlier just before dawn. They arrived to a very chaotic scene!⁵

There were the visible effects of an earthquake. One of those effects being that the large stone that had been blocking the entrance to the tomb had been rolled away!

The Marys also saw an angel.

He was clothed in blazing white garments. The Bible tells us that **"His appearance was like lightning,"** (what does THAT mean?). He was sitting on top of the rolled away stone as the women walked up.

The Roman guards and the Temple soldiers who had been assigned to stand guard over the grave were there - but not really. In fact, I've got an Easter vocabulary word to describe their condition. The word is *catatonic*.

Webster tells us that *catatonia* is a "syndrome characterized by muscular rigidity and mental stupor." These soldiers were catatonic. As Matthew tells us, they **"shook for fear and became like dead men!"**

This is the scene that met the women on Sunday morning: catatonic soldiers, a rolled away stone, and an angel blazing with light. Then, the angel spoke.

The angel commissions the women (vv. 5-7)

[5] And the angel answered and said to the women, 'Do not be afraid (RIGHT!); for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified.'

⁵ Mark tells us that they had already come to embalm the body of Jesus, and that they had waited until after the Sabbath to purchase the necessary spices.

Notice what the angel affirms. These women weren't at the tomb in anticipation of Jesus' resurrection. They had come to embalm His body, pure and simple.

BUT, they should have known better. Like the angel said, **"He has risen, JUST AS HE SAID."** - an angelically polite way to say, *"He told you so!"*

In finding the tomb empty, these women were getting their first taste of the possibility of a miracle too good to be true. This is a *"THAT changes everything"* morning for them - and it's only just begun.

Listen as the angle gives them a promise and an assignment.

[7] "And go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going before you into Galilee, there you will see Him; behold, I have told you."

Mark it down. When an angel gives a command, the best course is to obey. So Mary and Mary obeyed - and quickly,⁶ running off to find the disciples with a wild mix of emotions.

The ladies ran to tell the men (v. 8)

[8] And they departed quickly from the tomb with FEAR and GREAT JOY and ran to report it to His disciples.

Don't you just love this!? It is so true to life. Emotions all jumbled up, nothing nice and neat.

FEAR gripped them - in spite of the angel's **"Do not be afraid!"** - because what they were dealing with was way beyond them.

And, JOY beyond anything they had ever known filled their hearts because they had just started to grasp the impossible: Jesus is alive!

Then, as they were rushing out of the cemetery, they are greeted by Life Himself!

⁶ The original implies that they ran as fast as they could

The Lord's Message (v. 10)

[9] And behold, Jesus met them and greeted them.

When these two recognized that they were face to face with a VERY alive Jesus, they did what you or I would have done. They dropped to the ground **“and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him.”**

For His part, Jesus greeted them with the angel's words, **“Don't be afraid!”** and then followed that up by repeating the angel's assignment.

[10] Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; go and take word to My brethren⁷ to leave for Galilee, and there they shall see Me.’”⁸

It was in Galilee that people had first seen the light of Jesus, the Messiah. It will be in Galilee that the disciples will receive the marching orders that will set them on their life's purpose.

That commission is recorded for us in the last paragraph of Matthew's Gospel.⁹ The scene has shifted from Jerusalem to Galilee, where we find what is probably a rather large group on top of a peak in the Hill Country-like region of Galilee.

Resurrection Impact - Then and Now (Matthew 28:16-20)

Surprisingly, The Disciples Worship, Doubt (vv. 16-17)

Remember. Galilee was the home of most of Jesus' followers. He has called them to meet Him in a place of comfort and safety, far away from the drama of Jerusalem and the recent scene of so much conflict.

⁷ Luther - “If now, Christ is our brother, I should like to know what we still lack? Brethren have common possessions, have one father, one inheritance. So we have common possessions with Christ, one Father, and a common inheritance.

⁸ This doesn't mean that Jesus was instructing them to have the disciples leave immediately for Galilee. We know that they didn't because of the appearances recorded in John while they were still in Jerusalem.

⁹ For this morning, I am not dealing with the passage that records the plot by the religious rulers to discredit the message of Jesus' resurrection. If you struggle with doubts about the resurrection of Jesus, I would commend to you a fine book by Lee Strobel, *The Case for Easter*. Strobel was a writer for the Chicago Tribune for fourteen years before he came to faith in Christ. He has since devoted his life to giving reasonable answers to reasonable questions about Christianity.

Most scholars believe that those with Jesus on top of this mountain included most, if not all, of His disciples. It wasn't just the eleven. There were probably several women, Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, Zaccheus - and others.¹⁰

Listen as Matthew describes how they're all doing.

[16] But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated. [17] And when they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some were doubtful.

There is that strange mix of emotions again. Earlier it was the women who were **fearful** and **joyful**. Now, the disciples are **worshipping** AND **doubtful**.

Does that seem weird to you? Do you wonder what in the world they would have been doubting as they are interacting with the resurrected Jesus who is standing right in front of them?

Some of the commentators on this passage have come to the rescue of the doubters, suggesting that they were only *“initially doubtful.”*

Others have assured us that the apostles were certainly not among the “doubters.” The doubters were the *other followers* who had not been with Jesus to the extent that the apostles had, and had only just now seen the risen Lord.

Hmmm... Frankly, I find those thoughts suspect.

It may be better to accept Matthew's report of the doubting disciples as an honest commentary on people - apostles as well as non-apostles - who could gaze at the resurrected Christ, and still doubt.

OK. But what would they have doubted?

- Did they doubt the reality of what they were seeing? In other words, were they questioning their own senses, as in, *“Can this be real?”*

¹⁰ In fact, I believe that the scene we read of here at the end of Matthew's Gospel may have been what Paul was referencing when he wrote of Jesus appearing to more than 500 at one time (1 Cor. 15:6).

- Could they even have been doubting Jesus Himself at this moment, with Him standing right in front of them?
- Or were they doubting themselves and their ability to follow Him, having, for the most part failed in their first real test on the night before He died?

Whatever they were doubting, the Bible tells us that they were doubting - and this squares with my own experience and with my observations of others.

I conclude that doubts, serious questioning, and second thoughts are common to most everybody, at one level or another, at one time or another.

They can occur during a personal tragedy and they can spring up during a personal revival. I will admit to being racked with doubts from time to time, myself.

It is conceivable to me that the doubts of the disciples mentioned here ran the gamut of possible doubts: doubts of their senses, doubts about Jesus, doubts about the future, doubts about themselves.

But, even in this comment about the disciples' doubts, there is a note of hope. Did you notice? ALL the disciples saw Him. They All worshipped Him.

And SOME of those who were worshipping Him doubted. They worship despite their doubts. It is evidently possible to worship Jesus while doubting!

That's fantastic news for people like me - and maybe you - who face times of doubting. God-honoring worship can happen AS WE WRESTLE WITH DOUBTS.

It might be emotionally exhausting to give God heartfelt worship as you face doubts, but that worship is precious to God. He knows your struggle. He smiles when you worship Him for what you know to be true about Him.

Now, if it was surprising that some of the disciples doubted, it should not be at all surprising that the final words Jesus had for them consisted of a challenge.

NOT Surprisingly, Jesus Commissioned His Disciples (vv. 18-20)

ALL authority belongs to Jesus

[18] And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.

Notice first of all Jesus' authority. He is the Sovereign Lord.

The words here bring to mind the Apostle Paul's line in his letter to the church at Philippi. Paul says that Jesus has now received the Name that is above all names. At the Name of Jesus every knee will bow. Every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Matthew's Gospel **began** with the claim that Jesus, being of the royal lineage of David, was the true King of Israel. It **ends** here with Him confirmed as the One who reigns as King over all.

There was a time, three years earlier, when Jesus was offered authority over all the Kingdoms of the world, even before His earthly ministry began.

That was in the wilderness when Satan suggested that Jesus take a short-cut, by-pass the road of service, avoid the agony of the cross, and become the ruler of the world. All for the price of bowing down and worshipping him. (Matthew 4:9).

But, precisely because He rejected Satan's offer, remained loyal to His Father, and did not shrink from obedience to the way of the cross, Jesus now wears a sovereign crown.

All authority has been given to Him.

And Jesus' words here also include His assurance that He, the Sovereign Lord, would always be with His followers.

Jesus' Ever-Present Presence

[20] "and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

What Jesus has to say in this final address is spoken mainly as a master speaks to his servants. But, the friendship factor is not absent.

In Jesus Christ, one of our most dread foes - all-aloneness, alienation, isolation - is forever conquered. Believers in Jesus are never alone! We are now and will always be graced with the presence of a Sovereign Lord.

And sandwiched between these words of authority and presence is a commission - a GREAT commission.

Jesus commissioned His followers to make disciples of all the nations.

He tells these first followers and He tells us, who will come later, that we are to **[19] “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, [20] teaching them to observe all that I commanded you...”**

These words were spoken to the apostles PLUS others on a peak in Galilee. Throughout the last two thousand years, all who have followed Jesus have embraced them personally.

Jesus has given each Christian a bigger-than-life, transcendent assignment. Every one of us who names the name of Jesus is to be about the work of making Christ-following disciples of the men and women, the young people, and the children around us.¹¹

A disciple is not someone who has “arrived.” A disciple is someone who is *arriving*. She is *learning*. He is *following*. Disciples are always learning more and are always following more closely. There is always another “next step” in life with Jesus.

Our assignment is to not only grow, personally, but to train more and more people to learn more about Jesus and to follow Him more closely, too.

Based on what I know about God from the Bible, I can assure you that there is a message from Jesus for each person here on this Easter Sunday morning.

He wants YOU to take a “next step” today. Only you know where you are on your spiritual journey, so only you know what “next step” is the one for you.

Some of you here today have followed Jesus for years and are far down the path. Some of you have only taken a few steps in following Jesus.

And some of you have arrived here this morning, curious about Jesus and about what following Him might look like.

A FIRST STEP “next step”

For you, taking a “next step” will involve taking a “first step.” And your first step might be a step of learning more about Jesus.

Coming to church is a great way to start. Take time to read your Bible. Talk about Jesus with friends who know Jesus. If you are interested in finding out more about Him, following Him starts with exploration.

Or perhaps you know enough about Jesus to take a first FAITH step. Having learned a bit about Jesus and His ways, you know that you don’t come to God on the basis of your own efforts.

The way to come to God is by faith. Trusting reliance. You place your confidence in what Someone Else has done!

If you will trust in the finished work of Christ on the cross for you and in His resurrection from the dead you will live.

And you can place your trust in Jesus today, right now, right where you sit.

If you do, you’ll discover the joy of God’s saving grace, you’ll know forgiven all your sin, you’ll become a brother and sister to every other Christian, and you’ll be adopted into God’s forever family.

And what does a “next step” look like on this Easter Sunday morning for you who have already embarked on the following path?

¹¹ Similar statements are made by Jesus in Mark (16:15ff) and Luke (24:44)

A FOLLOWING “next step”

You’re already following, to some extent. Your “next step” might be to follow Him more closely.

Seriously pursue the path of holiness. Set aside the things that get in the way of following Him fully.

You will discover that when you follow Jesus, you will receive much more than you give up!

And one more thing...

For you who arrived this morning already following, Jesus’ Great Commission means that you are to be “on mission” for the Great Commission.

A GREAT COMMISSION “next step”

Back in the first chapter of Genesis, God gave the first command to the world’s first couple - *“reproduce after your own kind.”*

Here, in Matthew 28, Jesus commissioned the first disciples to do the same thing. You are a disciple. Live in such a way that there will be more disciples.

There are countless personal and creative ways in which you might carry out the commission of Matthew 28:18-20. Fer instance:

- You might meet regularly with one person or with a small group with the express purpose of growing in Jesus together.
- In the Name of Jesus, you might go out of your way to express love and care for someone with a special set of needs.
- You might invite a few folks who have never cracked a Bible to join you in an exploratory study of who Jesus is.
- You might generously contribute to an organization that is spreading the Gospel.
- You might tell your friends what a life-changing experience it is to follow Jesus - and then invite them to join you on the journey.

This is all Great Commission stuff. It is all allowing Jesus’ grace to shine through your life. It’s all lovingly pressing Jesus and His ways into our lost world.

You can do this anywhere. In the church, at home, at work, at school, at the gym, in the neighborhood.

You can be ““on mission’ for the Great Commission” by joining others in a named, organized effort, or as a silent, solo servant of one needy soul.

Jesus is the One who commands. We will gladly obey. And then let’s agree to urge each other toward more and more creative, personal, loving investment in people for His sake.

Our living, risen Lord could not have been clearer and He could not have honored us more than He has by calling us to make disciples.

THAT’s what the Great Commission - and Easter - is all about!

He is RISEN!

He is RISEN indeed!!