

“Life after Death”
Matthew 27:51-61
April 9, 2023

INTRODUCTION:

One of the dominant questions of our era is the question, “Is there life after death?” We live in a materialistic world in which many believe that there is nothing beyond the material, with the result that when the material is gone nothing is left. The British philosopher Bertrand Russell struggled to know whether he should regard himself as an agnostic or atheist. He once said, “When I die, I rot.” At one level, it’s hard to argue with that. It is an obvious truth. But is it the whole truth? Russell didn’t believe in an afterlife, so he believed that the rotting of his corpse would be the end of him. How do we know he’s not right? Have you ever had the thought that perhaps all this stuff we tell ourselves about the afterlife is nothing more than a way to cope with the pain associated with death?

Would it help us believe in life after death if God gave some remarkable sign to confirm that there is such a thing? God does precisely that in today’s passage. God had been completely silent in the events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus. Even when his beloved Son cried out, **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”** (Matt. 27:46), the cry was met with a loud silence. But as soon as the death of Jesus occurs, there is an explosion of divine activity. It is as if God is saying as clearly and loudly as he can, “Now that divine justice has been satisfied through the death of Jesus, everything is different. The purpose I’ve always had, a purpose for everlasting life for humanity, is now made possible.” I note three signs, all resulting from an earthquake that occurred in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus’ crucifixion. With these signs, it seems that God can’t wait for Easter. It’s like opening presents early. There are three of them.

I. A Curtain Torn – v. 51

The first sign is the tearing of the temple curtain, clearly done by God as indicated by the direction of the tear: from top to bottom. This is the curtain behind which was located the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctum of the temple. It was the very presence of God. The curtain was there not to provide privacy for an introverted God, but to provide protection for sinful man. The sin of the human race is like a cancer on the world.

Our sin does to God’s world the very same thing that cancer does to the human body. Cancer cells, as you know, are living cells inside your body. Do you know, though, what makes them cancer cells that bring death instead of

normal cells that bring life? Cancer cells do not submit to the order imposed on the body by the central control of the brain. They reproduce in rebellion against the brain. Sin is a spiritual cancer, causing us to rebel against God's order for creation. As such, sinners become like cancer cells. What do we do with cancer? The same thing that God's holiness does with sin. We destroy cancer cells any way we can, and God in his holiness must destroy sin whenever he comes into contact with it.

Two truths are taught by this rending of the temple curtain. The first is God's clear statement that the time of the temple is over. The temple was the place where God live. It was God's house, where humans could come to meet with God. The temple had its time and place in the Old Testament, a place of picturing what Jesus, the true temple, would accomplish. But with the death of Jesus, the reality that the temple could only portray has now arrived. Jesus is the new temple, and he has made the old obsolete. Jesus now provides the way for us to be with God.

The second truth is that salvation is open to all through Jesus. The sin problem preventing access to God has been solved. The point of this is not that God has changed by no longer being a holy God, or that we are no longer sinners deserving to be radiated out of existence like cancer cells. Rather, the point is that the sin problem has been dealt with through the blood sacrifice of Jesus. We can now enter the holy of holies, the very presence of God, through Jesus. The author of Hebrews speaks of this. **"Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience"** (Hebrews 10:19-22). The author of Hebrews suggests that not only is there a curtain in the temple that separates man from God, but also one in the human conscience. This inner curtain says that God is too holy to be approached by sinful humans. We should believe our conscience when it speaks to us of our sinfulness. But we should believe God when he says that he has torn down this barrier. All who lay hold of Jesus by faith are allowed into the inner sanctum of heaven, the very throne room of God. And when we enter that room, we find a God who smiles upon us because of Christ.

II. Tombs Opened – v. 52-53

Matthew is the only one of the four gospel writers describing this remarkable event. **"And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many."** It seems that the

earthquake Matthew describes had a particularly dramatic effect on the tombs near Jerusalem. The rocks securing these tombs were split open, and those whose bodies were residing in the tombs were raised up, to emerge from the tombs after Jesus' resurrection on Sunday. Again, it's as if God can't wait for Easter morning.

The text is silent on some of the things we would like to know from this passage. For example, were these resuscitations like Lazarus in John 11, or were they resurrections to immortality like that of Jesus? If they were like the raising of Lazarus, then those raised died again because their bodies were still mortal like ours. But if they were resurrections to immortality, then they would have been taken into heaven. The text doesn't say precisely, though I think the former is more likely. But either way, it was an astounding demonstration of Jesus' victory over death.

Let's focus for a few minutes on that sentence in verse 52. **“And many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.”** Matthew says that this happened to *many*. We don't know how many, but elsewhere Matthew demonstrates notable understatement in his description of things. For example, he writes of Jesus that **“after fasting forty days and nights, he was hungry”** (4:2). So when he says *many* were raised, I think we can conclude that it was a common sight in Jerusalem after Jesus' resurrection to see numerous resurrected saints walking the streets.

Don't pass over the significance of the word “bodies.” God loves our bodies and will raise them to immortality. As we recite in the Apostle's Creed, “I believe in the resurrection of the body.” We are embodied creatures, and we will exist forever with bodies that will never again suffer from aging, sickness or death. And we must not skip that familiar metaphor for death, that of falling asleep. At first glance, it seems an inappropriate metaphor for the violence and ugliness of death. But through the violence and ugliness of Jesus' death, our death can be transformed into something as normal and common as falling asleep. As Jesus' disciples said when Jesus told them that Lazarus had fallen asleep, **“Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover”** (John 11:12). Though they misunderstood Jesus' meaning that Lazarus had actually died, they spoke better than they knew. Through Jesus, the finality of death has been broken, and their statement is true of all who know Jesus by faith: “he will recover.”

I love the defiant tone of this passage and of others that speak of the resurrection from the dead. It's the same tone you heard in the prelude that was sung earlier. “Ain't no grave gonna hold my body down.” And you'll hear that defiant tone again in the offertory about to be sung. It's the tone of the apostle Paul's words in his letter to the Corinthians. He taunts death when he quotes from Isaiah: **“O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”** Death is not given the last word. The last word comes from the lips of Jesus, and it is a word of everlasting life and joy.

III. Lives Transformed – v. 54-61

Matthew mentions three groups who were forever changed by these events, and the centurions are first. After witnessing the earthquake, they said, **“Truly this was the Son of God!”** These centurions were Gentiles. Matthew, the author of this gospel, was a Jewish man. But he had learned that Jesus came not just for Jews but for Gentiles as well. So at the beginning of his gospel, he describes the three wise men who came from the East, men who were also Gentiles. Gentile faith bookends the ministry of Jesus in Matthew’s gospel.

I like the first word of this sentence: “truly,” or “really.” People today crave certainty but find it elusive. We live in a time when the very idea of truth is challenged, an era that has moved beyond skepticism into cynicism. But here Matthew points us to the place where certainty can be found. While correct theology is essential, there is something else more essential. These centurions are just a little deficient in saying “This *was* the Son of God.” Good theology would have required them to say, “This *is* the Son of God.” But they did get the Son of God part right, and in time everything else will be straightened out if you get that straight.

You may be thinking to yourself, “If I had the opportunity to see the things these centurions saw that day, I too would believe.” They saw the darkness from noon to 3:00 p.m. on the day of Jesus’ crucifixion, and they witnessed the earthquake that split the tombs. If you are waiting for more evidence before believing in Jesus, I would point out that there were many who witnessed these same miracles and did not believe. What about the citizens of Jerusalem who talked to those saints raised from the dead on this day? That’s a pretty remarkable piece of evidence. Yet, the majority of Jerusalem’s citizens still did not believe in Jesus. And what about those who witnessed the astounding miracle of Jesus’ raising Lazarus from the dead? Yet John records that while many believed in Jesus after that, others determined from that moment forward that Jesus had to die. The truth is that lack of evidence is not our problem. Our central problem is a heart that doesn’t want God in our lives as God. Evidence can help, but no amount of evidence will be enough to overcome a heart that doesn’t want God.

The next group of those whose lives were forever changed by Jesus are these faithful women. They had followed Jesus from Galilee, which would have been no small feat. Galilee was 80-100 miles from Jerusalem, a distance they traversed on foot. They did so in order to minister to Jesus. And they were still following Jesus during his terrible crucifixion. Two things stand out to me about these women. The first is their simple faithfulness. Matthew reports simply that they were there. Put simply, one of our chief duties as followers of Jesus is just to keep following Jesus no matter what. Even in the darkest of

times, we just continue to say, “I’m sticking with Jesus.” A second thing that stands out to me is the fact that the only enduring honor we will have comes from honoring Jesus. We would not know of any of these women apart from these texts. But as a result of their honoring of Jesus by their faithfulness to him, Matthew honors them here because God honors them. Matthew takes time and space even to record their names for us.

Joseph of Arimathea is the third one who responds in faith, seen in his giving of his own tomb for the burial of Jesus. Socially, Joseph is on the opposite end of things from the women named earlier. He was rich and well-connected, able even to achieve an audience with Pilate. He is one of whom Jesus said that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven. But with God all things are possible, even faith in the heart of a rich man.

CONCLUSION:

A friend of mine and Wendy’s passed away earlier this week. Nat Belz was only 70 years old when he succumbed to cancer. I want to leave you with something Nat once said to his daughter-in-law Kate. Talking to her about death and resurrection, Nat said, “I don’t understand it, but I’m sparkling with the wonder of it all.” Jesus has died for our sins and been raised again for our life. Now all who trust him will live forever in a world where all things have been made new. There is life after death, and I too am sparkling with the wonder of it all. May you sparkle too!

Discussion Questions
Matthew 27:51-61

1. Do you have a favorite Easter memory?
2. Paul tells the Thessalonians that as a result of the death and resurrection of Jesus we Christians grieve when a loved one dies, but we do so with hope (1 Thess. 4:13). What does it look like for you to grieve with hope? Talk both about the grieving side and the hope side of that.
3. One of the common metaphors for death in the Bible is that of falling asleep (Matt. 27:52). Do you ever fear your own death? How might this metaphor help calm those fears?
4. How would you respond to those who say that the resurrection of Jesus is just a nice thing to tell yourself to bring comfort in the face of death, but nothing more than that?
5. The text tells us that the centurions saw the events surrounding the death of Jesus and then declared that this was surely the Son of God. Yet many people saw the same things and didn't believe. What might we learn from these different responses?
6. How might the resurrection of Jesus motivate and strengthen us for daily living?