

“FOLLOWING THE KING – 89”

Matthew 28:1-10

Almost there! We arrive at the climax of this amazing story that Matthew has been telling about the coming into our world of the Kingly Messiah. Over the past few months we've seen the way in which the life and ministry of Jesus has unfolded as he has taught about and demonstrated in his own life the possibilities of the Kingdom of God. And over the past few weeks we've been drawn into Matthew's account of Jesus' arrest, trial and death. Last time we read about the burial of Jesus, which would have seemed the end of the road for those who didn't know how the story ends.

And, as you may recall, we saw how Matthew had built everything up towards this astonishing dénouement. In his telling of the story he had made sure to include mention of many witnesses – both friends and enemies of Jesus – who watched Jesus die, who saw his lifeless corpse removed from the cross, who carried him to his temporary resting place in the garden tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. There could be no doubt that Jesus was really dead. We read about the security measures that were put in place to stop anyone entering the tomb – large rocks, guards, an official seal. No-one would get into this rocky grave to steal away the body and fake a resurrection.

No-one would get in – that was guaranteed. But the guards and the rock and the official seal couldn't prevent someone getting out, particularly as the one who left the tomb was the Kingly Messiah. Early on that first Easter morning, the women who had been with Jesus went along to the tomb to finish the work that had been hurriedly started on Friday evening. Joseph – and, according to other reports, his friend Nicodemus – had put Jesus in the tomb quickly to ensure it was all sorted before the Sabbath, so they'd just put a makeshift linen shroud on him and bound into it some spices to act as a temporary embalming agent. Now the women came back with more spices and more time to make sure that their dead friend was properly prepared for the grave.

As they approached the tomb, wondering, no doubt, quite how they would get in, they saw that it was open. Matthew's explanation is that an angel had opened the tomb for the risen Jesus to make his exit, leaving a bunch of terrified guards quivering outside. Now the angel is sitting on the stone and he addresses the women with the standard biblical greeting for an angel. If you read through the Bible and look at all the instances of angels appearing, you'll find that in an awful lot of them the first words the angel speaks to the gobsmacked humans they encounter are, just as here, *“Do not be afraid”*. As if that is going to put their minds at rest! And in this story Jesus uses that greeting to his stupefied followers as well (v10).

We can never really be sure what an angel looks like, despite the myriad representations of them in art through the centuries, but Matthew tells us that this one “*looked like lightning and his clothes were as white as snow*”. Just seeing anyone standing there, nonchalantly sitting on the huge stone which had been moved would have been quite surprising for the women (and the guards), but to be throbbing with light and shining more brightly than the morning sun would certainly have got their pulses racing. Then to hear this strange being talk to them and say, “Don’t worry. It’s all OK”, as if this was the most normal thing in the world, was fairly mind-blowing.

Yet there was a reason why they should not be afraid. There’s a reason why we should not be afraid when we encounter the divine, when we find ourselves anxious and upset at what we see going on in our lives, when we consider all that’s happening in our world. Just four words here give the key to our assurance and also give a clue as to what Matthew has been writing about in this Gospel. The angel says to the women, “*He is not here; he has risen, just as he said*” (v6). “*Just as he said.*” That’s the key to all this.

Think back, if you can, over this whole Gospel of Matthew. We have said on many occasions that this book was written by Matthew for the people in the church he was leading, people who had come to trust in Jesus, but whose background was very firmly Jewish. They were understandably concerned that their allegiance to Jesus might be a betrayal of their religious, national and cultural heritage – all of which were closely intertwined. But Matthew has been at pains to put their minds at rest and has drawn very heavily on their Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament), making parallels between Jesus’ words and actions and the stories of the Old Testament. He has quoted from the Old Testament many times and he has deliberately made the link between the words and actions of Jesus and the prophecies and predictions of the Hebrew prophets, poets and preachers to show that Jesus is the fulfilment of all that. How many times have we read phrases such as “*This was to fulfil all that the prophets had said*”? Far from betraying their heritage, those first Jewish believers in Jesus were enjoying the outcome of the Old Testament story, they were now following the very Messiah who had been foretold and who was ushering in the Kingdom of God that had been described so prophetically by the likes of Isaiah, Micah and Amos.

What’s more, those prophecies made it clear that the experience of the Kingdom of God was not to be limited to the Jewish people. They were simply the means God had used to bring the light of his presence and promise to all people – Jew and Gentile alike – so that they could all enjoy the bountiful grace of God. And those words of the angel – “*Do not be afraid*” – those words of comfort and assurance, are as valid for us today as they were for those trembling Jewish women two thousand years ago. And for the same reason: because it is all “*just as he said*”.

You see, those words can be a source of comfort because they emphasise that this is **all part of God's plan**. We saw several times during the arrest, trial and execution of Jesus that he seemed to be simply at the mercy of forces and events beyond his control. This man who had spoken so confidently about his power and had demonstrated that power in healing and restoring people, in taming the forces of nature, in outwitting the religious and political leaders, eventually appeared to be as subject to the ebb and flow of the tide of human history and the vagaries of human destiny as anyone else. Why bother with him? Why give a second thought to this man whose pronouncements now seem to have been so much hot air, a man no different from the countless other messianic pretenders of his day, a man whose words now have the hollow ring if not necessarily of deceit, then certainly naivety about them?

Well, because of this! Because it has now all worked out as promised. Because this man has been brought back to life. Because God has brought to fulfilment his plan. All those prophecies of the Old Testament have been proved right. All those words of Jesus, which at the time he spoke them seemed so bizarre, are now proved to be true. Jesus is alive, which is what God had planned all along. It's probably not the way we would have done it. It caused Jesus an unspeakable amount of pain and anguish. But it has all turned out OK, just the way God planned it. Now we can believe that God has a plan, that God has got things worked out.

You see, that happens in our own lives too, doesn't it? There are times when we seem to be at the mercy of the forces around us – even of the forces of evil. Our lives are not going as we would want them to. Things are not falling into place as we think they should. We are struggling with pain and anguish, with illness and loss, with helplessness and despair, with our doubts as to whether we were ever right to take the decision to follow Jesus. But somehow – in ways we can never fully understand or appreciate – God has a plan. He has told us it will all work out in the end. It will be *“just as he said”*. It takes a fair bit of faith to believe that, but believe it we must. God has a plan for this world: his Kingdom will be fulfilled. Things will work out as he wants. His original perfect creation, perverted and distorted by the presence of evil, will be restored and we shall have the privilege of sharing it for eternity. There is something to hang on to and it will be *“just as he said”*.

And, of course, linked to that is the good news that **you can trust Jesus**. What Jesus said came true. And what he said was, until this Easter morning, perhaps the most unbelievable stuff you'd ever heard. He'd said that he would go through death and out the other side, he would come back to life. He said a lot of other things as well, which were still pretty hard to believe, but not as hard as that. Now he has delivered on that most unlikely of promises, so we can take seriously the other stuff he said as well. If he can deliver on this promise, then we can equally have confidence in all the other things he said. It will be *“just as he said”*.

That is an amazingly comforting thought. You may still be trying to decide if you really want to have anything to do with this Kingly Messiah, this man who did all kinds of surprising things and who spoke all kinds of wonderful words. You may still be in need of some kind of assurance that it's worth it, that it's really going to make a positive difference to you. You're still a bit hesitant about whether or not you really can trust him. Well, let me stick my neck out and say that it is, because you'll find that eventually – sometimes against all the odds (but not such long odds as a resurrection – and that happened “*just as he said*”) – it will all work out and there really is no reason not to trust him.

There are plenty of people here this morning who could tell you their story of struggle and difficulty, of questioning and doubt, but who somehow kept on trusting, kept on hanging in there, and who eventually discovered that, yes, it did all turn out “*just as he said*”. It didn't turn out as they expected – just as it didn't turn out as expected for the grieving women at the tomb or the frightened disciples back at the house. But that was because they hadn't been prepared to take Jesus at his word, they'd forgotten or disregarded what he'd said. Looking back on it all, though, as we see in the rest of the New Testament, they could piece it all together and they knew that it was, in the end, “*just as he said*”.

Let me just ask you this morning – are you willing to hang on to those words, to believe that God has a plan and that you're part of it? Are you ready to accept the promises of Jesus and follow him where he leads – down roads that may be difficult and dangerous in the short term, along pathways that might mean struggle and sacrifice, but which all lead to a glorious future in God's Kingdom, a future that will be “*just as he said*”? After all, we now know that Jesus will always deliver on his promises. It's up to you.

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No-one would get in, but the guards and the rock and the official seal couldn't prevent someone getting out, particularly as the one who left the tomb was the Kingly Messiah. Early on that first Easter morning, the women who had been with Jesus went along to the tomb to make sure that their dead friend was properly prepared for the grave. But they encounter an angel and hear him say, "Don't worry. It's all OK". The angel says to the women, "*He is not here; he has risen, **just as he said***" (v6).

Matthew has quoted from the Old Testament many times and he has deliberately made the link between the words and actions of Jesus and the prophecies and predictions of the Hebrew prophets, poets and preachers to show that Jesus is the fulfilment of all that. It is all "*just as he said*". And those words can be a source of comfort because they emphasise that this is **all part of God's plan**. Jesus is alive, which is what God had planned all along. It's probably not the way we would have done it. It caused Jesus an unspeakable amount of pain and anguish. But it has all turned out OK, just the way God planned it. Now we can believe that God has a plan, that God has got things worked out.

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Questions for discussion

- 1) Try to imagine how the women felt as they approached the tomb on Easter morning. What do you think you would have felt like?
- 2) Think back over Matthew's Gospel. Are there things that Jesus said that are especially significant for you? Why?
- 3) How important for your faith is the resurrection? Do we have to believe it is literally true? Why/why not?
- 4) How would you respond to someone who said that this is all a myth and you can't believe any of it?

5) What excites you most about the Easter story?