# SERMON SERIES: EMPIRE’S END

# “Oh No, He’s Back!”

## *Matthew 28:1-7, 11-15 (The Message)*

 On this wonderful day of celebration and joy, we come to the final sermon in our Lenten series “Empire’s End.” Throughout Lent we’ve explored some of the different empires that Jesus confronted during his ministry. We’ve seen him defeat the empire of Satan and the empire of death. We’ve seen him confront the empire of religious exclusiveness; and last Sunday we saw him address the empire of allegiance.

 Maundy Thursday was a time to solemnly remember our Lord’s final meal with his disciples, the kiss of betrayal from a friend, and Jesus’ arrest and trial. Good Friday marked the final hours of Jesus’ life. His body was gently taken down from the blood-stained cross, wrapped in linen, and placed in a borrowed tomb. Holy Saturday saw us without the presence of Christ as his body lay in the darkness of the tomb.

Turn with me to our Scripture reading, Matthew 28, where we’ll begin with the first seven verses. We imagined way back at the start of this series how the demons must’ve reacted when Jesus went into the Judean wilderness to be tempted. ***“Oh great, here he comes,” they may’ve said with anxiety. They immediately recognized Jesus for who and what he was. They knew who they were up against.***

Jesus rejected the temptations presented by Satan. And throughout Jesus’ life and ministry, Satan was confronted and confounded time and time again. So from Satan’s perspective, the events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday must’ve been the ultimate thrill of triumph. He’d gotten back at Jesus. Satan had put an end to all the talk of messiahs and heavenly kingdoms and forgiveness and love and grace.

***“Oh great, here he comes,” had given way to “Gotcha! We told you so!”*** But what Satan didn’t know—what he was soon to find out―was that there was still one more exclamation yet to come. The most important one—the one that still rings throughout history: “Oh no, he’s back!”

*After the Sabbath, as the first light of the new week dawned, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to keep vigil at the tomb. Suddenly the earth reeled and rocked under their feet as God’s angel came down from heaven, came right up to where they were standing. He rolled back the stone and then sat on it. Shafts of lightning blazed from him. His garments shimmered snow-white. The guards at the tomb were scared to death. They were so frightened, they couldn’t move.*

*The angel spoke to the women: “There is nothing to fear here. I know you’re looking for Jesus, the One they nailed to the cross. He is not here. He was raised, just as he said. Come and look at the place where he was placed.*

*“Now, get on your way quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He is risen from the dead. He is going on ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there.’ That’s the message.”*

Have you ever stopped to notice how much *fear* is present in the resurrection narrative? The angel of the Lord descended in brilliant light, accompanied by an earthquake—symbols of God’s presence, power and judgment. The angel removed the stone from the tomb, and Matthew tells us that the guards *were scared to death.* The Greek word translated as ‘scared’ means “to be afraid of someone.”

The Roman guards—strong, battle-hardened, and certainly not the kind to be spooked easily—were overcome with great anxiety at the sight of the angel. *They were so frightened, they couldn’t move.* Some translations say the guards *became like dead men*. ***We shouldn’t miss the irony that the ones assigned to guard a dead man now appear dead themselves, while the formerly dead man has been made alive.***

But there’s more fear on hand. *The angel spoke to the women: “There is nothing to fear here.”* The Greek word translated in this statement as ‘fear’ is *phobeo*, a verb which means to generally be afraid of something. Our word *phobia* comes from the Greek *phobeo*. The women weren’t so much afraid of the angel—although I’m sure there was quite a bit of that, too; they were afraid of the whole scene suddenly before them: catatonic guards, an angel, glowing light, an open tomb.

The women had nothing to actually fear. Yes, the situation was unprecedented and unusual. Yes, it certainly caught them off guard and freaked them out. But the angel wanted them to know that their sudden anxiety was very temporary because “*I know you’re looking for Jesus, the One they nailed to the cross. He is not here. He was raised, just as he said. Come and look at the place where he was placed.”*

Their momentary fear was to give way to *deep…wonder and…joy* (28:10).

 For the guards, however, their fear wasn’t going away as easily. Let’s pick up our reading in verse 11: *Meanwhile, the guards had scattered, but a few of them went into the city and told the high priests everything that had happened. They called a meeting of the religious leaders and came up with a plan: They took a large sum of money and gave it to the soldiers, bribing them to say, “His disciples came in the night and stole the body while we were sleeping.” They assured them, “If the governor hears about your sleeping on duty, we will make sure you don’t get blamed.” The soldiers took the bribe and did as they were told. That story, cooked up in the Jewish High Council, is still going around.*

Despite the fact that these men were likely veterans with decorated careers in the Roman legions, they ran like scalded dogs! Nothing in all their experience had prepared them for what happened that morning. A few of them, however, got a grip on themselves, remembered their duty, and went to the priests. Priests in turn called an emergency meeting of the key religious leaders and reported that they had a problem.

 Think about it for a moment: Jesus had been a burr under the saddle of the religious leaders ever since he began his ministry. He’d challenged their interpretation and application of the Hebrew Scriptures. He’d condemned their false piety and greed. He’d threatened their power and prestige. Now they were told that the very man they were responsible for having crucified was up and about! Can’t you just imagine them saying to one another, “Oh no, he’s back!”?

 So the religious leaders devised a scheme to cover up the events at the tomb. *They took a large sum of money and gave it to the soldiers, bribing them to say, “His disciples came in the night and stole the body while we were sleeping.”* The religious leaders even promised to cover for the “sleeping” soldiers when they got in trouble with their commanding officer.

 But there’s another element of fear in this story that isn’t explicitly recorded, yet it’s there all the same: the fear of Satan. The devil’s celebration on Good Friday and Holy Saturday dissolved into abject fear on Easter Sunday morning. Satan thought he’d won―that he’d accomplished the perfect plan against God. But with the first heartbeat of Jesus’ body in that tomb, Satan knew ice cold fear. *“Oh no…he’s back!”* Satan knew that his perfect plan hadn’t been so perfect. It hadn’t worked. In fact, as we said earlier in our sermon series, the thing Satan had counted on to defeat Jesus—the cross—had become the means by which God had permanently defeated Satan.

 What if this day—as full of joy and celebration as it is for us—was actually a fearful day for the empires of our world? What if the resurrection of Jesus wasn’t just to give Christians hope for eternal life, but was also to serve notice to the empires that continue to corrupt our world and keep people in bondage?

***Author Robin Meyers, in his book* The Underground Church*, imagines this scene: “Instead of “He is risen!” what if [the world] said, “Oh no, he’s back!” What if instead of angels singing we heard multinational corporations groaning, slumlords fuming, payday loan crooks reeling—in short, all the Herods of the world muttering about how crucifixion isn’t what it used to be?”***

You see, Easter Sunday isn’t the end of the story of Jesus. Sure, we like to end it this way because, hey, it makes for a great ending! But Easter Sunday marks a new beginning for the followers of Jesus. All who claim Christ are empowered to carry on his mission in this world. Where once there was one Jesus walking the roads―healing, teaching, comforting, challenging—now there are millions of them walking the roads―healing, teaching, comforting, challenging! We might be tempted to dust off our hands, breathe a sigh of relief that Lent is behind us, and move on with our lives. But to do that is to rob the resurrection of its power and its danger.

***When people think of Christianity, the first image that comes to mind is the cross. That’s the symbol we gravitate toward. Well, you might be surprised to know that the cross wasn’t the main theme of the early Christians. Art historian Kenneth Clark says of the cross:***

***“In the first art of Christianity, [the cross] hardly appears; and the earliest example, on the doors of Santa Sabina [Church] in Rome [dating from around A.D. 430], is stuck away in a corner, almost out of sight…Early Christian art is concerned with miracles, healings, and with the hopeful aspects of the faith like the ascension and the resurrection.”***

***The main theme of the early Church and the early Christians was the resurrection of Jesus Christ, not the cross. Of course, the cross was important and still is, but the resurrection played the prominent role.***

***There’s a good reason for this. The resurrection is all about transformation. Whereas the cross was about something that was taken away, namely our sin, the resurrection points to something that God gives us – transformation.***

That transformation begins in the heart of each of us, if we will allow it. Then we’re to take that transformation into the world and apply it to the places of need, loss, desperation and sin. The empires of this world that still exist due to human sinfulness—the empires that keep people beaten down and demoralized—still need to be confronted and challenged. The resurrection of Jesus isn’t *just* for us, any more than the church is just for us. The resurrection is a signal to the world that Christ’s followers have inherited his mantle and his mandate.

The greed and corruption in our world—the hate and racism—the abuse and deception—everything that prevents people from living God-fulfilled lives—should be on alert. On Easter Sunday, our greedy corporations and lying politicians and legalized loan sharks and Wall Street speculators should be trembling in fear when Christians leave their churches. They should be saying “Oh no, he’s back!” because we, his people, are a legitimate threat to the empires of this world.

The people around us every day—the poor and needy, the homeless and helpless, the orphan and alien, the uninsured and the addicted—they should be rejoicing when we step out of this building. They should be praising God because his people are being released into the world to bring them the good news!

Is that what we plan to do when we leave here? Do we intend to become the embodiment of Jesus Christ for the hurting around us? Are we willing to take up the crusade of Christ against the empires of this world and help people out of darkness and into the light? Will the people around you say “Oh no, Jesus is back!” when they encounter you?

Let us pray:

*Today marks the holiest day on the church’s calendar. It’s the day when the people called Christians gather to celebrate the fact that death is not the end of the journey, that suffering does not last forever, that the promises of God are reliable and trustworthy. From mountain villages in South America to the greatest cities of our world…from a humble chapel in the hills of Austria to the country church on a back road in Alabama…from house gatherings in China to soldiers deployed in the field…from the Gothic cathedrals of France to the slums of India…from Vatican to Venezuela…from Soddy Daisy to San Diego…millions of believers rejoice in this day above all others.*

*God has given us transformation. It’s his free gift to us, if we’ll but reach out and accept it. He’ll shape us and fill us for the journey to which he calls every single one of us. Our individual paths meet in this gathering called “church”―not so we can pat ourselves on the back for a good deed well-endured—but so that we may stride forth in Christ’s name and with the Spirit’s power to change the world.*

*Father above, let the sinful empires that still remain in our world tremble when we leave this place. Let them cry out in fear because Jesus is back, manifested in the love, grace, and service of his people. We’re the people of God, those redeemed by the blood of Christ, sanctified by the Holy Spirit, and made new through this day of resurrection. Thanks be to you, God of Life, for the resurrection of Jesus, in whose sacred and holy name we pray; amen.*