

CHRIST DIES AND RISES TO NEW LIFE

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Matthew 27:24–
28:10

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

Suddenly, Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. (Matt. 28:9)

Daily Bible Readings			
M	Apr. 14	Ps. 71:12–24	I Will Rise Again
T	Apr. 15	Heb. 2:1–13	Made Perfect through Suffering
W	Apr. 16	Gen. 22:1–14	The Provider
Th	Apr. 17	Matt. 26:17–30	Servanthood, Suspicion, and a Sign
F	Apr. 18	Matt. 27:39–40, 45–54	Darkness, Despair, and Death
Sa	Apr. 19	Ps. 49:1–15	Ransomed!

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

God chose ancient Israel to be the people through whom God demonstrated what it looks like to live in a loving relationship with God. By ordering their lives according to God’s law and making sacrifices to atone for sin, the people had an active role in the covenant. They were not simply passive recipients of God’s goodness. God gave them the law so they could show their love in response to God.

We have seen this covenant perfected in Jesus. He has transformed us into people for whom living as God made us comes naturally, and through him we are forgiven when we fall short.

Easter is the turning point for God’s relationship with everything God made. Matthew gives us powerful images that illustrate what Jesus has done. At the moment of his death, the curtain of the temple ripped in two, signifying that we now have direct communion with God. The earth shook, demonstrating that Easter has implications for the whole creation, not just human beings. Some of the dead were raised, a glimpse of what is in store when the work of Easter is done.

There are many ways to explain what Jesus' death and resurrection did. One popular explanation is that Jesus is our substitutionary atonement. This view holds that Jesus suffered the punishment each of us deserves on account of our sin; his sacrifice purges sin from the world. Another explanation that resonates with those who live under oppressive powers is that Jesus has overthrown the cosmic powers of evil that manifest themselves in racism, sexism, and poverty. Those who suffer physical or mental anguish identify with the perspective that Jesus entered into our suffering and by sharing it he lifts us up. Each of these is a partial explanation of something God has done that is too great for human beings to comprehend fully.

Thank you, Jesus, for your victory over everything that separates us from God, even death. Show us how to share the good news that Christ is Risen. He is risen indeed! Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Matthew 27:39–40, 45–54; 28:1–10

27:39 Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads ⁴⁰and saying, “You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” . . .

⁴⁵From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ⁴⁶And about three o’clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” ⁴⁷When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, “This man is calling for Elijah.” ⁴⁸At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. ⁴⁹But the others said, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.” ⁵⁰Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. ⁵¹At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. ⁵²The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. ⁵³After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. ⁵⁴Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” . . .

28:1 After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ²And suddenly there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow. ⁴For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." ⁸So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers and sisters to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

THE PERFECT SACRIFICE

The death and resurrection of Jesus are the culmination of the sacrificial system given in the Hebrew Bible. Those who passed by the cross derided Jesus because he claimed he would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days. Little did they realize that was exactly what they were witnessing.

There are several parallels between Jesus' death and the rituals of sacrifice we have studied. When Pilate handed Jesus over to the people to be crucified, he washed his hands like the priests washed themselves before offering a sacrifice in the tabernacle. Of course, that washing did not purify Pilate and make him worthy to offer a sacrifice to God, but the discerning eye can see a pattern beginning to form. The soldiers who scourged Jesus were preparing the sacrifice and unwittingly spoke the truth when they mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" Jesus' death is a conflation of Yom Kippur's two goats (Lev. 16). He is the spotless lamb who was sacrificed as atonement for sin. The location of Jesus' death outside the city wall alludes to him as the other goat that was released into the wilderness to remove sin "as far as the east is from the west" (Ps. 103:12). At his resurrection, Jesus is like the high priest returning to the people following the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement.

The tearing of the curtain in the Holy of Holies signifies that we don't need an intermediary to approach God. God has come to us in Jesus. We no longer encounter God in the tabernacle, nor seek God hidden behind a curtain. We meet God in the resurrected Lord who dwells among us and whose presence we know in acts of love. As the curtain was torn, darkness came over the land; the earth shook, rocks split, and graves opened. Jesus' death on the cross was more than atonement for the sins we have committed. It was a removal of sin's power from the world, the triumph of God over all that can hurt or destroy us or keep us separated from God.

Significantly, the first witnesses to the resurrection were two women, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph. In an age when women were not considered equal to men and their testimony was devalued, Jesus affirmed that in his new creation the cultural restraints that bound people into hierarchies of importance were broken. The first thing the woman did was fall down and worship. Then, assured that they had nothing to fear, they went to tell the good news to the men.



How has Jesus' resurrection made a difference in your life?

THE DEFEAT OF DEATH

Imagine if the animals that ancient Israel offered to God were returned to their owners alive and healthy after the rituals of atonement. That would not have been much of a sacrifice. The animals that were placed on the altar were completely surrendered with no possibility of restoration.

How, then, could Jesus be our atoning sacrifice if he were merely going through the motions on the cross? What would be the significance of his death if it were a brief interruption in his life, only to be restored back to his old self after a few days?

Jesus' cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46) lets us know how his death was different from all others. For centuries, God's people found comfort in the promise that God would never forsake them. "If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol [the realm of the dead], you are there" (Ps. 139:8). Yet Jesus experienced total separation from God. The Apostles' Creed affirms that this is what happened when it declares, "he descended into hell." It is a jarring statement. Some churches omit it when they say the creed because the thought of Jesus in hell is so

disturbing. For all the cartoonish depictions of hell as a fiery place populated by horned devils, in reality, hell is separation from God. This is what Jesus experienced. He suffered the full weight of death's power. He did not even mitigate the pain of dying by accepting the offer of wine to dull his senses.

The isolation of the Son, the second Person of the Trinity, from God, was such a cataclysmic experience that it reshaped the entire cosmic order. The earth shook, rocks split, and tombs opened. Jesus went to the heart of the power of sin and death and freed the universe from their grasp. Mortals still sin. Each earthly life still comes to an end. But in Jesus' death, the victory has been won. This hope sustains us through every trial.

Jesus told the two Mary's "Do not be afraid." Fear is often what we experience when our basic assumptions of reality are upended. The admonition not to fear speaks beyond the moment when Jesus met the women. "Do not be afraid," are Jesus' words to us as we live in this post-resurrection world. Whatever befalls us, Jesus is with us. The Advocate is for us, even in the face of death.

? After conquering the power of death, Jesus said, "Do not be afraid." How do these words speak to your greatest fear?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

Those who taunted Jesus saw him on the cross and jeered, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross" (Matt. 27:40). That is exactly what he could have done. When he was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, one of his followers drew a sword and cut off the ear of a slave of the high priest. Jesus told his friend to put away his weapon. He said, "Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matt. 26:53). Rather than escaping death, Jesus endured it on our behalf so we can face it without fear.

The gospel is often misinterpreted as a promise that our life will be free of sadness, disappointment, and suffering. Following Jesus is likely to take us deeply into these things. Just as he faced suffering head on, he sends us to share his victory with those who have little hope. In the days before he was arrested, he instructed his disciples that when he returned in glory, he would welcome those who cared for people who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, and in prison. He told them, "Just as you

did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:40).

The assurance that Jesus is with the outcast and those who suffer empowered saints and martyrs through the ages. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, bore witness to Jesus even as he was being stoned to death. Martin Luther King, Jr., led the struggle for racial justice and economic fairness. His faith in Jesus empowered him to proclaim before his death, “I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

Hope in the resurrection empowers us to confront the powers of death. It is why the church ministers to those who are sick. It is why we have courage to confront injustice. We’re not afraid to lose our possessions, power, or privilege because we know that something greater is in store. We can endure hardship and suffering because Jesus has paved the way for us. On Easter, we rejoice in his glory!

 **How does the promise of Easter shape your church’s outreach to the hungry, the sick, the stranger, and the prisoner?**

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today’s Scripture.

1. The torn curtain is probably the inner one, implying the departure of God’s presence from the temple. It could also indicate new access to the Most Holy Place through Jesus’s sacrifice; access to God no longer required an intermediary (Heb. 6:19–20; 9:3; 10:19–20).
2. Early Christians interpreted Jesus’s death by imagining him as a Passover lamb who also purges and atones for human sin (Yom Kippur). He was not punished for mortal sin—God’s justice is not retaliatory—but offered as purgation of sin from the world.
3. Some scholars see in Jesus’s death and resurrection a conflation of Yom Kippur’s two goats. Jesus is spotless lamb offered to God and scapegoat bearing the world’s sins into the wilderness. Atonement, in this sense, envisions a unifying movement toward the Holy of Holies, and a removal of sin “as far as the east is from the west” (Ps. 103:12).