

Finding Life in Jesus

Matthew 28:1-17 on Easter Sunday, March 31, 2024

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Please read Matthew 28:1-17 before going further in this transcript.

As we begin today's message on "Finding Life in Jesus," let's define what we mean by "life." The life that we're talking about here, is much more than just physical life; it's a comprehensive definition that includes our spiritual life, as well as our overall state of wellbeing. It includes our everyday lives here on earth, as well as our lives stretching on into eternity.

Life in Jesus can be defined as "the rescue, joy, and direction we find through a relationship with God, both now and throughout eternity."

> The rescue we find is our rescue from sin, being rescued from the judgment we deserve, for going our own way rather than living God's way.

> The joy we find is the joy of being in a personal relationship with our Creator, who knows best what makes us happy and content.

> The direction we find is the direction of knowing what to do with our lives, and how to find meaning and purpose, in this life, and the next.

In John 10:10 Jesus says, "...I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."^{1 2} So "Life in Jesus" is about having an abundant life; it's about living a life that's worth living. A life of meaning and purpose, a life that goes far beyond the simple struggles and pleasures that this world has to offer. So on Easter Sunday, when we talk about Jesus Christ being raised from the dead, it means that He proved that He defeated DEATH when His physical body was raised to life in its glorified form. And it also means that Jesus defeated SIN when God the Father accepted His perfect sacrifice on the cross, by raising Him from the dead, thus rescuing us from the consequences of our sin. This means that each one of us now has the very real opportunity to "Find life in Jesus," to find the rescue and joy and direction that we need. This life begins when we place our faith in Him, and when we follow Him as the Lord of our lives.

This "Life in Jesus" is the very life that His first century followers found, which is why they were so confused, and disheartened, by Jesus' death. The rescue, joy, and direction that they'd come to enjoy, seemed under threat. But, rather than being under threat, "Life in Jesus" was now fully assured due to His death and resurrection on their behalf.

¹ "Fat, contented, safe, flourishing sheep symbolize life at its best." *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2173 footnote on John 10:10.

² Pastor John Piper says it this way: <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/in-him-was-life>

Matthew 28 teaches us at least three things that are required for “Finding Life in Jesus”:

First of all, Finding Life in Jesus requires...

1) Faith in the existence of an unseen God with supernatural power.

Matthew 28:5-6 says, “The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.”³ You see, Jesus’ earliest followers had the extreme privilege of spending time with Him during His incarnation, while He was walking around on planet earth, eating and drinking, and laughing and singing. But now they needed to wrap their minds around a new understanding of Jesus, a Jesus who died, and then rose again with a glorified body. A glorified body that would soon be ascending into heaven, so now their faith would not have the advantage of sight. Jesus’ followers needed to have faith in the existence of an unseen God with supernatural power.

In verse 6, the angel says, “he has risen, just as he said.” Earlier, Matthew 16:21 says, “From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.” Jesus’ death and resurrection happened, “*just as He said,*” with supernatural power.^{4 5} During Jesus’ earthly ministry, His disciples had witnessed Him perform all sorts of miraculous healings and supernatural wonders.⁶ But now, their faith was being put to the test at a whole new level, because even though Jesus had predicted this very thing, they were finding His resurrection difficult to process.

Their faith was further tested by their contemporaries who opposed Christ at every turn.

Finding Life in Jesus requires...

2) Navigating opposition from people who want to keep us from following Him.

Matthew 28:12-13 says, “When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, “You are to say, ‘His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.’” So here we find outright deception and clear evidence tampering. These religious leaders had their hearts set on preventing people from following Jesus. Just when these religious leaders

³ “The stone was rolled back, the seal broken, and the soldiers made helpless, not to let the risen Messiah escape, but to let the first witnesses in.” D.A. Carson, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed. #9, Matthew - Mark*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 658.

⁴ We find similar predictions by Jesus in other chapters of Matthew, as well as in the other Gospel accounts. See Matthew 12:40; 17:22-23; 20:17-19; 26:32.

⁵ “This assertion by Jesus was contrary to all Jewish expectations. It was, nevertheless, in accordance with the Old Testament.” (*NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1620 footnote on Matthew 16:21.) Consider John 12:34.

⁶ Which proved His power and identity. See Mark 1:24-28; John 3:2; and Acts 2:22.

thought that this threat to their power and position had been squelched, Jesus' resurrection presented them with a whole new set of challenges. The irony is that this is the very scenario that they said they would prevent back in Matthew 27:62-64, "The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. 63 "Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.' 64 So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first."

Now in verse 64, the first deception is referring to Jesus' claim to be the Messiah, which we talked about last week on Palm Sunday. "This last deception" is referring to Jesus being raised from the dead.⁷ Here's the thing though, neither of these was a deception, and neither of these was going to be stopped by their meager human efforts to oppose them!⁸ Nonetheless, they put their full effort into conspiring to deceive, and they tampered with the actual evidence surrounding Jesus' resurrection.

Matthew 28:13-15 goes on, "...You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' 14 If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." 15 So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day." The hypocrisy of all this is just rich: After sending guards to prevent any deception by the disciples, they then pay those same guards to arrange for their own deception. They knew full well that Jesus' body hadn't been stolen, but that didn't keep them from using a good chunk of change to help build a false narrative, not to mention their assurance that they would shield the guards from Pilate's wrath.

You may recall that while Jesus was hanging on the cross, some of the religious leaders said this: "Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him."⁹ And yet, even after getting this firsthand report from the guards about Jesus' resurrection, their hearts were hardened toward the facts before them. Not only were they deceiving the people around them, but they were also deceiving themselves. Matthew 28:11 says, "...some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened." So they were given a clear report of what had actually happened: An earthquake, and a supernatural encounter with

⁷ *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1646 footnote on Matthew 27:64.

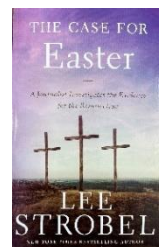
⁸ Consider Acts 5:38-39.

⁹ "The plan devised by the chief priests and elders proves...that their pious promises to believe, if Jesus would only come down from the cross (27:42), were empty." D.A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed. #9, Matthew - Mark*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 661.

an angel, and an empty tomb, which means that they had immediate, firsthand access, to compelling evidence, that Jesus Christ had risen from the dead.

It seems likely that at least a few of these religious leaders were wrestling with the facts before them. What of this report about an angel rolling away the stone? There's no indication that the religious leaders thought that the guards were lying, or mentally unstable, or whatever else.¹⁰ There must have been at least a few of these religious leaders who were asking themselves the sobering question: could it be that we crucified our own Messiah, and could it be that God had now raised Him from the dead? John's Gospel indicates that at least one of the Jewish religious leaders, a Pharisee named Nicodemus, seems to have come around to faith in Jesus. After all, he personally helped Joseph of Arimathea with Jesus' embalming and burial.¹¹ And Matthew's Gospel says that Joseph of Arimathea, who was himself a prominent member of the Sanhedrin, had become a disciple of Jesus.¹² So at least a couple of the leaders were being honest about the facts. If the religious leaders who were opposing Jesus, actually believed their own accusations about a stolen body, then why didn't they demand a search for Jesus' body? Why not bring in the disciples for questioning, and exert significant pressure on them to admit where they were hiding His body? I think we know why.^{13 14}

Finding Life in Jesus requires navigating opposition from people who want to keep us from following Him. That was true in the first century, and it's still true today. Fortunately, we have the opportunity to read the Bible for ourselves, and to do our own research on Jesus' claims. There are also a good number of other resources to help us think all of this through. One resource that we're making available this morning is Lee Strobel's booklet, "The Case for Easter." Don't allow the modern-day opponents of Jesus to deceive you or tamper with the evidence. Do your own study and research; do your own prayerful investigation into Jesus claims to be our Messiah and risen Lord. And if you really want to find the truth, ask God to reveal Himself to You. One of the reasons that we're sharing some recorded testimonies in today's



¹⁰ Much like the Roman centurion, who'd witnessed all that had happened at the foot of Jesus' cross, and then declared, "Surely he was the Son of God!," surely these guards, who'd witnessed all that happened at the empty tomb, must have seriously considered the supernatural reality behind their personal experience with Jesus.

¹¹ See John 3:1-21 and 19:38-42.

¹² See Matthew 27:57; Mark 15:43; Luke 22:50-51. Also, notice that Acts 6:7 later reports "...a large number of priests became obedient to the faith."

¹³ "it is significant that no early writer—Jew, Greek, or Roman—ever identifies a tomb in which Jesus' body remained." (Craig Blomberg, Matthew, vol. 22, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 424.)

¹⁴ Some skeptics assert that Matthew made up this report about the guards, when he wrote his gospel, in order to hide the fact that Jesus' body was actually stolen. However, take a look at Matthew 27:62. "If Matthew were trying to prove Jesus' body was not stolen, why does he not have the guards posted immediately instead of waiting until the next day." D.A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed. #9, Matthew - Mark*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 654.

service, is to provide firsthand, modern-day witnesses about the risen Christ. A key piece of evidence that Jesus is still alive and well some 2,000 years later, is that He's still changing lives today!

Finding Life in Jesus also requires...

3) Navigating our own personal doubts and hesitations.

Matthew 28:16-17 says, "Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted." There were now 11 disciples rather than 12, because Judas took his own life, after he experienced the deep remorse of betraying Christ.^{15 16 17} The end of verse 17 seems to come out of nowhere, "but some doubted." While it's certainly possible that some other disciples had come along with the 11, it's not specified here in the text. So it's likely that "some" refers to "some of the 11."^{18 19 20 21}

As surprising as this might at first seem to us, it actually fits quite well with other reports in the Gospels.²² For example, the disciples on the road to Emmaus come to mind.²³ Luke 24:25-27 records Jesus' words, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."

¹⁵ See Matthew 27:3-10 and Acts 1:18-19, which seems to indicate he bought the field indirectly through the money he'd returned to the religious leaders.

¹⁶ The mountain where they met up with Jesus, may very well be the same mountainside in Galilee where Jesus gave His famous Sermon on the Mount. See Matthew 5:1. Be that as it may, the fact that the Great Commission was given to Jesus' disciples in Galilee highlights its continuity with all that He'd been teaching them throughout His earthly ministry, including Matthew's five great discourses, as well as everything else in each of the four Gospels. (See Hill cited by D.A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed. #9, Matthew - Mark*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 663.) In other words, Jesus ministry, among and through His disciples, was far from over. It was only just beginning, as the book of Acts and the other New Testament books make quite clear. "Their climactic commissioning takes place at "the mountain" (or the hill country), recalling the setting of the Sermon on the Mount (5:1) and "the mountain" as a place of revelation and communion with God throughout Matthew (cf. 4:8; 14:23; 15:29; 17:1; 24:3; 26:30). They are in "Galilee" because Galilee is home but perhaps also because it is Galilee "of the Gentiles" (4:15). As in his life so also in his resurrection, Jesus anticipates the ministry of the gospel expanding beyond the boundaries of Judaism." (Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 430.)

¹⁷ So they left Jerusalem and traveled some 80+ miles north, up to Galilee. This wasn't a quick 2-hour car ride either; it would have likely taken a couple of days.

¹⁸ "some. Probably of the 11 disciples, though it may include others as well." *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1647 footnote on Matthew 28:17.

¹⁹ It's difficult to be certain either way, but Carson believes that Matthew is alluding to a larger crowd along with the 11, both here in verse 17 as well as earlier in verse 10. D.A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed. #9, Matthew - Mark*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 663.

²⁰ "We must therefore cope with the difficulty of people both worshipping and doubting. It is no accident that προσεκύνησαν ('worshipped') also occurs in the context of Matthew's only other use of διστάζειν ('doubt'; 14:31, 33). Peter doubts; all worship. The challenges to the faith of the one who, in faith, walks on the water to Jesus do not go away in the post-resurrection situation of the church. For Peter doubt gives way to worship; but amidst the challenges of life, both doubt and faith that leads to worship at times coexist. The possibility that one will prove to be 'of little faith' (14:31) remains." (John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2005), 1263.)

²¹ Because Thomas is the one who we remember for being singled out for doubting Jesus' resurrection (see John 20:24-29), we may tend to assume that none of the other 11 had any doubts or hesitations. But Matthew 28:17 should cause us to pause and reconsider this assumption.

²² See Luke 24:10-11,25-26,36-47.

²³ Also see John 21:4.

Many of Jesus' followers seemed to struggle early on, because Jesus' 1st coming, wasn't at all what they were expecting: the setting up of His earthly kingdom.²⁴ Instead, Jesus 1st coming was to suffer and die for sin, and they needed time to process this new reality.^{25 26} Even some of Jesus' dearest and closest disciples had a hard time understanding a Messiah who would die, and then rise again. It simply didn't fit into the framework of their Messianic expectations. They'd just had their hopes shattered by Jesus' death; they were running and hiding behind locked doors, cowering in fear, so it was a lot to take in!^{27 28} After all, this man had just been brutally tortured and crucified, and pierced through the side with a spear. There was absolutely no doubt in their minds that He had died. So it's understandable that it probably took a minute to come around to believing that He was alive again, and that He was indeed the risen son of God.²⁹

But why would the Gospel writers record this in their accounts? Why report these occurrences of doubt among Jesus' closest followers? I mean, why not leave this part out? Well, because that's the way it happened; they were reporting the facts, so they told the truth. There was never any pretending by the Gospel writers that belief would come easily to everyone, or equally to everyone. This was true even for the firsthand eyewitnesses. Some of them needed more time to process the information, just like some of us today need more time. And that's ok, it's called intellectual integrity, and that's a good thing.

This being said, all 11 of these men did eventually come to fully believe in who Jesus was, and to serve and worship Him accordingly. They became deeply devoted followers, who went on to lay down their lives for Christ. History records that most, if not all of them, went on to die for their belief in Christ. They became martyrs, martyrs who will one day experience their own resurrection, when Jesus comes again.³⁰

²⁴ Consider Acts 1:6-7, just moments before Jesus' ascension.

²⁵ "doubted. Belief in the resurrection was not instantaneous for them. After the traumatic experience of the crucifixion, it took time for the disciples to come to full faith." *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1647 footnote on Matthew 28:17.

²⁶ "Although Matthew stresses this theme less than Mark, he agrees with Mark that disciples often are foolishly unbelieving (6:30; 14:31; 17:20), even after the resurrection." (Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 716.)

²⁷ See John 20:19 and D.A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed. #9, Matthew - Mark*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 655.

²⁸ It wasn't all that long ago that they had run away in fear when Jesus was arrested. Tensions and emotions were running high. It shows a certain wisdom to be a bit more cautious when life feels out of control.

²⁹ "they may simply continue to exhibit an understandable confusion about how to behave in the presence of a supernaturally manifested, exalted, and holy being." (Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 430.)

³⁰ See 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

So don't be too worried if you, or someone you know, is having some personal doubts or hesitations. But don't let your doubts keep you from searching for answers. There are meaningful and satisfying solutions for whatever doubts any of us may be feeling. Ask God to help you by praying for understanding. In Matthew 7:7-8 Jesus tells His listeners, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened." We shouldn't allow our doubts to hinder us, any more than we should allow other people to deceive us or tamper with the evidence. Our doubts should motivate us toward a deeper searching, which will eventually lead us to the truth that God has for us.^{31 32}

Even with the risen Christ standing right there in front of them on a mountainside in Galilee, some of Jesus' followers needed time to assess what was going on, and to let it sink in. Far from being overly gullible, or too quick to believe, we find that some of them were hesitant to go "all in," at least, right away.³³ That's just how some of us are wired. For some of us, believing comes more naturally and easily, like the women at the empty tomb. For others, it takes a bit more time, like some of the disciples in Galilee – it comes only after a certain amount of prayerful searching, and intellectual processing. And that's totally ok.^{34 35} The important thing, is that we press on through our doubts, in order to find the life that's truly life. ***"Finding Life in Jesus" is what Easter is all about!***

³¹ One thing that I didn't have time to squeeze into this particular sermon is something called, "[The Dark Night of the Soul](https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/my-dark-night-of-the-soul)." This is an intense season of personal doubt that some believers will go through at some point in their faith journey. It can be a sort of spiritual depression that we can scarcely bear to admit. It's been described as a spiritual eclipse from God's light, when the light of God seems to go dark. One of the best articles that I've found on this is here: <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/my-dark-night-of-the-soul> If you're encountering something like this, please don't hesitate to contact one of the pastors.

³² Sometimes even in the lives of believers, doubts can creep in later in life. This may be due to persecution for our faith, or weariness from so many years of living in a fallen world, or certain griefs and losses that are such a burden to carry, or being weighed down by life's worries and anxieties, or unrelenting temptations toward sin, or maybe simply due to the fact that we are always learning and wondering about new things which bring about new questions that need answering.

³³ Speaking of hesitation, it's worth considering Carson's comment that "The verb used ('doubted')... does not denote intellectual disbelief but hesitation." D.A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed. #9, Matthew - Mark*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 663.

³⁴ "Jesus' resurrection was not an anticipated episode that required only enthusiasm and gullibility to win adherents. ...[Some of] Jesus' followers... [were still] hesitant; and their failure to understand his repeated predictions of his resurrection, compounded with their despair after his crucifixion, worked to maintain their hesitancy for some time before they come to full faith." D.A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed. #9, Matthew - Mark*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 664.

³⁵ "One suspects that the 'hesitation' (not doubt) sprang from the fact that the 'risen Jesus both was and was not 'the same' as he had been before.... There was a mystery about him which even those who knew him best were now unable to penetrate." Citing Wright, D.A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Rev. Ed. #9, Matthew - Mark*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010, p. 664.