

THE ANGEL ON THE STONE AT THE SEPULCHER

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Lessons: Matthew 28

The Lord had been crucified and His body had been tenderly laid in a new sepulcher. Over the door of the sepulcher a great stone had been rolled. Only Mary Magdalene and the other Mary remained, sitting over against the sepulcher.

So ended the day before the Sabbath, and the hopes of the Lord's disciples and other followers. Although He had told them that He would be crucified and rise again the third day, they had not understood what He had said, nor in their sorrow remembered His words.

But the chief priests and Pharisees, who hated and feared the Lord, did not forget what had been reported to them of His rising on the third day. They wanted to destroy His teaching and knew that belief in their own teaching would be weakened and belief in the Lord and in His teaching would be strengthened, if He should actually rise on the third day and people then should see Him and the empty sepulcher.

So the chief priests and Pharisees got Pilate's permission to seal the stone over the door of the sepulcher in such manner that it could not be moved without leaving evidence of the fact, and they set soldiers to guard against anyone moving the stone. By day and night the soldiers were to watch. In this manner the chief priests and Pharisees thought they made certain that the Lord's promise of rising on the third day could not be kept.

The Lord provided that this should be done, though none then knew it. He wanted to make sure that there would be no room for doubt about His resurrection. So He used His enemies to see to it that He could not come out of the sepulcher and that no one could get into the sepulcher to take away His body and then claim that He had risen.

We know that the Lord did rise on the third day. On the Sabbath none of the disciples or women or other people who loved the Lord, went to the sepulcher, because they obeyed the Word which taught them not to do such things on the sabbath. But very early in the dawn, on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the sepulcher. They didn't know about the soldiers guarding it, and asked, as they went, "Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulcher?" (Mark 16:3).

As the two Marys went to the sepulcher, an angel came down from heaven, rolled the stone away from the door of the sepulcher, and sat on the stone. At the same time there was a great earthquake. The soldiers guarding the sepulcher saw this happen and were so frightened that they shook and stood unable to move. They saw the women. They saw that there was no body in the sepulcher. And they heard what the angel said to the women.

The women, too, were afraid. They saw the stone rolled away and the angel sitting on it. The angel's face and figure were like lightning: his clothes shone like snow in bright sunlight. For a while they stood speechless with surprise and wonder. Then, the angel, knowing they were wondering where the Lord was, answered their unspoken question, telling them not to fear, that he knew they had come seeking Jesus who had been crucified. "He is not here; for He is risen as He said," the angel told them. He added, "Come, see the place where the Lord lay" (Matthew 28: 6). And when the women had looked into the sepulcher and had seen that the Lord's body was not there, the angel told them to go quickly and tell the disciples that the Lord had risen and they were to go to Galilee where they would see Him.

Hurriedly, the women went to tell the disciples what they had seen and heard. And as they hurried along the Lord met and greeted them. At once they knew Him and fell at His feet and worshiped Him. Then He sent them to tell His disciples and others who loved Him to go to Galilee where they would see Him.

After the women had left the sepulcher, the soldiers hurried to Jerusalem and told the chief priests and Pharisees what had happened. They were so frightened that they gave money to the soldiers and said they were to tell everyone that the disciples had come in the night, while the soldiers slept, and had stolen away the Lord's body. Like all people who tell one lie to support another, they did not remember that it would be impossible for the soldiers to know who had come while they were asleep! But the Lord let the chief priests and Pharisees do this, because it was another means of establishing the fact of His resurrection.

The great stone over the door of the sepulcher means the Word. Rolling it away from the door means opening the Word. This is one reason why an angel and no man rolled away the stone; for no person on this earth can open the Word. Not even an angel can open the Word by himself, only the Lord can do so, but He does such miracles by angels and by chosen humans. In the Word "angel" means the Lord's own truth, such as He meant when He taught people saying, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life". By His truth the Lord opens the Word so that people can see all the stories in it to be about Himself and the things from Him.

The stone was not rolled away from the door of the sepulcher to let the Lord rise and come out of it. Later He entered a room that had all of its doors closed and locked, and showed Himself to His disciples. In fact, it was His rising from the sepulcher that rolled away the stone from its door. This was done to let the women and disciples and even the soldiers look into it and go into it to see where the Lord had lain and that He was no longer there. For in rising, the Lord opened the Word and let people see the hidden meanings in it, let them see into the other world — into heaven — where is all resurrection, and where the Lord always can be seen in His glorified Human.

This also explains why there was an earthquake when the angel rolled away the stone. In the Word an earthquake means a change of thought. When the stone was rolled away there was an earthquake in the other world as well as in this world. Then the way spirits and angels as well as people thought about the Lord, and what they thought about Him, were changed. The Lord's resurrection completely changed the ideas about Him that angels, spirits, and people had, and it gave a new meaning to the Word. They were able then to see that the Lord Jesus Christ is truly the one God of heaven and earth in whom all the prophecies of the Word are fulfilled.

The women and disciples had thought the Lord to be dead. But now they knew He was still alive and recognized Him in the body which they saw with their spiritual eyes as the same Lord who had walked among them, lived with them, taught and healed them.

This is why they rejoiced greatly on that first Easter morn and on the following days when He again and again appeared to them and talked with them. This is why we sing joyfully songs to Him every Easter Sunday and listen with great joy to the story of the first Easter, when the angel sitting on the stone rolled away from the door of the sepulcher told the women:

Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and indeed He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him (Matthew 28:5-7).