

EASTER

Matthew 28

In the younger classes the teacher should start with a brief review of the Palm Sunday lesson and then tell the children as simply as possible the story of the last week of the Lord's life on earth. He spent the first two days of the week teaching in the temple, but at night He went out of the city to Bethany, the home of His friends Mary and Martha and Lazarus. On Thursday evening He went into the city again and celebrated the Passover feast with His disciples. It was at this feast that He instituted the Holy Supper, which in the Christian Church takes the place of the Passover. After supper He went out to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray, and it was there that the crowd, led by Judas, seized Him. He was tried before the high priest, before Herod, and finally before Pilate, the Roman governor. No fault could be found in Him except by the use of false witnesses, but they demanded His death, and on Friday He was crucified. This review of events should be given in full to the Juniors but more briefly to the younger ones.

Doctrinal Points

Disbelief in the resurrection is willful, not logical.

Easter means not only belief in a future life. It also means belief in the power of love over hate, of truth over falsity, in all of life.

The Lord's resurrection teaches that the Lord is always with us even though we cannot see Him with our physical eyes.

Notes for Parents

Easter is really the most important day in the church year, for although on Christmas we celebrate the Lord's coming into the world to be our savior, on Easter we celebrate not only the completion of the work He came to do but the glorious assurance that He is present with us forever in His divine humanity.

Most of us are familiar with the Easter story. Has anyone ever said to you, “How do we know there is another life? No one has ever come back to tell us about it”? And if you thought to answer, “The Lord came back and told us,” the person may say, “That’s what the Bible says, but how do we know it’s true?” We need to have the answer ready for that one, too. When the Lord was crucified, all His disciples—even the closest ones—thought everything was over, that they had made a mistake, that Jesus could not have been what He claimed to be. Some of them lingered in Jerusalem talking it over. Others went back immediately to their former occupations. If the resurrection had not taken place, they would have had no Gospel to preach and there would have been no Christian Church to change the whole course of history. It is as simple as that.

The resurrection itself changed history, and belief in it—real belief—changes the life of the person who believes. For it involves the acknowledgment that Jesus Christ was what He claimed to be: “the resurrection and the life,” “the way, the truth, and the life,” the heavenly Father revealing Himself to men. It means that it is God Himself who speaks to us in the Gospels and in the Word of the Old Testament, too, which He said taught of Him. It means, therefore, that it is our highest duty and privilege, as men and women, to read and study the Word and to try to form our lives on the pattern He gives us there. It means not only that death is not to be feared, but that it is the gateway to our real life and that our life in this world—whether long or short—is merely our beginning and our early school, our opportunity to learn how to live.

When we see this, we are like the disciples meeting the risen Lord on the mountain in Galilee. The whole plane of our thinking is lifted above worldly and selfish considerations. We breathe a purer air and we see our life in this world spread out before us in its true proportions and relations under the sun of heaven. Our difficulties and trials, which loomed so large in our former thought, now look small, and the lovely scenes that always lie beyond them appear.

The Lord says to us on Easter day, as He said to the disciples on the mountain in Galilee: “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth” and “Lo, I am with you all the days, even to the consummation of the age.” The Lord is always with us, closer than any earthly friend, with power to enable us to overcome our temptations, to meet all our trials as opportunities for spiritual growth, to bring comfort and help to those around us, and so to become children of our heavenly Father and inheritors of the kingdom of heaven.

Primary

Center your story on the first ten verses of the chapter and try to impress the children with the reason why we celebrate Easter. Get their minds away from the thought of bunnies and Easter eggs. Tell them something of what it meant to the disciples and what it means to us to know that the Lord conquered even death and that our own life goes right on just the same after the body dies. Tell them it was to teach us this that the Lord allowed Himself to be put to death.

On what day did the Lord come to Jerusalem for the last time?

How did He enter it?

Were the people glad to see Him?

What did He do in the temple?

Within a few days the people turned against the Lord.

Because He told them about their sins, they put Him to death.

The Lord knew all the time that this was going to happen, but He knew what would happen afterward, too, and He was not at all afraid to die. On Thursday night He came back into the city to eat the feast of the Passover with His twelve special disciples. And afterward He let the crowd capture Him, and the next day, Friday, He let them put Him to death.

Two of the leaders who had not agreed with the others got permission from the Roman governor to care for His body. They prepared it for burial in the Jewish fashion and placed it in a new sepulchre or tomb cut out of the rock. A great stone was rolled against the entrance of this sepulchre and it was sealed so that no one could get in. A guard of soldiers was also placed near it.

Who came to the sepulchre very early on Sunday morning?

Mary Magdalene was a woman whom the Lord had healed.

The “other Mary” was the mother of one of the apostles.

What did the women find?

What are we told had happened when the angel descended from heaven?

What did the angel tell the women?

Who met the women as they went to tell the disciples?

What did He tell them to do?

What day do we celebrate in the church in memory of the resurrection?

It is because the Lord rose on Sunday morning that Sunday is called the Lord’s day.

This is also the reason why we observe Sunday as the sabbath, instead of Saturday.

After He had talked with His disciples, what did the Lord command them to do?

Forty days after the resurrection the disciples saw the Lord ascend into heaven.

We may read the story of the ascension in Luke 24:50-53. (Cf. Acts 1:1-9.)

But the Lord promised to be with us always, and He is always with us even though we cannot see Him.



Junior

Try to find time for studying the first part of the chapter and also to take up verses 11-20, and to compare this account with the accounts given in Mark 16, Luke 24:1-12, and John 20:1-18.

What was last Sunday called?

What did the Lord do on that day?

How was He received?

What did He do in the temple?

The disciples thought the Lord was now accepted by all. But the religious leaders and most of the people were looking for a king who would overthrow the Roman government and make Judah a great nation again. They did not want a king who would expect them to change themselves. So they soon turned against the Lord and put Him to death. The Lord was crucified on Friday. During Saturday, the Jewish sabbath, His body lay in the tomb. But early Sunday morning the women who had loved Him came to the sepulchre. Mark and Luke tell us that they brought spices to anoint his body.

What did they find?

Who told them that the Lord had risen?

What had happened when the angel descended from heaven?

As they went away, who met them?

What did He tell them to do?

The accounts of the resurrection in the four Gospels are different in some ways. All the events recorded actually happened. No two people seeing an event remember exactly the same details, but we know that the words of all the Gospels were inspired by the Lord. That is, the Lord recalled to the mind of each of the four writers just what He wanted him to record and gave them the words in which to record it. When you begin to study the Scriptures in their internal sense, you will find that each story of the resurrection has its special lessons.

When the Lord was crucified, all the disciples forsook Him and fled. We read in several places how disheartened they were. They had put all their hopes in Him and He had apparently failed. Suppose they had never seen Him alive again. They would have returned to their homes and taken up their old occupations. They would have remembered some of the things He had told them, but they would have had no Gospel—no “good news”—to preach. There would have been no Christian Church.

How did the leaders try to prevent the truth’s being told?

Some people who do not want to believe in the Lord still say the same things.

The Lord passed through death to prove to the disciples and to us that He really is “the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25), that the death of the physical body is nothing but an onward step in our lives, that it does not change us in any way. If someone says to you, “I can’t believe in a future life; no one has ever come back to tell us about it,” you can say, “But that isn’t so: the Lord Jesus came back to tell us just that.” Anyone who calls himself a Christian knows this.

Where did the Lord say He would meet His disciples?

In the time of the Lord the Holy Land was divided into three provinces: Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. The Holy Land is a picture

of a heavenly character, and there are three divisions in this, too. Judea pictures our heart or will, Samaria our mind or understanding, and Galilee our outward conduct. So the Lord's words tell us that if we wish to come close to the Lord, we must not only mean well and think what is true but we must do what is right. And the place appointed by the Lord was on a mountain. You know that from a mountain we can look down on the land and see a long distance on all sides and see just how everything is located in relation to the whole view. So a mountain pictures a high or spiritual point of view. The Lord is close to us in our everyday life only if we are able to see that life from a high point of view. And His resurrection enables us to take this view of life because it shows us that our life here in this world is just the beginning of eternal life and that it is given us to use under the Lord's direction in such a way that our eternal life will be happy.

Forty days after the Lord's resurrection His ascension took place. Read the story of it in Luke 24:50-53. Even though we do not see the Lord with our physical eyes, He is with us always, as He promised. And we are called, just as the disciples were, to bring to other people the good news that God Himself came into the world in Jesus Christ to show us how to live and to teach us about heaven.



Intermediate

This is a brief lesson which lends itself to verse-by-verse explanation, especially through verse 10. The young people should be so familiar with the story itself that they should be very much interested in realizing that every detail has a correspondence relating to our ability to see living truth in the Word. Impress them with the idea that as long as we remain in mere knowledge of the letter of the Word, it is as if the Lord sleeps in the tomb, but when we begin to bring forth what we know and put it into use in loving service, the Lord rises and lives in us.

Just as we sometimes associate Christmas more with presents and decorations than with the church, so many associate Easter only with lilies and new spring clothes.

It is true that Easter always comes in the spring when we are rejoicing that winter is over and looking forward to the free outdoor life which comes with warmer weather. But no external enjoyment can be more than temporary, and we lose the whole importance of Easter if we do not see that it symbolizes an eternal springtime which we may enjoy if we recognize and accept the fact of the Lord's resurrection. Swedenborg tells us that in heaven it is always springtime (DLW 104). This is because there we shall be always going forward into new and fuller life and joy. When we depend on ourselves, we are always coming to the end of our powers. Our bodies grow old and wear out. Our minds reach their limits. Our good intentions are balked by ignorance and opposition. Only by means of the Lord's perpetual presence and help can we go steadily forward.

The women at the sepulchre recognized this. They had thought of the Lord as someone greater than themselves, but they had also loved Him as a man, as many people today still try to love Him. When they saw Him die on the cross and saw His body placed in the tomb they did not, as the disciples did, go back to their ordinary occupations. They stayed near the sepulchre and prepared spices to perform the last services for the body of the master they had loved. They represent our affections for truth, which cling to the thought of the Lord even when our minds are turned away by doubts. It is by means of these affections that the Lord can show Himself to us finally as He is. We must learn to put aside our childish ideas of Him as a man who long ago walked about the Holy Land performing miracles, and we must learn to see Him as our ever-present Lord and our all-powerful savior.

Our lesson tells of the measures which were taken first to prevent the resurrection and then, after it took place, to discredit it. This is what worldly reasoning tries to do in our minds. But the resurrection was a fact, a fact proved by the change it wrought in the apostles and by the change which belief in it accomplishes in every Christian life. It makes a great difference in our way of facing every problem of life whether we believe that this life is all there is

or believe that it is only the beginning of endless life. Not only death but life looks different.

The disciples met the Lord after His resurrection on a mountain in Galilee. Galilee, we remember, pictures the plane of our outward life and a mountain pictures a high state of thinking. We must be able to lift our thoughts above our natural selfish concerns and to see our everyday life as an opportunity to serve the Lord and the neighbor. Then the Lord walks with us in everything we do. When the Lord told His disciples to meet Him in Galilee, He was telling us to carry His principles into everything we do from day to day. Then our lives, like the apostles, will carry the “good news” to others and help to establish heaven on earth.

Basic Correspondences

women = affections

a mountain = a high or spiritual point of view

Senior

Stress the fact that disbelief in the resurrection, an attitude which these young people will soon meet in the world, is willful—not logical or reasonable. Emphasize also that Easter should mean for us not only belief in a future life but also belief in the power of love over hate and truth over falsity in every problem of life. We really believe in the Lord only so far as we trust and obey Him. Trust and obedience are the measure of our faith, and they will be the measure of our spiritual success.

Each of the four Gospels gives us some different details of the Lord’s trial, crucifixion, and resurrection. This is not strange, nor should it cause us to doubt any of them. If they were identical accounts, we might well say that one had copied from the other. Four witnesses to the same event will inevitably remember it differently. And we know also that in writing the Word the Lord directed the recollection of the human writers even to the very words they used, and that each Gospel had a sequence of its own important to the spiritual meaning.

In all the Gospels we learn that the first to discover the resurrec-

tion were the women who loved the Lord: Mary Magdalene, “out of whom he had cast seven devils,” Mary the mother of James the Less, and Salome, the mother of James and John. They had remained near the tomb after it was closed. They picture our affections for truth which cling to the Lord even when external evidence leads us to doubt.

Many people in the world today are like these women who loved the Lord. They still cling to Him blindly and try to keep close to Him even when the Bible is a “sealed book” to their minds. The letter of the Word, when its spiritual sense is not known, is like the tomb with the great stone sealing it.

We cannot see the Lord as He is so long as we cling to the historical figure alone, a man who lived in Palestine hundreds of years ago. The historical Christ must burst the tomb of finite ideas in our minds and rise. Like the women when they saw Him risen, we must worship Him. We hold Him by the feet when we follow His example in our daily lives, but we must also see Him as our God who says to us, as to the disciples, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth,” and “Lo, I am with you always.”

The Lord told His disciples to meet Him in Galilee. Galilee means the plane of everyday life. We do not have to withdraw from the world to come close to the Lord. We have only to obey His commandments day by day. But this does not mean that we are necessarily close to the Lord if we do external “good works.” The Pharisees did good works “to be seen of men.” We read, “Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee into a mountain where Jesus had appointed them.” If we are to meet the Lord in the plane of our everyday life, we must look at that life from the high place of His appointment. That is, we must see our everyday affairs as opportunities of serving Him and hold ourselves always subject to His direction. Only in this way will our lives be witnesses of Him.

Today, when Christianity is so often divorced from the Christ of the Gospels, it is well for us to remember that without Him we “can do nothing.” Our own ideas of right and wrong are not Christianity. Christianity is a life according to the teachings of Christ,

and our only knowledge of those teachings is found in the inspired Word.

Isaiah says, “His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:6) This prophecy describes the way in which the Lord rose in the minds of those who loved Him when He was on earth, and the way in which He must rise in our minds.

Adult

Most of the Adults may already be sufficiently familiar with the details of the Easter story and their meaning, although the correspondence of the tomb and the stone that sealed it should be mentioned. Good discussion topics are the historical effect of the resurrection and its implications for the New Churchman especially.

The first ten verses of our chapter are very familiar to all of us. Most of us know them by heart. It is a simple, beautiful story. The sorrowing women come to the tomb to care for the body of their master and friend, upon whom they had counted so much and whose death seemed to them the end of everything. But instead of the sealed tomb guarded by soldiers, they find the tomb open and empty and an angel of glorious countenance in white raiment, who tells them to fear not for the Lord is risen and will come to them in Galilee. Then, as they run to tell the wonderful news to the disciples, they see the Lord Himself coming to meet them. “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.” This resurrection scene takes place “in the end of the sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week.” Night always pictures a time of spiritual darkness and dawn the coming of a new spiritual day, a new state of recognition of the Lord. The sabbath of our first verse is not the holy sabbath of rest in the Lord, but the false sabbath of the religious leaders, the state of rest in the thought that they had triumphed by putting the Lord to death and would no more be troubled by Him. And the change is heralded by an earthquake, picturing a complete change in the state of the church.

The stone with which they had sealed the tomb represents their false interpretations of the letter of Scripture, by which they kept the people from seeing the spirit of truth within. False interpretations of the letter of the Word have not been confined to that day: they are prevalent today also and they still come between men and the Lord. The stone is rolled away when these false interpretations are given up and the Lord Himself is seen coming forth to reign and to bless.

The apostles were not the first at the sepulchre. In spite of all that the Lord had told them of His death and resurrection, they had given up hope when they saw Him die on the cross. But the women, who picture our affections, clung to the thought of the master even after His death and sought at the earliest opportunity—as soon as the sabbath was over—to serve Him still in the only way they thought remained to them. So our affections, even when hope seems dead, when the ideas of God in which we have trusted appear to be proved false, still cling to belief in the Lord Himself and seek to serve Him. And it is to this spirit of loving service that the Lord's resurrection is first declared. The keepers, who represent the false arguments in the mind which seek to keep the Lord in the tomb, to convince us that Christ is after all a mere historical figure, shake and become as dead men before the mighty truth of the resurrection. But this same truth encourages the loving affections and bids them instruct our thoughts and seek the Lord in the joy of willing service, in Galilee. We remember that Galilee pictures the plane of daily living and a mountain a high state of thought from which we can see our daily life in its true proportions and relationships. It is in carrying out the Lord's will in our daily life that we find His living spirit; without such active effort our knowledge of the Lord is dead. A similar truth is pictured by the fact that when the women actually saw the Lord, they “came and held him by the feet.” The Lord's “feet” are the outmost plane of His activity, where His spirit affects our conduct.

The resurrection was the promised “sign of the prophet Jonas” (Matthew 16:4). The Lord rose on the third day, and between that

time and the ascension forty days later, He walked and talked with many, opening their spiritual eyes to see Him.

But those whose spiritual eyes were closed by willful blindness did not see Him. That the apostles did see Him is proved by the effect on their lives. They had deserted Him when He was on the cross; they withdrew to mourn and wonder and doubt, as we see by the conversation described in Luke 24:13-21, and even the report of the women failed to convince them (Mark 16:10-11, Luke 24:10-11). But when they saw Him themselves, their whole life was changed; they then recalled and believed all He had told them of Himself, and were ready to go forth and suffer martyrdom for their belief in Him. Moreover their belief was so sure that they were able to convince others and to found the Christian Church. The very existence of the Christian Church is ample evidence of the fact of the resurrection. And the spirit of the glorified Lord working through the lives of those who accept Him has changed the course of history and brought about a new type of civilization. There is no logical reason to doubt that the resurrection was a fact.

If we accept the fact of the resurrection, we must believe, as the apostles did, that the Lord told the truth about Himself, that He is God with us, and that His Word is binding upon us. In the resurrection He gave the world a single great sign which stands for all time as proof of His claims and of His power. Belief in the resurrection entails upon us the responsibility of studying the Lord's teaching and obeying it, giving up our own judgment when we see that it is contrary to His teaching. This is the difficult side of the acceptance. But there is another and very joyous and beautiful side which we always have especially in mind on Easter Sunday. The Lord rose not only to prove to us that He is God, "the resurrection and the life," but to prove that His power is always victorious in the long run, that, whatever the appearance may be, falsity and evil always fail in the end. "Fear not them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do." If we will adopt the principles of love to the Lord and the neighbor as our ruling principles and act

steadfastly from them, nothing can harm us spiritually; everything that happens to us in this world, however hard and disastrous it may seem outwardly, will be turned by the Lord into a means of developing fuller and happier life; our lives, no matter how humble and circumscribed they may seem, will advance the kingdom of heaven on earth. And when life here is over, when the evil forces of worldliness and selfishness have done their worst, we shall merely discard the outworn garment which served us so imperfectly and rise to full life and freedom in the spiritual world. The resurrection shows us death as the gateway to life; it enables us to live in the certainty of eternal values.

And the resurrection teaches us another lesson. The Lord is always with us although our physical eyes cannot see Him. He is not far away in heaven, indifferent to our struggles and needs. He is always at the door, waiting to come in when we open to Him. He is nearer to us than any earthly friend we have. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He is always ready to listen and not only willing but able to help us, if only we will trust Him and accept His advice. “And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.” He says this to us. And He tells us, as He told the apostles, to go out in the strength of this knowledge and spread the gospel of the kingdom. What we need to remember is that the Gospel is His, not ours—the truth as we find it in the Word, not our own ideas of what the truth ought to be. Again and again we are told in the writings that the Lord’s spirit cannot act through falsity. Our church can succeed in the world and in our individual lives only so far as it is truly Christian, so far as it opens the way for the Lord’s presence and power by seeking Him in His Word and obeying the truth as He speaks it there.

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Arcana Coelestia, n. 2405: Concerning the correspondence of *dawn*: “As in the proper sense the ‘morning’ signifies the Lord, His advent, and thus the

approach of His kingdom, it is evident what it signifies besides, namely, the rise of a new church (for this is the Lord's kingdom on earth), and this both in general and in particular; in general, when any church on the globe is being raised up anew; in particular, when a man is being regenerated, and being made new (for then the Lord's kingdom is arising in him, and he is becoming a church); and in the least particular, whenever the good of love and faith is working in him; for in this consists the advent of the Lord. Hence the Lord's resurrection on the third day in the morning involves all these things (even in the particular and least particular) in regard to His rising again in the minds of the regenerate every day, and even every moment."

Arcana Coelestia, nn. 10591-10595: "Man has been so created that he cannot die in respect to his Internal, because he is able to believe in God and also to love God, and thus to be conjoined with God in faith and love; and to be conjoined with God is to live forever. This Internal is in every man who is born. His External is that by means of which he brings into effect the things that belong to faith and love, thus that belong to the Internal. The Internal is what is called the 'soul,' and the External is what is called the 'body.' The external which man carries about in the world has been accommodated to uses in the world. This external is what is laid aside when the man dies; but the external which has been accommodated to uses in the other life does not die. This latter external together with the internal is called a 'spirit'; a good spirit and an angel if the man has been good in the world; and an evil spirit if he has been evil. In the other life the spirit of man appears in the human form absolutely as in the world. He also enjoys the capability of thinking, of willing, and of acting, as in the world. In a word, he is a man in respect to each and all things, except that he is not encompassed with that gross body with which he was encompassed in the world. This leaves behind when he dies, nor does he ever resume it. It is this continuation of life which is meant by Resurrection. . . ."

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- P. What day is today? *Easter Sunday*
- P. Why do we observe Easter? *to remember Christ's resurrection*
- J. Why did the people turn against the Lord so soon after they welcomed Him as king? *they listened to the jealous religious leaders*
- J. Why did the Lord come into the city again on Thursday evening? *to eat the Passover*
- J. On what day of the week was the Lord crucified? *Friday*
- J. What do we call that day in Holy Week? *Good Friday* ["Good" in the sense of, "a day or season observed as holy by the church." –OED]

- J. What was done with the Lord's body after the crucifixion? *laid in a new tomb*
- P. Who came to the sepulchre on the first Easter morning? *the women*
- P. What did they find? *open tomb*
- P. What did the angel tell them? *He is risen*
- J. Where did the angel tell them the Lord would meet the disciples? *Galilee*
- P. As they went away, who met them? *Jesus*
- J. How did the religious leaders try to discredit the fact of the resurrection? *bribed guards to lie*
- P. What does the Lord's resurrection teach us? *after death we will live again*
- J. When Jesus met the disciples in Galilee, what did He first say about Himself? *"All power is given unto me . . ."*
- J. What did He tell them to do? *make disciples, baptize*
- J. What was His final encouragement to them? *"I am with you always"*
- I. Why did the Lord tell the disciples to meet Him on a mountain in Galilee?
Galilee = outer, everyday life
mountain = high state of thinking
- S. Why were the women the first to learn of the resurrection? *our affections for truth persist even when external evidence would seem to demand doubt*