



LITURGICAL SEASONS

# EASTER

*Season of Realized Hope*

Catherine Upchurch



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# *Introduction*

**Alive in the Word** brings you resources to deepen your understanding of Scripture, offer meaning for your life today, and help you to pray and act in response to God's word.

Use any volume of **Alive in the Word** in the way best suited to you.

- **For individual learning and reflection**, consider this an invitation to prayerfully journal in response to the questions you find along the way. And be prepared to move from head to heart and then to action.
- **For group learning and reflection**, arrange for three sessions where you will use the material provided as the basis for faith sharing and prayer. You may ask group members to read each chapter in advance and come prepared with questions answered. In this kind of session, plan to be together for about an hour. Or, if your group prefers, read and respond to the questions together without advance preparation. With this approach, it's helpful to plan on spending more time for each group session in order to adequately work through each of the chapters.

- For a parish-wide event or use within a larger group, provide each person with a copy of this volume, and allow time during the event for quiet reading, group discussion and prayer, and then a final commitment by each person to some simple action in response to what he or she learned.

This volume on the topic of Easter is one of several volumes that explore **Liturgical Seasons**. Our church accents seasons within each year that allow us to enter into the story of salvation. This is commonly referred to as the liturgical calendar. Its purpose is not to mark the passage of time but to understand the overall mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ, from his incarnation and birth through his ministry, death, resurrection, and sending of the Spirit. By meditating on the themes of these various seasons in the church year, we are more fully able to live the mystery of Christ in our own lives.

# Prologue

*“[A]s the first day of the week was dawning . . .” (Matt 28:1)*

*“Very early when the sun had risen, on the first day of the week . . .” (Mark 16:2)*

*“[A]t daybreak on the first day of the week . . .” (Luke 24:1)*

*“On the first day of the week . . .” (John 20:1)*

From the earliest times, Christians recognized that Jesus’ resurrection changed the world. They chose the day of his rising from the dead, the first day of the week, to celebrate the continuing presence of Jesus in their midst. It is as if every Sunday is Easter, set aside to confirm that because Jesus lives, so do we.

As followers of Christ, we can benefit from meditating on the events of Easter and considering the ways the risen Lord lives in us and through us. We are better able to cultivate an Easter spirituality—a conviction of hope in the face of sorrow—by studying and praying with New Testament texts that recount the empty tomb, describe encounters with the risen Christ, and explain what these realities mean for us. In this book we will explore three of these texts: two from the gospels and one from Paul’s letters.

Easter is a season that anchors us in hope, not wishful thinking. We hear the witness of believers who are like us: seeking, questioning, and wondering. In their witness to the risen Jesus, we realize that we do not have to look very far or have every question answered. Each sign of new life in our world flows from an investment in the kind of life that Jesus embraced, before the tomb and after it. This is the cause for our hope. Christ is truly risen!

# *He Has Been Raised*

*Begin by asking God to assist you in your prayer and study. Then read Matthew 28:1-10, an encounter with the risen Christ.*

## **Matthew 28:1-10**

**<sup>1</sup>After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb.**

**<sup>2</sup>And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, approached, rolled back the stone, and sat upon it. <sup>3</sup>His appearance was like lightning and his clothing was white as snow. <sup>4</sup>The guards were shaken with fear of him and became like dead men. <sup>5</sup>Then the angel said to the women in reply, “Do not be afraid! I know that**

**you are seeking Jesus the crucified. <sup>6</sup>He is not here, for he has been raised just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. <sup>7</sup>Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ Behold,**





I have told you.” <sup>8</sup>Then they went away quickly from the tomb, fearful yet overjoyed, and ran to announce this to his disciples. <sup>9</sup>And behold, Jesus met them on their way and greeted them. They approached, embraced his feet, and did him homage. <sup>10</sup>Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.”

*After a few moments of quiet reflection, consider the background information found in “Setting the Scene.” This information will help you put the passage in context.*

### *Setting the Scene*

The word “gospel” comes from the Greek *evangelion*, which means “good news” or “good tidings.” Jesus is the incarnation of God’s Good News for the world, and the four gospels announce the Good News of Jesus to communities with slightly different backgrounds and needs. The purpose of a gospel is to invite listeners to encounter Jesus and to follow him.

In each of the gospels, we find stories about the resurrection of Jesus (Matt 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; and John 20–21). The details vary somewhat, but none of the gospels describe the resurrection itself. Instead, these accounts describe the empty tomb of Jesus, giving witness that something unique has happened. And in each gospel, the risen Jesus eventually appears to his followers. That time between finding the empty tomb and encountering Christ himself is where the struggle between doubt and hope

plays out most dramatically. This happens for Jesus' disciples in every generation.

Matthew's resurrection account involves five scenes, two of which actually occur before the resurrection. In the first scene (27:57-61), Joseph of Arimathea requests the body of Jesus, lays it in his own tomb, and seals it with a large stone. In the second (27:62-66), the Jewish leaders request that Pilate place guards at the tomb to ensure that the body of Jesus will not be stolen. Jesus was known to have said his body would be raised in three days, so they did not want any possibility of trickery. In the third scene (28:1-10), which we will explore in detail, two women come to the tomb, discover it empty, are told by an angel that Jesus has been raised, and then encounter the risen Christ. In the fourth (28:11-15), the guards are bribed by the Jewish elders to say that Jesus' body was stolen while they slept. And in the final scene (28:16-20), the risen Jesus appears to the disciples gathered in Galilee and commissions them to make disciples of all nations, assuring them that he is with them always.

*Matthew 28:1-10 will now be considered a few verses at a time. Questions in the margins may be used for personal reflection, journaling, or group discussion.*

### *Understanding the Scene Itself*

<sup>1</sup>After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb.

In Matthew's account of the crucifixion of Jesus, we are told that "many women" who had followed Jesus from Galilee were faithfully present at the cross. But only two women are named: Mary Magdalene and "Mary the mother of James and Joseph" (27:55-56). While this is Mary Magdalene's first appearance in the Gospel of Matthew, we know of her from an account in Luke 8:1-3, where Jesus is said to have cured her of evil spirits and restored her to health. Mary the mother of James and Joseph is presumed to be "the other Mary" mentioned both at the burial of Jesus (27:61) and here with Mary Magdalene, as the two women approach the tomb on the first day of the week (28:1).

In other accounts of women coming to the tomb of Jesus, they are reported to be there to anoint his body (Mark 16:1; Luke 23:55-24:1). But in Matthew's account, an earlier anointing of Jesus takes the place of the anointing at the tomb. This anointing occurred in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, just a few days before Passover and the arrest of Jesus. There, a woman poured a jar of costly perfumed oil over Jesus' head, much to the dismay and objections of the disciples (26:6-13). Jesus used the moment to tell his disciples that she was preparing him for burial and that her action would always be remembered.

The story of the women coming to the tomb provides witnesses to the resurrection events. Their coming also demonstrates the power of loving witness to the death of a loved one. What are some of the ways we honor those we love who have died?



When have you realized some spiritual truth from an unexpected person, someone you may have bypassed in usual circumstances?

Readers of Matthew's gospel today cannot help but notice that it is three women who pay Jesus the homage that is the only fitting tribute to his sacrificial love—the woman who anointed him, Mary Magdalene, and “the other Mary.” These faithful followers of Jesus possess a level of understanding that is still eluding the likes of Peter, James, John, and the other apostles. Jesus' ministry consistently embraces those who are discounted by society. How appropriate that the ones who stand by him in this dire time are those ordinarily overlooked or even shunned by others!

<sup>2</sup>And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, approached, rolled back the stone, and sat upon it. <sup>3</sup>His appearance was like lightning and his clothing was white as snow. <sup>4</sup>The guards were shaken with fear of him and became like dead men.

The description of an Easter earthquake is unique to Matthew's account, as is the earthquake that earlier accompanied Jesus' death (27:51-52). Matthew wants his audience to connect the death and resurrection of Jesus with Old Testament theophanies, or manifestations of God. In this gospel, earthquakes—earlier described as the “beginning of the labor pains” (see Jesus' words at 24:7-8)—are expected to usher in the fullness of God's kingdom. Just as the earth labors in storms, earthquakes, tornadoes, and floods, creating new pathways and surfaces,

God labors to bring about a new reality through his Son's life, death, and resurrection.

Matthew includes further evidence of God's intervention in the appearance of "an angel of the Lord" at the tomb of Jesus. Just as an angel assured Joseph that Mary's pregnancy was the result of divine intervention (1:18-21) and then appeared again to protect the infant Jesus and his family from the murderous plans of Herod (2:13-15), God's messenger now appears to the women at the tomb.

The gem in these verses is the reaction of the guards who "were shaken with fear of him and became like dead men." The guards are present at the tomb as a sign of imperial power, presumed by many to be absolute. Jesus, even a crucified and buried Jesus, is seen as a threat to the power structure of his day. As an appointee of the Roman emperor, Pilate's job is to preserve law and order and to quash any possibility of threats, not only to the emperor's position, but also to the status quo. Rather than standing courageously

When have you seen the power of natural events, even dangerous or disastrous ones, reshape understandings about God or the power of community?

