

The First Day!

By Dr. Dave Neale

This is a day of celebration, our greatest high holiday of the Christian year!

It is the day the church gets to party and rejoice, to kick up its heels, today the Kingdom of God is a party! For He is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!

Any words or phrases that a preacher might choose to attempt to elucidate the terrifying grandeur of the resurrection morning will never be equal to the task.

All of our words are so very earthbound, so common, that there is a numbness that can obscure the truth of it all. The great peril is that we diminish the light by our cliches and overly used phrases.

One feels almost that we should read the Gospel accounts and then sit down!

So this Easter morning I'm going to hold three ideas up before you to help us glimpse the grandeur.

They all work together – they all say the same thing in somewhat different way – they all depend absolutely on the evidence of an empty tomb on that morning long ago.

The first two ideas have been the topic of our messages the last two weeks. Allow me to remind you because, if you are like me, I can't remember where I put my phone down ten minutes ago much less be able to tell you what the preacher said two weeks ago!

Idea number one: Two Sundays ago we talked about the resurrection of Lazarus at Bethany and we found there the astonishing words of Jesus, ***I am the resurrection!*** It was Eugene Peterson who helped us see the syntax of the Greek perfectly clear: ***You don't have to wait for the End. I am, right now, resurrection and life.***

That is all you need to know about the Christian life. This is it. Every day is resurrection day for the Christian. If we can get our heads around that we have some juice for life! Wow!

Idea number two: Last Sunday we unpacked the six OT passages that elucidated the Triumphal Entry, one of which was Jacob' end-of-life word to Judah.

Basically, Jacob said the scepter would reside in the Tribe of Judah for ever (Jesus' lineage) and that when that day comes for his kingdom, the world will be a place of divine abundance. So much so that the little donkey will be tied up to the best vine in the vineyard and eat all the grapes he wants!

Now idea number three: let me bring us to today's text and show you what I mean.

The Gospel Matthew has about 1000 verses in it. Do you know how many he devotes to the entire resurrection narrative – 20 verses, 2%). Mark is even more succinct just 8 verses out of 660! Truth doesn't need a lot of words.

In our passage from Matthew this morning he begins the narrative this way: ***After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.*** (Matt 28:1)

You hardly notice this, but it is very significant that Matthew says, ***...after the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning...***

In fact, in spite of many differences, even inconsistencies, in the four resurrection accounts, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, all four begin their narrative in exactly this way.

After the sabbath, on the first day of the week...

If you've heard me before you know that every time we reread a NT passage together, discover that by probing intertextuality between Old and New Testaments we find different layers of meaning that really make these ideas pop for us today!

This morning there aren't any direct references to OT in the resurrection narrative of Matthew.

I liken this narrative to someplace we've never been before.

Those of you who are skiers will appreciate what I mean by the bliss of "fresh tracks." It snowed a foot last night. You got there early. You go to that back bowl not everybody knows about. And there it is... untouched and fresh. Nobody has been here yet today! So you drop in and away you go! That is the bliss of powder skiing!

That is the bliss of the resurrection story! There is bliss here because it is new. It's untracked, its fresh!

Even though our narrative doesn't directly quote an OT text (because the resurrection of the Son of God was completely unforeseen), there is *indirect reference* to the greatest OT story of them all, an unmistakable allusion to the creation of the world here.

As the first day of the week was dawning reminds us Genesis 1:1-5:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth... God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light... And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

*Yom ahad. Day 1.*¹

The whole structure of the creation account in Gen 1:1-2:3 is based on the numbered days, 1-7.² Day 1 all creation was new and God created light.

In fact, we can see that the foundational concept of modern time on earth is a reflection this very idea of 7 days in a week. It is amazing when you think about it.

The reference to "first day" here in Matthew 28:1 (and the other three gospels as well³) is an allusion to the beginning of a new creation. The dawning "first day of the week" is the first day of a brand-new world, illumined by the reality of Jesus' resurrection.

In Hebrew the days of the week don't have names, they have numbers. Shabat, the word from which we get Sabbath and Sunday is the number seven in Hebrew.

The first day of the week (our Sunday) is *Yom Rishon*,⁴ the "first day." *Yom Sheni* is the second day (our Monday), and so on.⁵ Using the ordinals.

I don't speak Hebrew so don't be too impressed. I learned this from YouTube!

Yom Rishon, the "first day", begins at sundown on our Saturday. At dawn of *Yom Rishon* Mary Magdalene and the other Mary find the tomb empty and encounter the angel of the Lord.⁶

An angel appeared in clothing ***white as snow***, whose ***appearance was like lightning...***

He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay – see?... he has been raised from the dead! (Matt 28:6-7) Fresh tracks.

From the Text

My message to you this Easter morning is this.

Nothing in time or history has been the same since that moment. This is that place in the Creed where we talk about the phrase “he suffered death and was buried.” Period. New sentence ‘On the third day he rose again in accordance with the scriptures...’ That hallowed, unfathomable space between the period and the capital letter.

This is the day that gives every other day of the year in the life of the Christian its meaning. No resurrection, no hope! Just give up! It’s all for nothing! You might as well just do your best to drag yourself to the end of your days.

Yom Rishon is the day of a second chance at life. Everything is new in God’s eyes. Each *Yom Rishon* is an opportunity to refresh our experience of the resurrection and seek new paths for doing good – no matter how unhelpful our choices were last week.

Yom Rishon is not a day of making resolutions. It’s not the Christian New Year. It is not a day in which all (or even any!) of our worldly problems are solved!

But our biggest problem is solved: the plight of unforgiven sin that can pull us from the joy of salvation and condemn us to a meaninglessness and death.

[Musicians come]

Last week we spoke of the heavily laden vines of the kingdom. Those choice vines that Jacob said even the donkeys would be able to eat their full in the day of the Messiah. That’s us! *Yom Rishon* is opening our arms to the abundance of the kingdom.

It is releasing oneself into the spiritual fertility expressed in the language of the conquest of death. It is the day when everything is made new. So ya... we party!

Now we look inside, and what we see is that anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life burgeons! Look at it! (2 Cor 5:17, The Message)

Of Jesus it is said in our song of worship:

Death could not hold You
The veil tore before You
You silence the boast of sin and grave
The heavens are roaring
The praise of your glory
For You are raised to life again!

Benediction:

And now may the God who establishes a new creation every day through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, make your life a new creation. Thanks be to Jesus who sits at the right hand of God with all the angels, authorities and powers subject to him.

Thanks be to God. Amen (1 Peter 3:21-22)

¹ The seven days of creation are found in Genesis 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31; 2:2.

² This is also where we could look with profit at other passages that allude to the creation of light at the dawn of creation, most prominently John 1.

³ Also Mark 16:1; Luke 24:1; John 20:1.

⁴ Rishon is the ordinal form of *ahad*, the Hebrew numeral one.

⁵ *Yom Rishon*, the first day (Sunday); *Yom Sheni*, the second day (Monday); *Yom Shlishi*, the third day (Tuesday); *Yom Revi'i*, the fourth day (Wednesday); *Yom Chamishi*, the fifth day (Thursday); *Yom Shishi*, the sixth day (Friday); *Yom Shabat*, the seventh day (Saturday).

⁶ So we have Jesus crucified Friday morning, *Yom Shi-Shi*, the Sixth Day. Joseph of Arimathea wanted to get Jesus buried before the commencement of Shabat at sundown on day 6/7.