



Those Others Who Arose

The glorified Saints of Matthew 27:53

The shout will go up again this Easter Sunday from pulpit and pew all over the world: “*He is risen!*” For on this day, we especially remember the resurrection from the dead of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was triumphant over all the powers of the evil one.

But Jesus was not the only one to be resurrected. When He died, many others arose from the dead. After His resurrection they went into Jerusalem and appeared to many people.

That’s a strange story, and one that evokes many questions. One of those which keeps popping up isn’t actually directly related to what we read in Matthew 27. Where did they go? Where did the bodies of those resurrected saints end up after the Resurrection?

Of course, that’s not the main point of what Matthew is telling us. He is declaring ‘The Miracle of the Open Tombs’ – Christ’s victory over death. The Advent Church returns to symbolise the fact that, because of Christ’s death and resurrection, they are in glory right now!

However, the question remains. Where did these men and women end up? For that matter, where were they in the three days between the supernatural opening of the tombs and their appearance in the city?

There are other questions, too. This is a true, but unique, story. Let’s see why.

The time these saints reappeared

The first thing we note is the time frame for this event. This is where Matthew says, *and after Jesus’ resurrection*. Remember that they haven’t actually been seen yet. Their witness to Christ’s victory over death lies in the fact that they couldn’t be seen – at least, not their bodies! Everyone saw which of the opened tombs had the bodies missing. They were the ones who had believed and prophesied that the Messiah would come.

Now no doubt remains: they are seen. All thoughts and talk about their disappearance vanish, because the people are right there!

In the same way that the torn curtain, the earthquake, the rocks splitting, the tombs opening and the bodies of the dead being raised occurred when Christ died, this appearance of the resurrected saints marks the time when He arose from the dead.

We read of something similar in the story of the transfiguration. There was a definite purpose for that: it was a foretaste of the glory of the Messiah. The three key disciples are pointed clearly to where it is all going. And it happens at a particular time in the ministry of Jesus.

In the same way, there’s a clear reason for the presence of these saints on this occasion. They give us a foretaste of the glory of believers. We realise we’re being joined with them in the Church.

The Jewish rabbis taught that in the messianic era many righteous would arise from the grave. They had even gone as far as to name which patriarchs would appear. Now, those righteous people are here. The word of prophecy is falling into place. It’s all coming at the right time, because these saints only appear after Christ has risen. They could only be witnesses after the Great Witness Himself had testified.

Klaas Schilder points out that the first Sunday of the Christian church, the first Sabbath of the New Testament, is here acknowledged and kept by the dead before being discovered and celebrated by the living. In the words of Romans 14:9, "*Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of the dead and the living.*"

This makes the ultimate difference. For the people of this world go to the cemetery to mourn, and some of them spend the whole day there doing just that! But Easter Sunday, for the Christian, turns the cemetery into the greatest reunion in history. Man's way leads to a hopeless end: God's way leads to an endless hope!

Together with Christ, who is the first-fruit, there comes all this other fruit. It's the beginning of the most incredible harvest in the world!

That's why Matthew tells us about the reappearance of these saints. It couldn't happen at any other time but this: God's perfect time.

The place these saints reappeared

It couldn't have been in any other place. Matthew 27:53 says, "*They went into the holy city.*" And because of what we've read before, it seems as if they came from the cemetery outside the city.

Not necessarily, though. Where had they been during the three days in between Christ's death and resurrection? If it is true that they had risen from the dead and come out of the tombs on the Friday afternoon, it all depends on where they had been since then.

This is commonly acknowledged by the commentators to be a mystery. They say it's part of the unexplained – something we might get to know about in heaven, if we're really that interested in it then!

Could it be, though, that in their glorified state they had been in heaven itself for that period of time? That's where a number of other equally glorified saints are – people like Enoch, and Moses, and Elijah. When it was time for them to reappear, they did indeed go into the holy city. The holy ones entered the holy city to testify to the Holy One!

Could they still now call Jerusalem the holy city? She who had persecuted the prophets of the past, and now murdered God's own Son – the greatest prophet of them all!

Jerusalem is the holy city – she represents where God is with His people, and by God's sovereign grace she was the place where He had been among His people. Not by virtue of the people themselves: we could never look to them. As indeed we could never depend now on the leaders and members of the Church universal. But because she is Christ's, she is holy!

While we may despise what people in the Church may do, let's never disparage the Church. She is our mother as God is our Father. In Christ He is the husband who, like Hosea, has been the faithful husband, constantly saving her. And in the end, He paid His own life for her. She still has His purpose for her to fulfill!

In Acts 1:8 the Lord Jesus, as He is about to ascend back to heaven, tells his disciples, "*you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*" Therefore, the city of Jerusalem is where it starts. She is the capital city of the King. From here the Gospel goes throughout the whole world.

Matthew's readers would have been so overwhelmed! Heaven has come down to earth. The soldiers of the King tell us D-day has come, and the battle has been won. They come in the Name of the Son!

The place where the Lord had His visible presence is now only the first place of all the places His presence will go. And it will be in Jerusalem that everything for us will end: the new Jerusalem! As the apostle John pictures it in his vision of Revelation 21:2-3,

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.'

The Jews have an expression which has passed down through the generations. They say it to their fellow Jews when they take their leave. When they say goodbye, they say, "Next year Jerusalem!"

Christians, let's look to enter the holy city, too, which is for us the heavenly Jerusalem. Because we're going to the One up above – the One where we'll stay forever!

The way these saints reappeared

The *time* and the *place* these saints re-appeared is vital. It points to what Christ has done and the difference that will make all over this world and for all eternity! But these two things themselves could only occur because of the way these saints reappeared. So we come to consider now the last phrase in verse 53: *After Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city **and appeared to many people.***

Over the years we can meet all kinds of people. Many we won't remember at all in time to come. So what makes us remember them? Because meeting these saints would have been an unforgettable experience! Why do we recall certain people and not others? What stands out about them? Perhaps it is the way they look, the way they talk – maybe it's the unusual name they have! What would make these men and women not only unforgettable, but also quite recognisable? Even if they had died hundreds of years before?

The account of the Transfiguration helps us here, for it is quite clear who Moses and Elijah are (Matt. 17:1-8). Jesus becomes glorified before them there in the presence of two old covenant saints who already live in eternity: they whose brightness is awesome!

Their glory is so obvious that Peter wants to put up shelters for them. But that's when the voice from the cloud speaks, and they realise why Moses and Elijah are there. That is why those two were gone when the disciples looked up after humbling themselves before the voice. They had completed the witness to their Lord.

And it's the same in our text. As soon as they had testified to the Lord, the saints went up. Let's not think otherwise. They couldn't have lived their lives ever again amongst us. Just think of the confusion and disruption that would have created for those who had died only a few years before! Would their spouses have to take them back, even if they'd remarried in the meantime? Hebrews 9:27 makes it very clear, *man is destined to die once*. That's God's order for us. Not even a hint of reincarnation here!

These saints didn't live human lives again. Nor either did they stay until Pentecost, as some have suggested. If that was the case, we would be sure to find other references to them in scripture. And, anyway, what would that add to their purpose in being here? That purpose was to connect Christ's death to His resurrection. They proclaim that He is the One – the Messiah all the ages of the Church have looked hopefully for. They prove that Christ is the second Adam, for they have glorious bodies. What was sown in weakness, to use the words of Paul in 1st Corinthians 15 verse 43, is now raised in power. We've got something out of this world to look forward to!

And it's all due to the One they witness to. To take our eyes off Jesus for a moment is to miss the One Whom this is all about. He is Christ the King! He rules everything because he has conquered death's sting! He has comprehensively defeated sin.

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