

Series: THE ANSWER NO ONE EXPECTED - April 24, 2011

**THE FINAL BEGINNING
Matthew 28**

1. Crying comes naturally to human beings. I mean, when you think about it, we start life by crying. Mom's cry, babies cry—Dad's pass out. I mean, if you're a baby, you just decide that you're going to be tough and stoic about the whole birth thing—you could get **smacked!** Interesting—there are tears of pain **and** tears of joy. But there are never laughs of pain. As tough as some of us are, we all cry—when we're hurt, frustrated, ashamed, afraid, and in pain.

a. But the cries **help** are in a category all their own. Every single day, people groan and cry and reach out to the world, to God, to **Someone** for help. People in pain so bad they can't help but groan. People whose relational pain and sense of aloneness drives them to desperation. The cries for help come from terrified parents; from people who face death, kidnapping, rape and torture. It comes from people who work in **horrible** abusive conditions—and are trapped. The cry for help comes from people who live in financial desperation—**and** from people isolated and encased in their money. Terror, pain, fear, agony, need, horror and desperation has no boundaries.

-Every hour of every day—the cries for help are deafening. Help! **Please** help! Does anyone hear me? I can't hold on any longer! I can't make it on my own!

b. These cries have been going on for **thousands** of years. And the **question** is—**does God hear?** And maybe the even **greater** concern is...**does He even care?** Some people would rather believe that there is **no** God—than a God who **hears** all these cries—and frankly, doesn't care.

2. God, by definition, is immense; I mean, if he can speak a universe into existence, He obviously has no limitations. We are tempted to think, "You know, if **I** were God—I would **immediately** end all this pain! **NOW!**"

-If the historical records are correct—and I believe they are--God's answer to all these cries for help—was Jesus. We believe that 2000 years ago, God didn't snap his fingers and declare an end to all sadness, God actually **showed up!** He somehow laid aside his power and authority as God, was born to a young Jewish virgin. His birth was surrounded with angels and prophecies, but he actually grew up as a very normal kid in a small town in the hill country of Palestine.

a. After a career as a construction worker, He started His ministry as a Teacher—telling people the **Good News** of the **Kingdom**. Of course, like us, people had all kinds of ideas of what this meant; visualizing a mixture of Rambo, the Terminator and Superman. Someone who would immediately right every wrong, solve every problem—and put an end to pain, oppression and evil.

-Know that scene from **Bruce Almighty**—where he's looking at millions of prayers in the computer—and, to save time, he does an **answer all—YES?**

Well, Jesus didn't do that. The amazing miracles He did made it clear that there was **nothing** outside of his power. I mean, he healed every imaginable disease and disability; fed thousands with a single bag lunch, turned water to wine—and raised people who had been dead for **days**. But every act involved a personal touch with a **real** human being—whose needs were different than the obvious problem they faced.

-And, when you think more deeply behind these miracles—they were **astounding**—but, actually, **temporary** solutions to problems. The blind and deaf and lame he healed—aged, had more health problems and eventually died. The wine Jesus made eventually ran out; the seas grew stormy again—and even the dead people he raised—eventually died—again.

- b. And at the end of the record of Jesus' life—unless you read the last chapter--it would appear that those who **usually** win—**won**. The religious leaders conspired with the political leaders—then had Jesus arrested, beaten, and executed by crucifixion--the most humiliating, painful form of execution humans have been able to invent.

-There has been speculation that Jesus survived the cross. He didn't. While he was hanging there, the local death expert—the Centurion who had executed **hundreds**—shoved a spear through his side into his heart. Yep. He was dead. So they pried the spikes out of his hands and feet and threw him in the dirt. Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish ruling council, asked Pilate for Jesus' body. He and Nicodemus, solemnly wrapped Jesus' body in a linen shroud, and put it in the grave Joseph had carved out of solid rock for himself. And then they rolled a massive custom made stone in front of the entrance. and went home.

-It **seemed** like Jesus' life—and all He stood for—were over. All the hopes that God's power and grace and life would put an end to oppression and hunger and poverty and need—seemed to die on that cross and get thrown in the cave--buried behind that massive stone. -And it would seem that Jesus' followers who had proclaimed him the Jewish Messiah, the Son of God had scattered in fear. Maybe Jesus had promised what He just **couldn't** deliver.

3. Has anyone here **ever** in your life, had an ad or a sales person over-promise and under-deliver? Sometimes I watch TV ads—and think, “Are there really people who are stupid enough to believe this?” That the **ab-roller** or the **box-flex** or **weight-watchers** will give you a body that looks like that. **Really!** Car ads promise that you will glide through streets—and people will stop everything and **stare** at your car! That a dinky little pack thing of fat-free yogurt will cause you to lose track of time!

-Bosses over-promise, under-deliver. Political candidates to it—you know, over-promise and under-deliver. But it **really** hurts when friends—or partners do it. “I will stand by your side **no matter what! I will always be your friend**”—then, things get weird. It happens between lovers—and partners. **I will ALWAYS love you! Better or worse, richer—or poorer**—doesn't matter. I promise!

-But the **ultimate** in over-promising and under-delivering happens with kids. That little bundle comes into our homes—and we are the happiest people on earth. But we don't always **stay** happy, patient and loving, do we? **Over** promise; **under** deliver

-On Saturday, Jesus is laying cold, dead and decaying in a cave behind a massive rock—and I'm guessing that everyone who heard him teach thought, "I guess he just couldn't pull it off. He over-promised—and under-delivered."

***I am the way, the truth, and the life...**

***I am the resurrection and the life;**

***Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened—and I will give you rest**

***I and the Father are one...**

***I am the Good Shepherd...my sheep hear my voice...**

-I mean, Jesus **promised** the Kingdom. Jesus said that He had the power to forgive sins and made it clear at his trial that he was the Messiah—and would return on the clouds of Heaven to judge the living and the dead.

-But **now** he was dead. But...as Sunday dawns—there are glimmers that **something** has happened. Whispers, rumours, started drifting back to those who had laid everything on the line to follow Jesus. And the **first** people to know something had happened were the women who had followed Him. Matthew's account says:

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said.

Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."

So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

(Matthew 28:1-10 NIV)

- a. In a culture like ours, some people read this and think, **"No-o-o! Come on! Things like that don't happen. Someone's been messing with the truth!"**

The problem is that if someone in that culture was writing fiction—they wouldn't use women as the heroines. It was blatantly sexist—and women weren't

allowed to even testify in court. If someone were creating fiction—they'd have used men.

-But the first witnesses in all the accounts—are women. **They** are the ones who have courage to watch Jesus die and see exactly where he's buried. When they come back, they're **not** expecting him to be alive; they simply want to bury him properly.

- b. As you read the other accounts, it becomes clear that **no one** expected Jesus to be alive. When the women first tell the male disciples what's happened, it's not like these guys say, "**Yes! I believe!**" What these pillars of the faith **believe** is that the women have gone crazy. So **they** go to see what's happened. Other accounts tell us that Jesus, later that day, showed up while they were hiding. He says, "Look at my wounds! Go ahead, **touch me!** I'm not a ghost!

- c. What became clear as these encounters amassed over the next month—with over 500 people—is very simple. **Jesus can be trusted—He will never let you down.** The angel said to the women there at the empty tomb:

He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. (Matthew 28:6 NIV)

-In other words, "He **told** you this would happen—several times, in fact!"

The angel wasn't shaming them—just telling them the facts. "Would Jesus, Son of God, Saviour—the truth—ever lie? Is God in the habit of **overpromising** and **under-delivering**? No. He doesn't have to! He's not **selling** anything!"

- d. Jesus, told the women to convey a message; he would meet the disciples in Galilee. Now, Galilee was about 70 miles away—so it took some time for the disciples to all get there. The question was—would **Jesus** be there?

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:16-20 NIV)

-Did you notice that even with Jesus standing **right in front of them**--the response was mixed among these first witnesses—maybe like it is right here this morning. **When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.**

Some believed, were ready to write and sing songs about the fact that Jesus, the Son of God, Saviour, was alive—**Yes! It happened! I knew it would!"**

-Others? They doubted. Now, remember who they are; the **eleven**. They'd all been with him for three years. They'd seen pretty much every single miracle; they'd stuck with him when others walked away. And **some** are apparently thinking, "Mmmmm—not so sure. Could be a party trick. Could be smoke machines. Mirrors. David Copperfield."

-And Jesus' response to these doubters? "**All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore...BURN, INFIDELS! SONS OF EVIL...!**" No. "All of you—believers and doubters,

"...Go make disciples of all nations, baptizing them..., teaching them... And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."
(Matthew 28:19, 20 NIV)

4. And so, they did—initially as a community of believers **and** doubters. This story is **thousands** of years old, and it's never changed.

Every single one of these people could've saved themselves a painful death if they'd said, "Uh, no. I **could be wrong!** After all, I was pretty excited." But the earliest and best records tell us that all but one of these witnesses are executed. Peter **and** his wife was crucified—her first. James was beheaded in Jerusalem. Thomas, chronic doubter, carried the Good News of the Kingdom to India—where he was speared to death. Matthew, author of this account, was executed too.

-What's interesting is that in this account there is no real **proving** going on. No clips for **YouTube**. No burial cloths sealed in clay jars or Tupperware. Jesus never said, "Now, develop an airtight case filled with facts—and prove to **everyone** that my resurrection is real." In fact, the people who witnessed to Jesus resurrection make themselves look bad; that they struggled with doubt and failure; that when it came time to show loyalty—they ran!

-The **driving force** behind the story of Jesus' resurrection seems to be, "**Just tell the story...and live it! Then, if people ask questions, give a reason for the hope in you.**" And that's what they did. And that's what followers of Jesus have done down through the years. What happened is **astounding**. Within 300 years, most of the Roman Empire had, in some way, turned to Jesus.

-It wasn't Jesus' followers political or military power. And it wasn't because they were able to stitch together clever arguments—or because being a Christian was the new, cool thing to do. **They** were the ones crying out to God in pain. **They** were betrayed, oppressed and slaughtered. But this resurrection life was **so** powerful, so loving, so life-giving, so filled with and compassion and hope—people said, "I'll bet my **life** on the truth of this!"

-In the months following Jesus death and resurrection, it became clear exactly what happened. The Son of God fully identified with our pain, our humiliation, our oppression—and the helplessness of dying at someone else's hands. One of his last cries from the cross was,

Eli! Eli! Lamasabachthani! My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?
(Matthew 27:46 NIV)

This is taken directly from Psalm 22—which is an entire Psalm, crying out to God in pain—and the sense of desertion. It describes exactly what happened to Jesus!

-So, is that it? We cry out in darkness—and it doesn't change anything—but God can say, "I **feel** your pain!" What becomes clear is since it was God in flesh who experienced death—and walked out of the grave, it was like the tectonic plates of the universe moved.

Death—as a curse—shifted to life. Something besides that stone moved; in some profound way Satan—and his whole plan for destruction—was defeated. Somehow the evil and darkness driving the human race toward absolute disintegration, was stopped. God had promised that **He** would reverse the curse bless all human kind. He had heard the cries—and slowly but surely **His** power would bring forgiveness, transformation—and life instead of death. It was a new beginning—the **last** beginning.

- a. The implications of this, friends, are **massive**. Way bigger than I can explain to you this morning. The Bible says that death is being swallowed up by life. **All** of it. Not just human suffering and death—but **all** death. The death of the environment; the death that greed brings. The death of oppression, hatred, racism, malice. What brought Jesus to the cross was **not** fate—a few bad days when He lost popularity. It was the choice of **love**. At the core of the universe now is a **new** law. Love. Love wins. Everything else loses. And now, life—eternal life—is open to all!
- b. Right now, even as I speak, God is at work behind the scenes—**everywhere**—even in the places where you and I can't see him. He is working to bring His realm of influence, **His** power to bear in a way that will make everything right. **Every** form of sadness, just like what humanity did to Jesus, can be redemptive. The ultimate plan of God is to make **all** things right—**all** things new—and remake us and everything else **as we should be!** And He promises that **He** will share His life, His joy, His healing and power with us—forever.
- c. We're suspicious of this because we live in a world over-promises. We're told that money will solve our problems; that if we can find the right person to hook up with—we'll feel the love we've always craved; that if we can be cool and desirable—our friends will always be there for us. Over time—we find that that the promises are empty. They can't deliver.

-It's funny—Christianity **starts** with emptiness—an empty cross and an empty tomb—**promises** life in place of death—and **delivers!** His final promise was,

All power and authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me...and I will be with you until the end of the age.
(Matthew 28:18, 20b NLT)

-And Jesus says to weak, small people like me...and you; "It's okay to be weak—my strength is made perfect in weakness! I'm the **Good Shepherd**. I hear your voice, I'm watching over you, you have everything you need, I'll guide you in the right paths, I'm protecting you, I've prepared the way for you, you're way more blessed than you realize. I am at work in **thousands** of unseen ways in everything you face!

-You may not see it now—so, you'll have to trust me. If you will—I will leave **everything** better in the wake of your life—and bring you safely home. And I can do all that because I conquered the arch-enemy of this world, and forced him to give up his most lethal weapon—death!"

5. Our calling as a community of followers of Jesus is to **live** this powerful, resurrection life--and **carry** the life wherever we find ourselves. You know the cries I talked about at the beginning? The way God has chosen to work is to not just hear those cries—but to help **us** hear them.

-See, God **could** do what we expect; save the victims and nuke the victimizers. If He did that—almost everyone on this planet would instantly die. I know **I** would—because there are people who have cried out to God for mercy because of the pain **I've** caused. Instead, God has chosen a slower path; to make the victimizers, the arrogant, the racists, the oppressors—the ones carrying guns and swords and whips—**His** people. He did that for Paul; He did that for me; and He's done that for many of you.

-See, when Jesus touches things—He changes them. The single most oppressive, horrific symbol in the world—the cross--used for centuries to torture people—was transformed to a symbol of hope. **Jesus changed everything**. We date this year 2011—because **Jesus** showed up.

-His followers have always been out on the front edges of caring for the sick and creating hospitals. His people have been out on the edge of making education available, of eradicating slavery, of using art and music to express the heart. How we think about justice and human rights and worth and dignity—have, in large part, come because followers of Jesus **carried this resurrection life with them**.

- a. You need to know that there is a part to finding, living, and carrying the life of Jesus is **very** personal—and carries you to the other side of death. You could compare our lives to this bowl—made of clay—and quite brittle and fragile.

-We all live in a system that says, "How **full** that bowl is will determine how happy and fulfilled you are!" We believe that, and we fill that bowl with a **lot** of stuff. Education. The esteem of others. Money, homes, cars, things. Experiences. Friends. Work. Education. Accomplishments. Pleasure. Solomon, a brilliant, rich king of Israel tried **all** of this—and in a journal of his life said, "Yeah—tried it **all**—and it's **vapour management!**"

-He compares life to a **bowl**—like this one--that we spend life trying to fill. Bowls are made of clay; they're vulnerable. Over time, the pressure on them from stress, sickness, time and age is like a clamp that squeezes tighter and

tighter. After a very graphic, depressing description of this process—waking up before the birds—but too deaf to hear them; eyes growing too dim to read anything without magnification—teeth like stars—they come out at night—Solomon says:

Remember him [your Creator]—before the silver cord is severed, and the golden bowl is broken... (Ecclesiastes 12:6 NIV)

His point is that no matter *how* fancy your bowl is—or how full it is—it one day breaks. And the ultimate rip-off is that all you’ve done, achieved, accumulated—*spills out*.

-The life Jesus makes possible could be illustrated by this plant in the bowl. I mean, it takes up some space—but what is put in the bowl waters the plant; and what doesn’t fit spills over the edge to others as you live. Is the bowl still vulnerable to age, pressure, health issues, accidents. And it still *breaks*—but the life—what’s *truly alive*—continues. *That* friends—is what *I* want! That’s the promise Jesus made. That’s what I’m counting on.

- b. But it’s not just about individuals. It’s *way, WAY* more. We’re all very small, fragile, weak. We fail. We get discouraged. And that’s why Jesus reaches out to individuals—and loves individuals; but His plan for getting the Good News of the Kingdom imbedded into the DNA of this world—was through a community. He called it...the *Church*. According to these early records—this church is made up of, well, let me read it: **When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.** Worshippers—and doubters—people caught in the pressures of the giant C clamp of life.

-It could be that you’d *love* to believe and sing the songs and have confidence that Jesus really did rise—and that death and Satan have been defeated—that life does make sense and that God is up to something really, *really* good. But you’d have to say, “You know....I’m not too sure these days.” You’ve lost someone—through death or betrayal—that you loved.

-You’re *trying* to leave your past behind--and see it in the rear view mirror—but it’s followed you into the present. Or you’re struggling with *terrible* relational health—and it’s left you hurt and lonely. Or you’ve gone through a divorce, a betrayal, an affair or an abortion. You’re looking at Jesus tomb—or maybe you’re *in* the tomb—and in the darkness—you can *feel* this massive stone—and there are no shining angels offering to move it for you.

-Jesus says, “It’s okay to doubt. Doubt happens. The community will carry you—when you can’t carry yourself. I know that, because I’ve experienced it personally. There have been times when I’ve doubted everything I do, everything I stand for—and *you* have helped me. I’ve watched your life, your repentance, you giving yourselves to a desperate world—and said, “No, this is real. **No** one gets changed like that apart from resurrection power!”

6. Ultimately, Jesus tells us, His followers, ***Go live out the resurrection.*** Bring life with you—everywhere you find yourselves. That’s what the world needs. The resurrection of Jesus is not a finely crafted argument; it’s a ***life*** that a community—like ours--puts on display—and ***gives*** to a world, like ours, that desperately needs it! It’s ordinary, frail people like us—leaving a gathering like this—and bringing life wherever we find ourselves. This life comes from ***Jesus***--the final beginning. Jesus is the answer ***no one*** expected!