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Matthew 28:1-15
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A Joy That Conquers Fear

Hello, my name is Larry Adams, and I want to take a moment to personally thank you for tuning into this week's podcast where you downloaded or are streaming this week's Bible message. I hope it will be a great encouragement to you, and it's our prayer that God will use it to strengthen your faith.

I just want to be sure to tell you too that we in no way intend for this message to be a replacement for your weekly involvement in a good local church. We hope that you are involved in a church in your community to worship, grow, and serve and to sit under the authority of pastors and teachers who can speak into your lives. We also realize that around the world there are places where there is no local church, so we're hoping that these messages each week will be a great encouragement to you and anyone else you may be gathering with to pray with, encourage, and to share with in this message. Thank you again for downloading this message, and we hope it will be a great blessing in your life.

If you have your Bibles today, I'd like you to turn with me if you would to Matthew 28. We're gonna be looking at the resurrection account as seen through the eyes of those ladies who were first to come to the tomb. You know, there are many, many ideas of what Easter is about. Many times we get a little doubt about the secularization of so many of our holidays. I was reading about a public school teacher who was trying to find a way to get the true meaning of Easter into her public school classroom. She knew she couldn't bring it up, so she simply said to her class, "Does anybody know what Easter is about?"

One little kid raised his hand and said, "Yeah, Easter is about spring. It's the celebration of a new season."

She goes, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. For a lot of people that's what it is. Does anybody else know what Easter's about?"

A little girl raised her hand and she said, "It's about bunnies and chocolate and baskets on Easter morning."

"Yeah, yeah, it's about that. For a lot of people it's about that. Does anybody else know what Easter's about?"

Finally one kid raises his hand and said, "I think it's about Jesus rising from the dead."

"Yes, yes, that's right. And what else?"

"And if he sees his shadow there's six more weeks of winter."

Well, that's not exactly what it's about. It is about his rising from the dead, but it has a whole lot more meaning than that. You know, it's hard for you and I to realize the sentiment that was going on amongst the believers that first Easter morning. Things could not have looked gloomier when they awoke to the dawn of that day. The events of that weekend had seen all their hopes dashed. Jesus was gone, and they were faced with some very real fears. There was a price on their head. Being a follower of Jesus during those days was not easy, and there were fears more than enough to go around. Yet something happened that changed their fear to joy. I know what that something is because it happened to me as well and maybe to many of you. Maybe God wants that joy to be born in your life this morning.

Matthew captures the story for us of that amazing transformation that took place that first Easter morning in Matthew 28 beginning in verse 1:

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

² 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. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. ⁴ The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

⁵ The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. ⁷ 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."

⁸ So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them. "**Greetings,**" he said.

Always cracks me up. They meet the resurrected Lord, he goes, "**Greetings**" like, of course, they do this every day.

They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "**Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.**"

¹¹ While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. ¹² When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, ¹³ telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' ¹⁴ If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." ¹⁵ So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.

Let's pray for a moment.

God, the reality of this is so overwhelming. It's no wonder these people were so transformed and their lives were never the same after this. There was a joy that captured them that morning that helped them to overcome all of those fears that were crushing their spirit and stealing their hope. Jesus, you're alive, and we meet on this Easter morning to have the same realization to discover what these so early at the tomb discovered that changed their lives and millions of others who have believed it through the centuries. God, on this day, may you help us to know the joy that conquers fear and we'll thank you. In your precious name, Amen.

He was a professional thief. His name stirred fears like the desert wind stirs tumbleweeds. He terrorized the Wells Fargo stage line for 13 years roaring like a tornado in and out of the Sierra Nevada spooking the most rugged frontiersman. In journals from San Francisco to New York his name became synonymous with the dangers of the frontier.

Max Lucado, in his book *The Applause of Heaven* went on to write:

During his reign of terror between 1875 in 1883, he is credited with stealing the bags and the breath away from 29 different stagecoach crews, and he did it all without firing a

shot. His weapon was his reputation. His ammunition was intimidation. A hood hid his face. No victim ever saw him. No artist ever sketched his features. No sheriff could ever track his trail. He never fired a shot or took a hostage. He didn't have to. His presence was enough to paralyze. His name was Black Bart, a hooded bandit armed with a deadly weapon.

Lucado went on to say:

He reminds me of another thief, one who is still around. You know him. You've never seen his face either. You couldn't describe his voice or sketch his profile, but when he's near you know it every time. If you've ever been in the hospital you've felt the leathery brush of his hand against yours. If you've ever sensed someone was following you, you felt his cold breath down your neck. If you've ever awakened late at night in a strange room, it was his husky whisper that stole your slumber. You know him. It was this thief who left your palms sweaty as you went for the job interview. It was this con man who convinced you to swap your integrity for popularity. And it was this scoundrel who whispered in your year as you left the cemetery, "You may be next."

He's the Black Bart of the soul. He doesn't want your money. He doesn't want your diamonds. He won't go after your car. What he wants is something far more precious. He wants to steal your peace of mind. He wants to steal your joy, and his name is fear.

His task is to take your courage and leave you timid and trembling. His mode of operation is to manipulate you with the mysterious, to taunt you with the unknown: fear of death, fear of failure, fear of God, fear of tomorrow, fear of everything. His arsenal is vast, and his goal is to make cowardly, joyless souls.

Fears, we all have them. No one is immune. And if there is any prevailing attitude encompassing our world today when you talk to people around the world, it is fear. There are so many things to be afraid of, but the number one fear that most people still have is the fear of death; not just the fear of death itself, but the whole dying experience. What will it be like?

You see, no matter how well things are going, no matter how joyous the moment, the fear of death is always lurking just around the corner. Have you ever noticed that? Every holiday you have with loved ones, no matter how great, the thought can enter your mind, How many more of these will we have? Who might not be here the next year? Or with every trip that's taken by you or a loved one, the thought enters our mind. I have a daughter driving back from Bakersfield today. The thought enters my mind, Will she arrive safely? Every visit to the doctor no matter how healthy, you wonder, Will they find something terribly wrong? Fears are all around us, and at times those fears can be overwhelming.

That was the kind of overwhelming fear that gripped the people closest to Jesus as that dawn approached on that first Easter morning following Jesus' brutal death on the cross. People, if we do not understand the crushing weight of the fears they faced, we will not understand the joy they experienced. You see, the followers of Jesus had become fearful, joyless souls and for good reason: the danger and the threat of death was all around them. Jesus was dead and with him their hopes. They had put all their hopes in this one who was the King, the Messiah, who could heal the sick and give sight to the blind and raise the dead, but now he was gone.

It all happened so fast, so unbelievably fast. In fact, just earlier they had celebrated with the whole city his arrival in the triumphal entry on that Palm Sunday hailing him as King. He's finally come. The joy swept the city, but now he was gone. Their hopes were dashed. The enemies of Jesus had a price on their head and all the followers of Jesus Christ. So in fear they huddled together in the upper room where they had eaten their Last Supper, and they tried to sort it all out but they couldn't. They were alone, confused, and afraid. Fear and disillusionment had gripped them all. But early on that Sunday morning as the women made their way to the tomb to

finish the job of the burial preparation they had had no time to do on those days before, they could have had no idea of the joy that was awaiting them, a joy that would conquer their fear because the good news of the resurrection of Jesus fills us with a joy that conquers our fear. Why is that so? Because of Jesus' resurrection, we have the joy of knowing that we are going to live forever. Here's the way Matthew put it in Matthew 28 verse 5:

The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. ⁷ 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."

⁸ So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

"And ran to tell his disciples." Fear of death can be a paralyzing thing. It paralyzed me when I was a kid. I remember when I was a little guy. I would sometimes be lying on the couch or in my bed at night, and I would be overcome of these paralyzing fears of death. I used to wonder what the death experience would be like. What really traumatized me, something I couldn't escape, was the thought of being in a box being in the ground forever. But then I would find some comfort in knowing that I didn't have to deal with it for a long time, because I thought only old people die. I would just put it off out of my mind. That's the way I would escape it.

But then our five-year-old neighbor boy, Hoppy, died in a car accident, and I had no category for five-year-olds that die. In high school I lost two friends. I had no category for people my own age who died. I still remember being in college getting the call as I worked at the student center of that Wednesday morning. "Larry, your dad is dead." At 55. I came to realize that death can come at any time without warning to anyone.

No matter how you try to drown out its reality it's always there. It's always lurking in the back of your mind. It's always on the perimeter of every event because we know it's coming. I was paralyzed by that fear for 25 years, but at age 25 I heard some good news, the same good news that the disciples discovered that first Easter morning. I want you know, for me, everything changed then. It's truly changed because the good news of Jesus' resurrection brings a joy that conquers fear. In fact, in verse 5, Matthew wrote:

The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. ⁷ 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."

⁸ So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

That word "they were afraid but filled with joy," it's a complex word. It means "to be marveling at" almost like "could this really be true?" It's almost like knowing that you're broken, you're in financial straits then you suddenly discover a whole bank account that you didn't know about or an inheritance that can support you for the rest of your life. You're thinking, Can this really be true? Can the bad news now be this good? That's the kind of idea they were experiencing as they ran away from the tomb. "This thing is empty. The angel told us he ain't there. Can that really be the truth?" They were filled with joy. Their fear was transformed by it, and they ran and told the disciples. They were filled with joy. Wouldn't you be?

Seriously, people, let me ask you this morning, if you're a Christian, have you been gripped with the reality that because Jesus' tomb is empty, because Jesus is alive you're alive? Because death couldn't hold Jesus, death won't be able to hold you. Have you ever come to grips with the reality that some day your body may die but you never will? You're alive forever! Our hope is not gone. Jesus is our hope and he's alive.

Max Lucado once put in another one of his books:

We know that because of the resurrection our life is not futile. We have a purpose. Our sins are not fatal. We are forgiven, and our death is not final. In fact, we're never going to die. We're gonna live forever. The grave cannot hold us because it cannot hold him. It's all true. Jesus is the way the truth and the life, and people who believe in him live forever.

People, this is the good news that Satan does not want you to hear. Satan controls by fear. How in the world can he control by fear when his greatest weapon has now been exposed? You see, the truth is, without the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, death is a real enemy. Satan knows it, and, boy, he knows how to deploy it. But I learned when I was 25 the great truth of why that weapon is so powerful. It's because of sin. Death is such a threat because of sin. That's why Paul told the Romans in Romans 3 verse 22, "There is no difference between Jew and Gentile,²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." All of us. I'm a sinner and so are you. I hate to shock you this morning, but you are. All of us have sinned and fall short of his glory. There's a price for that. Romans 5 verse 12, "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned—."

Sin is the problem. It's sin that creates the death. You see, God is life. There is no life apart from God. He creates physical life and sustains it, but you can't know real life apart from God. It's impossible. Death is separation from God, and death's very definition is separation. That's why physical death is defined as the separation of our soul and spirit from our body. Some day we're gonna leave this thing, and our body dies. We don't need it anymore.

Spiritual death is the state we live in every day separated from Christ. It's where the whole world is born. Sin is in our lives, so we're separated from God. If we die physically while sin is still in our lives, that sin will keep separating us from God forever in a Christless place called hell. Hell was never meant to scare anybody. Hell is a reality that God wants us to know about so that we can understand that we've been saved from its destiny. Because if we could die physically with sin forgiven, then death couldn't separate us from God anymore. In fact, we would discover that death was now the means that God was gonna use to bring us out of this mess into the eternal life he has promised and always planned for us. You go from life to life as a Christian. They may stick your body in the ground, but the ground can't hold it.

The good news is, Jesus who had no sin died in our place to pay for our sin. All of God's wrath against sin that would've separated us from him forever, Jesus took that sin. He took that wrath upon himself, so that now when we accept Christ into our lives we are forgiven. That wrath is not pointed to us. Our sin is gone and we're brought into relationship with God. When Jesus died on that cross, he was buried in a tomb. The good news of Easter is that the tomb could not hold him. Three days later he conquered sin and death and the grave, and he rose victorious. He's alive today, and he's offering hope and eternal life and forgiveness to everybody. I've accepted that. It's changed me. I'm transformed. I can't die anymore. I'm gonna live forever. Are you gonna live forever? The answer is yes if you have Jesus Christ living in you. He's alive.

That's why Paul said, "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." No one or no thing can bring a joy like that, and nothing else can conquer that fear.

Max Lucado once wrote, "Power can't conquer, and people have tried to use power to conquer it. But if you think power can conquer fear, ask Joseph Stalin, the Great Premier of Russia who ruled from the 1920s to 1953 with an iron fist. Joseph Stalin was afraid to go to bed at night. He had seven different bedrooms; each could be locked as tightly as a safe. In order to foil any would-be assassins, he slept in a different one each night and never told anyone which one he was in. Five chauffeur-driven limousines transported him wherever he went, each with curtains closed so no one would know which vehicle actually housed Stalin. So deep-seeded were his apprehensions that he employed a servant whose sole task was to monitor and protect the safety of his teabags. The Premier of Russia who had all of that authority was deathly afraid of death. Power couldn't protect him from it.

Possessions and money can't buy anything to conquer that kind of fear. If possessions conquered fear, the late billionaire Howard Hughes would've been fearless, but you probably know his story. His distrust of people and his paranoia of germs led this billionaire to Mexico where he died a lonely death later in Texas as a cadaverous hermit with a belly length beard and corkscrew fingernails. He was so afraid he withdrew from everything, paralyzed by fear.

Fame and popularity can't conquer fear. Remember the Beatle, John Lennon? His fame as a singer and songwriter and pop icon made him a household word, but his fears brought him misery. In fact, his biographers described him as a frightened man, unwilling to sleep with the lights off, and afraid to touch anything because of its filth, and paralyzed by the fear of death.

People, power can't conquer this fear. Money and possessions can't buy a way out of it. Fame and popularity won't overcome it. Even religion won't help you overcome this fear. Religion doesn't do it. In fact, most people are confused by religion. Why are there so many? Why are they seemingly offering alternate paths to the same God? Well, don't be confused by religion. There's a move on today to try to get us to believe that even Christianity and Islam are worshiping the same God. They're not, not even remotely so.

In fact, each Easter I take time just a moment to explain everybody who are confused by religion not to be, because you need to understand, religion needs to be exposed. All the religions of the world except four are just pure philosophy. They're just the pure inventions of people coming up with ideas and mechanisms and approaches to God and gods. They invent whole systems. People by the billions are enslaved in these worthless, mind-bending, man-invented philosophies. They do no good to anyone. They're just philosophy. That's the world's religions.

The four that are left are based on the teachings of their founders: Judaism, based on the teaching of Abraham; Buddhism, based on the teaching of Gautama the first Buddha; Islam, based on the teaching of their prophet Mohammed; and Christianity, based on the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

People, it's important that the world knows this. Abraham died. He's just a man. He was buried in a tomb at Machpela, and his body is still there. Gautama, the first Buddha, died just a man. He was buried in a tomb in Kusinara in the Himalayan Mountains. His body is still there. Mohammed, the prophet of Islam, died in 632 A.D. just a man. His body is still in the tomb. Because Abraham and Gautama and Mohammed have no power over death, but Jesus Christ died, was buried in the tomb, and the grave could not hold him because he's not just a man. He's God in the flesh, the Savior the world, the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords. He conquered sin, death, and the grave, and he's alive today! He's alive today. That's why the angel could say to the women Matthew 28 verse 5, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; he has risen, just as he said."

You know, when I was in second grade I had a good friend named Rocky Lihulier. Ricky would invite me over to his house once in a while. He lived on the other side of the tracks, little more upscale. His dad and family had a membership to the YMCA. When I was in second grade, he invited me on a Friday night to his house. I found out when I got there we're going to the YMCA.

I couldn't believe it. There's no hope I would ever get into a place like that. You know why I was so excited? It was the dead of winter, and they had an indoor swimming pool. I had heard about it, but never seen one. I was so excited, man, I could hardly wait.

When we got there, man, I was so disappointed because you see the shallow end was even over my head. When I was a little kid going to the lake, I loved to swim but I would only go in knee-deep. I would bend over in the water and crawl around on the bottom pretending I was swimming. As long as I could touch the bottom I was cool, but otherwise, man, I was afraid of the water. You would never know I went on to be a lifeguard for a few seasons. Anyway, I was afraid to get away where I couldn't touch the bottom. I would dogpaddle a little bit. I could go a few feet and kick and pretend, but as long as I could touch the bottom I was okay. Here I am in this pool, the shallow end's over my head. I'm sitting there gripping the side with my feet dangling and while my friend, Rocky's "Yahoo!" He's bouncing off the board, jumping, and having a ball.

His dad comes over and says, "Larry, why don't you join him? Just jump in. You can just dogpaddle. Just have some fun. Don't sit there. Don't be afraid."

I said, "No, no I can't go in. No, no I can't go in." I'm gripping the side of the pool. What I didn't know, his dad was a very big man, came up behind me and picked me up and threw me into the deep end of the pool. Just threw me in. I was underwater for the first time in my life. I'm coming back up kicking and spluttering, everything I could do to get back to air. Whatever little dogpaddle I had, I used an eternity's worth to get from there to the side of the pool. When I turned around he's standing there laughing.

He said, "Ha, ha, ha, now, wasn't that fun! Get out and do it again." I knew he was gonna throw me in again if I didn't do it, so I got out real quick. I ran around. I jumped in right next to the edge of the pool, and I swam over and he said, "Do it again." I jumped in and, you know what? I kept doing that and getting further out. By the end of the night, you know what I was doing? I was jumping off the diving board having the time of my life. You know what happened? My joy conquered my fear.

That's what Jesus wants to do with our fear of death, with our fear of the future, with our fear of the unknown. He wants the joy to conquer our fear. So the women came that morning, and the angel told them, "Don't be afraid. He ain't here. He ain't here. He's conquered it all. You go the Galilee you're gonna see him."

Max Lucado once wrote:

Earthly fears are no fears at all when you have a resurrection. All the mysteries revealed, the final destination is guaranteed, answer the big question of eternity and the little questions of life fall into perspective.

By the way, remember, Black Bart? As it turns out, he wasn't anything be afraid of either. When the hood came off, there was nothing to fear. When the authorities finally tracked down the thief, they didn't find a bloodthirsty bandit from Death Valley. They found a mild-mannered druggist from Decatur, Illinois who never had other robbers with him. He would put sticks in the bushes to make it look like robbers. The man the papers pictured storming through the mountains on horseback was in reality so afraid of horses he rode to and from his robberies in a buggy and never mounted a horse. He robbed stages on foot. He was Charles E. Bowles, the bandit who never once fired a shot because he was too afraid to load his gun.

You know what God did that Easter morning? He ripped the hood off of death and exposed it for what it was so that everyone could know that while it's a reality it will never touch a Christian. It may grab your body some day, but it cannot touch you. The angel said to the women, "Do not

be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; he has risen, just as he said.”

People, when you have Jesus Christ living in your heart, there is a joy he brings that nothing else can. Easter is the celebration of the joy that conquers fear.

*God, I want to thank you this morning for this reality. There's a lot of scary realities in our world. We're not Pollyanna, we don't pretend, we don't stick our head in the sand, there's a lot of scary realities in our world. But, Lord, you told us once that to live is Christ and to die is gain. Jesus, you said, **“I'm the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.”***

Do you believe this? Lord, I believe it. There's a lot of us here today that believe it. I pray on this Easter morning you will help us to know that there is a joy. We're gonna live forever. A joy that conquers fear . . .