

## Perplexing Texts: Dead People Walking

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Matthew 27: 50-54

I know of a pastor who was out for sushi with his family when his 12-year-old son asked his dad this question, “Dad, how do we know that God is real and Zombies aren’t?” Well, the question took him off guard, and so the pastor confesses to stumbling around a bit before his son said, “You know how I know that zombies are real, dad? Well, you know when Jesus dies and the graves open and people start walking around? There you go. Even the Bible talks about zombies!”

Later, the pastor in telling a friend about the awkward sushi conversation said he couldn’t really recall much about how he answered his son, aside from the fact that it was profoundly forgettable and predictably unsatisfactory as his son stared at him blankly and kept munching on his California Roll.

After having some time to think about his son’s question, the pastor put his thoughts into words. Here’s a bit of what he wrote:

*I know that it’s really hard to figure out what’s real and what’s not in this crazy world we live in. I know that everywhere we turn we are inundated with superheroes and zombies and magic and wizards and boys with burning scars and giants and unicorns and dwarves and hobbits and all kinds of other things that we never, ever see walking down the street.*

*I also know that it’s even harder to figure out what’s real and what isn’t when we talk about the Bible that has angels and demons and people who live ridiculously long lives and people rising from the dead and virgin births and arks full of animals and suns that refuse to set and talking donkeys and all kinds of other things that seem way harder to believe in than zombies.*

*Let me assure you, son, that grown-ups struggle with these things too, even if we’re better at ignoring them or pretending we have things all sorted out. We don’t. Believe me. (ryandueck.com)*

I never imagined I’d begin a sermon by talking about Zombies. But I get how a 12-year-old mind is perplexed at what we just read in Matthew’s gospel. Who am I kidding? I understand why a 59-year-old mind is perplexed. But thankfully I’ve had some time to consider this perplexing text and hopefully I can talk about it in a way that’s maybe slightly better than profoundly forgettable.

So the part of this text that is most perplexing is of course the part when Jesus dies on the cross-and the tombs of some holy people (some translations call them saints) are opened. And then those risen saints, after Jesus has risen-take a jaunt right into Jerusalem where lots of people see them.

So what is going on in this crazy story? Did this really happen? What’s the take away from this perplexing text? Let’s start with a little context.

First, it’s important to realize that there is more than one thing going on here. When Jesus dies on the cross, when the cry of his final breath is fully exhaled, Matthew says ‘the veil of the temple tore, the earth shook, the rocks split, graves opened up, and dead people came out of them.’ But the way I just described that-isn’t exactly right because actually, every one of those action verbs in our passage, in the Greek, is expressed in the passive voice. So more literally-the

temple veil WAS torn, the earth WAS shaken, the rocks WERE split, the tombs WERE broke open, and the bodies of the dead WERE raised.

The question it begs is- who is doing all this? Who's enacting the tearing and the shaking and the splitting and the opening and the raising? Who's in charge of what's happening here?

Well-clearly God. And God wants us to have no doubt about that. The Bible scholar Fleming Rutledge says that "If Satan believes himself to be in control on that hill outside Jerusalem, his enjoyment must have been short-lived." Friends, something huge is happening on that hill. Something cosmic. Something unmistakably from God.

Matthew's scene is meant to show us that all of history is laser focused on the Cross of Christ. And that there on that hill God, not Satan, is in charge. Let me say that again-there (and here) God, not Satan, is in charge. It's hard to imagine a greater comfort than that right now. I'm not going to spend a lot of time rehashing all that seems wrong with our world right now. We feel the brokenness, I think, deep down in our bones.

I want to do what Matthew is doing and show you the power of God, how that power showed up on Calvary's hill and still shows up today. And it shows up in our/humanity's relationship to God, to the world around us, and to death itself.

So Matthew sets the scene with Jesus' last cry-filled breath. And immediately the temple curtain is torn in two from top to bottom-opening the barrier between God and the people. You see, the whole temple setup was based on the distinctions of who was most worthy to get close to God. But now there was no longer any separation, no longer any hierarchy between the high priest and others, between Jews and Gentiles, women and men, first class and second class. As one commentator put it, "There was no longer a velvet rope dividing the supermodels, the agents, and the rockstars from the overweight, the unfashionable, and the uncool. All the fun of looking down on others as one passed through to the inner sanctum was wiped away" (Rutledge-The Undoing of Death p. 185). There is no distinction, says Paul to the Romans, "While we were still helpless, Christ died for the ungodly." That's all of us.

The veil torn from top to bottom speaks of the powerful love of God that rips open the barrier between us and moves toward us. It says to every single person who knows themselves to be poor and needy-that because of the cross of Christ, because of God's own doing, you are restored to God. And nothing can separate you from that love.

Secondly, God's power shows up at the cross in the shaking of the earth and the rocks splitting open. If God's power over anything that would keep us apart was on display, so was God's love for and power over creation.

Remember when Jesus was on his way into Jerusalem and declared that if the people would not praise him for who he was, if they were silent, the rocks would cry out? Well here on Calvary's hill, as the people to whom Jesus came crucify him-the rocks are crying out. They are declaring the power of God to redeem all creation just as Jesus did when he commanded the waves to lie down or a woman's stooped-over spine to straighten up. Creation is bearing witness to the power of God.

Which brings us to the most perplexing but fantastic way we see the power of God. Matthew is the only gospel writer who reports that tombs broke open and bodies were raised. He seems eager for us to not have to wait until Sunday to know that there's a power able to swallow up death in victory!

So not only is Jesus' death strong enough to split the temple curtain and cancel sin, it is also strong enough to open tombs and cancel death.

You know, some think the holy ones who were raised were saints of old—perhaps the prophets or martyrs. Others believe they were folks who had died recently, just ordinary believers like us. Whoever they were—the prison doors of death were thrown open for them so that we might know that ours will be too. And also that in the meantime, the doors of our own earthly prisons, the biggest, thickest, heaviest challenges we face, whether it be grief, fear, failure, loss of love, jealousy, resentment, or the feeling that life and joy are slipping away—these prison doors are not bigger than the power of God to bring hope and new life into every dark and desperate place.

Here's something else about those believers who were raised even before Christ himself was. They tell us that the shockwaves, the cosmic repercussions of Jesus' death on the cross extend both back in history and forward to the future. The commentator Dale Bruner says, "These opened tombs tell us that Jesus' death has as much power to raise those who looked forward to God's salvation as it does to raise those who look back on it." To put it simply—Jesus' death is as effective BC as it is AD.

Matthew reports that after Jesus rose from the dead, those risen saints went into the city and lots of people saw them. Some Christian scholars hold that the raised saints in Matthew's gospel are meant to be symbolic. It's a step too far to take by faith. For me, it doesn't feel like a step that's beyond what we already accept, as Christians, by faith.

I've not encountered a human person who came out of their grave. But I do know people raised to new life. You see, God has woven resurrection into our daily lives. My neighbor who overcame the death-grip of addiction and has stepped into new life. My Hattian friend who near death met Jesus in a dream. He saved her from death and gave her new and eternal life.

Tomorrow, the family and loved ones of Faith Gauger will gather to say goodbye and honor the life she lived. If you knew Faith—you know there was much to admire about her grace-filled life. Yet something that won't leave me is that even as her body diminished and died, the life inside Faith burned brighter than ever.

Paul asks, "who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?" The answer? "Thanks be to God who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 7:24-25).

My apologies to all 12 year olds. Matthew's perplexing text offers no support for belief in Zombies. Rather, it points to a day that is surely coming when we'll all be gathered in the New Jerusalem, creation will be restored, and all who've been made holy by Jesus will be together, face to face with God forever. O Lord, haste the day! Amen.

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