

**Worship Is Jesus-Centered**  
**Matthew 28:1-10, 16-20**  
**Pastor Amy Carlan**  
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If it wasn't so cold outside, you might think from today's text, that you somehow missed the fact that Easter came really early this year. It's true that time flies, but it doesn't fly that fast. It's not Easter, but we are studying the Resurrection scene this morning. We are in a series about worship and Matthew's record of the Resurrection tells us some central truths about what true worship is and how we engage in it.

Right off the bat I want you to notice that Matthew tells us that when the disciples saw Jesus, risen from the dead, that they worshipped; but some doubted. The disciples were in different places about what they believed about Jesus. Worship and doubt were mixed from the beginning. We who are gathered in this room are also at different places about what we believe about Jesus. So we are going to begin by praying that Jesus would meet each of us right where we are, in faith or in doubt. We are going to use a prayer one of the great theologians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century -Karl Barth – wrote. This prayer has been meaningful to me over the years, and I` hope you will find it speaks to you as well. The words will be on the screen if you want to read it while we pray. Or, you can simply listen and pray along:

O Lord our God! You know who we are:  
men and women with good consciences and with bad;  
persons who are content and those who are discontent;  
the certain and the uncertain;  
Christians by conviction and Christians by convention;  
Those who believe, those who half-believe, those who disbelieve.

And you know where we have come from:  
From the circle of relatives, acquaintances and friends, or from the greatest loneliness;  
From a life of quiet prosperity or from manifold confusion and distress;  
From family relationships that are well ordered or from those disordered or under stress;  
From the inner circle of the Christian community or from its outer edge.

But now we all stand before you, in all our differences  
yet alike in that  
we are all in the wrong with You and with one another;  
that we must one day die;

that we would all be lost without your grace;  
but also in that your grace is promised and made available to us all in your dear Son, Jesus Christ.

We are here together in order to praise you through letting you speak to us.  
We beseech you to grant that this may take place in this hour,  
In the name of Your Son our Lord. Amen

As part of my seminary training, I spent one summer as a chaplain intern at a hospital in Portland, Oregon. There were three other ministers-in-training who were also interns at the same time. About half of our internship was visiting patients.

The other half, under the direction of our supervisor, was sharing our experiences so we could help each identify our growing edges, vulnerabilities, and fears as a way to prepare for ministry. Of the four interns, two of us were Presbyterians: me and Paul, a proper and polite young man who always dressed smarty and used big words. Then there was Marta, who was already ordained as an Episcopal priest in Germany, which was her home. The fourth intern was Adam. He'd grown up in the Christian faith, but was burned by the church, and had become a Unitarian Universalist. Our supervisor was one of the first females to be ordained as a Buddhist priest in the United States. And the hospital we worked at was Catholic, so about half of the regular chaplains were priests and nuns. As you can imagine, we had some pretty interesting and in-depth discussions. I learned not only about myself that summer, but also about my Christian faith because it stood in such contrast to the interfaith context I was in.

One of the tasks we were given as interns was to plan 4 interfaith worship services. Each of us was tasked with planning one of them, and we all participated in each. Thankfully, I wasn't in charge of the first service because the idea made me uneasy. After experiencing the first couple of services I realized that there was nothing to fear.

## True worship is centered on Jesus

But I also quickly realized that this was not worship. It was a hallmark card – full of nice sentiments about life and kindness, but lacking the power to fulfill and transform. Why wasn't it worship? Because true worship is centered on Jesus.

Our text today tells us why true worship is centered on Jesus. The two women who went to Jesus' tomb that Sunday morning were not going with happy and hopeful hearts. They weren't going expecting to see Jesus alive. Mark and Luke tell us that the women went to anoint Jesus' lifeless body with spices, a common burial ritual in their time. They were walking to the tomb with heavy hearts, grieving the loss of their friend Jesus, and the loss of their hopes. The two

Mary's had been following Jesus during his ministry, taking care of his needs. They thought he was going to be the Messiah, the one that God had promised would free the Jewish people from oppression. Along with the other disciples, they hoped that Jesus was the promised Savior who would bring the people God's favor, and that God would then bless all nations through the Israelites. But instead they saw him wrongly convicted and crucified.

Matthew tells us, in chapter 27, that these women were watching as Jesus breathed his final breath and died. These two women in particular, watched as Jesus was taken down from the cross and his body placed in a tomb with a large boulder rolled over the entrance.

They must not have expected anything but to grieve and anoint Jesus' body, because when they encountered an angel and an empty tomb, the first thing the angel needed to say to them was "Don't be afraid." (Don't flip out!) And then they heard those glorious words "He is not here; he has risen, just as he said." Then the angel encouraged them to check out the empty tomb for themselves and then to go and tell the disciples. On their way to share the news, the women discovered the truth of the angel's words for themselves, because Jesus appeared to them. He says one word to them "hello" and then Scripture tells us that they clasped his feet and worshipped him. They fell down on their faces and clung to Jesus with reverence and adoration.

When Jesus appeared alive to the eleven disciples in Galilee shortly after this, they too worshipped Jesus. They worshipped him because they knew his resurrection meant that Jesus really was who he said he was – the Messiah. They worshipped him because his resurrection meant that Jesus was truly God.

The resurrection tells us these great truths as well. Jesus is the Messiah, the one that God promised would set people free.

The Jewish people were expecting that the Messiah would free them from the oppression of the Roman government. But God's plan was much bigger than that. In the very beginning, God made us to be in relationship with Him. God made us to worship him, to adore him and be filled with joy as we adored Him. But from the first humans on down, we have chosen to worship things and people other than God. Scripture calls that choice sin, and it has torn at the seams of the good life God meant for us –it battered our world, strained and tore our relationships with each other, and most tragically it tore at the relationship we were made to have with God.



What a good God we have though. One who in great love made a plan to mend all that had gone wrong by his own power, because we certainly couldn't and can't do it on our own. God's plan was to pick one people to know Him, to be the witness that God wanted to interact with humans. Then out of that one people – the Israelites – God made a way for sin to be

defeated and all people to worship him freely and fully again. God did this by becoming human Himself. God the Son, the second person of the Trinity – took on flesh, and became truly human. We call Him Jesus.

Jesus lived the life we were supposed to live, in our place. He fully worshipped God and loved his neighbors, not only living for us, but showing us how to live. Jesus died in our place – taking on the consequences for our sin; taking on evil and brokenness. And then Jesus rose from the dead, definitely defeating death and sin, so that we could engage in an intimate and interactive life with God, worshipping God fully...the life we were made to have in the beginning.

The dictionary's definition of worship is to assign worth to someone or something, giving that thing or person adoration and reverence. By definition we can worship many things. But by design, from creation, worship means centering our life on God, adoring Him. And that means that true worship is centered on Jesus. True worship is centered on Jesus because the resurrection tells us that it is through Jesus that we can engage in a relationship with the Triune God. True worship is centered on Jesus because the resurrection assures us that Jesus was not just a man, or a great teacher, or a prophet, but true God who came in the flesh to draw near to us. True worship is centered on Jesus because as our Risen Lord, all authority in heaven and earth is His; He is King.

True worship is centered on Jesus. So what difference does that make in our lives? A decade ago, it meant I needed to share with my fellow interns that I thought interfaith services weren't true worship. It wasn't a conversation I looked forward to, because I was worried that they would dismiss me as intolerant. The conversation however went well – it is possible to hold to convictions and to respect each other. It's possible that any of us in this room may be faced with interfaith services and the conviction that true worship will make a difference. But we don't have to be faced with interfaith service for the truth of worship being Jesus centered to have practical impact on our daily lives. The truth that worship is Jesus-centered worship makes a difference in our worshipping community –what we do together on Sunday mornings and other times we gather; and it makes a difference in our daily lives as individuals. We're going to look at some of the ways that Jesus-centered worship practically matters.

First, the truth that worship is centered on Jesus means that if we don't center ourselves on Christ, our Sunday morning worship is a Hallmark card – nice words on a pretty page that might feel good or inspiring for a short time, but that lack the power to fill us, transform us, and empower us. If you ever hear me, Peter, Mike, Petey, or someone else preach and teach about a gospel other than Jesus, you need to hold us to account. I told Peter earlier this week that I was going to tell you all that you should fire him if he quit preaching Jesus. He agreed! Without Jesus there is no good news.

Let's flip that coin around. If true worship is centered on Jesus then it means that as long as we are honoring Him, the forms of our worship can change. The styles of songs we sing

don't matter as much as who the songs are about. The order of worship doesn't matter as much as recognizing who we are worshipping. The formality of the words we use isn't as important as that the words glorify the Lord. This isn't to say that style, order and forms don't matter. But these things aren't the heart of worship, and as long as the way we do things honors Jesus, we can be flexible. So it would be okay to fire Peter for not preaching Jesus, but it shouldn't make you hot under the collar if he decides to start preaching at the beginning of the service instead of the end!

The truth that true worship is Jesus centered also encourages us to treat our family of faith with charity. Let's go back to my chaplaincy example. The hospital offered interfaith services once a month that the interns were in charge of. But the hospital was Catholic, and they offered Catholic mass on a daily basis. Whenever I had a break in the day, I would go. The liturgy sounded strange to my Presbyterian ears. There are a number of theological issues the Catholic Church holds that I disagree with, like precluding women from ordained ministry and restricting who can participate in the celebration of communion. These are serious differences, and yet I found sitting in the chapel during mass, that it was worship. It filled me like the interfaith services could not, sustaining me for the chaplaincy task ahead. It was worship, because it was centered on Jesus. And that meant that the priests and nuns were my brothers and sisters in Christ because all of us embraced Jesus as our Savior, Lord, and King.

There are serious issues that faithful Christians disagree about. I can guarantee that even in this room there isn't consensus about how to interpret the Bible on particular issues. But our differences don't have to divide us, keep us from sharing life, or worshipping and serving together, when we agree on what is central: Jesus! One of the things I appreciate about our new denomination, ECO, is that this center-focused spirituality is one of our core values. Here's how the core value is worded: ***We believe in calling people to the core of what it means to be followers of Jesus – what "mere Christianity" is and does – and not fixate on the boundaries.***

Again, this doesn't mean that the other issues aren't important. They are. But it does mean that when we agree on Jesus, we can intentionally grapple with the difficult conversations together. And we can treat one another with charity as we discuss and when we disagree. We can treat each other with charity because worship is Jesus-centered.

That's some of how the truth that worship is Jesus-centered affects our life together. Now let's talk about how that truth affects us as individuals.

The truth that worship is Jesus-centered means that we follow the one that worship is centered on. Peter's going to talk much more in depth about worship being an everyday affair next week, but we can't go without mentioning it now, because worship and following Jesus go hand-in-hand in this text. When the two women first saw Jesus resurrected, Matthew tells us that they fell down, clasped his feet, and worshipped. Their worship continued when they obeyed what Jesus asked them to do - to go and tell the disciples to meet him in Galilee.

After Jesus appeared to the 11 disciples, he gave them a mission: “Go, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” That mission is our mission too, and we worship Jesus when we engage in this mission. Trying to worship Jesus without following Jesus is like joining a basketball team, and then asking the coach if you can suit up and then sit in the stands. No matter how much many spectators think they are actually players, those sitting in the stands aren’t actually part of the team. Worshipping Jesus can’t be separated from playing on his team, joining him in his mission. No one even sits on the bench when it comes to following Jesus. All of God’s people are on His mission. To worship is to follow Jesus. The truth that worship is Jesus-centered, also encourages us to come to Jesus with our questions and doubts. So far, I’ve been talking as if everyone here is convinced that Jesus is our Risen Savior, our Lord, and the King of all. But if we take our cue from Matthew’s

**“When they saw  
him they  
worshipped but  
some doubted.”**

record of Jesus’ resurrection, that’s not the case. Even among those who saw Jesus with their own eyes, there was doubt. Listen again to how Matthew records Jesus’ first appearance to the 11 disciples: *Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go.<sup>17</sup> When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.*

At first glance, the combination of worship and doubt is a head scratcher. How could people doubt if they actually saw Jesus alive? And how could they worship if they doubted? Scholars over the years have come up with different theories to explain these odd bedfellows: that all the 11 believed, but there must have been others around too (though Matthew doesn’t actually say so) and they were the ones who doubted. Or, that the 11 used to doubt, but do so no longer. But Matthew doesn’t say either of these things. He says that they all worshipped and some of them doubted.

Here’s one of the things I love about Jesus. He doesn’t say to those who doubted: “Your worship doesn’t count because you don’t believe 100%”. He doesn’t say, “I can’t believe that you don’t believe in me yet. Shape up or ship out.” Unfortunately, there have been times that the larger church has said these things to people. Remember that I mentioned that one of the other chaplain interns I worked with that summer, Adam, left the church? The specific reason Adam left is because he had questions about scripture and Jesus. He shared these questions and doubts with a Sunday school teacher, who told him that if he didn’t just believe, he could leave. And so, he did. Of all the interns, Adam was the most compassionate and gifted of us. It broke my heart not only that he felt pushed away from Jesus, and left, but that the gifts that God had given him to invest in people, weren’t being used to share Jesus with people.

Jesus isn't like that Sunday school teacher. He doesn't address the disciples doubt at that moment. Instead, in verse 18, we read that "Jesus came to them and said...."and then he launches into giving them all the greatest mission of all time.

## Jesus came closer

Jesus came to them. That phrase stood out to me while I was studying this week.

Jesus was already with them, so that phrase doesn't mean he is suddenly appearing. It is better translated that Jesus came up to them, or stepped towards them. Think about that. In response to their doubt, Jesus comes closer. And then he includes them in his mission to tell the world about

them. Jesus doesn't push away those who doubt. He comes closer and invites them to discover who he is and what he is all about. He comes closer and invites them to worship and to serve.

If you aren't sure what you think about Jesus – if he is really God the Son or the resurrected Lord - you belong here. The best thing to do is to follow the angel's commands to the women at the tomb: "Don't be afraid. Come and see where they lay him." Use your mind to investigate the claims of Christ, and engage with the Lord in worship, sharing your doubts with him.

**"Christians are both believers and doubters, adoring and wondering, trusting and questioning." Bruner**

In reality, we all have or will struggle with doubt....not just those who haven't embraced Jesus yet. Dale Bruner said it well, "Christians are both believers and doubters, adoring and wondering, trusting and questioning." There will be times when we wonder if Jesus really is our Savior and Lord. There will be times when we wonder if he really is the King, because the world is

still a hard place. There will be times when we doubt Jesus' promises to be with us, to forgive us completely, and to transform us. There will be times when we aren't convinced of the depth of his love. In the times we struggle with doubt about Jesus and His affection for us, the best thing we can do is engage in worship, focusing on the Risen Lord and engaging in his mission. As we do, Jesus will become clearer than the doubts and insecurities that rest in our hearts and minds.

Here's the final point, very brief point, that I hope rings in all of our ears and hearts for the days and years to come. The truth that worship is Jesus-centered means that we can and should worship in any and all situations – in grief, in joy, in confusion, in celebration, in loneliness, in sickness, in health, in the ho-hum's of ordinary life. We can worship in any and all situations because God first drew near to us in Jesus Christ, and gave everything to make it



possible for us to worship our Creator in a loving relationship once again. God held nothing back so that we could worship him; so we don't have to let anything hold us back from worshiping him.

We are going to end this message together, but engaging in worship through lifting our voices together, focusing on Jesus. Let's pray, and ask the Lord to help us focus on and adore him as we sing.