

ANIMAL TALES: A LION'S TRIUMPH (Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24 and John 20)

4.4.21 – Easter Sunday

INTRODUCTION

This is a service of celebration. “Christ the Lord has risen today.” Just think about those words; let them run around your head for a bit. Somebody nailed to a cross until He was dead, somebody viciously speared in His side to make sure He was dead, somebody briefly anointed with ceremonial spices to prepare His body to be dead, somebody laid in a tomb behind a huge stone because He was dead, and somebody even sealed inside the tomb by powers that be who also added soldiers to guard that tomb, all because they desperately wanted to ensure He stayed dead — that same “somebody” — Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Christ, Jesus the Son of God, has risen! In doing so, He conquered everything — every single enemy who opposed Him.

We’re going to share the last of our “Animal Tales” today by focusing on Jesus’ title as the “Lion of Judah.” It was in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, where Jacob, in the course of blessing his sons at the end of his life, gave these words to his fourth son — Judah: ***“You are a lion’s cub, Judah; you return from the prey, my son. Like a lion he crouches and lies down, like a lioness — who dares to rouse him?”*** — ***Jacob, Genesis 49:9.*** And then, as he continued, Jacob added to that picture of power with a picture of royalty: ***“The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his”*** — ***Jacob, Genesis 49:10.*** Jesus, the promised Messiah, would trace His human lineage all the way back to the tribe of Judah. And then, at the end of the Biblical story, in the book of Revelation, we see that a monumental triumph, reflecting both the power and the majesty of this “lion of Judah,” had taken place, so great a triumph, in fact, that the halls of heaven sing and shout with indescribable joy: ***“Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.”*** . . . ***“You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because You were slain, and with Your blood You purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth”*** — ***Revelation 5:5, 9-10.***

Wow; that is some celebration, a celebration completely worthy of a king. So, it seems only fitting that we would use the storytelling skills of the “king of the beasts” — a lion — to take us through the final phase of Holy Week — the most incredible phase of the entire story. But first, **let’s prepare our hearts with a moment of prayer.**

TEXT/ANALYSIS

You know me. Every one of you, you know me. I may be one of the most familiar faces in the entire animal kingdom. I am a lion. No names, please; just “Your Majesty” will do. And that is most appropriate; I am, after all, known as “the king of the beasts.” But to people who study this animal kingdom over which I rule, I am known as an “apex predator.” What does that mean? It means that I am at the top of the food chain. I may have enemies, but I have no predators. Being an apex predator means that I am perpetually hunting, coming after prey to kill them and eat them and share them with my family and pride, but there will be nobody found to be “returning the favor” by coming after me.

Now because me and my brethren are so well known for who and what we are, we have been seen in many ways down through the centuries, and it's always meant that somebody is trying to make it known that they are the best — nobody more powerful. In ancient times we were a symbol of royalty. From what I've heard, it's the face of a lion that represents some company that tells stories. Some sports teams use a lion as a symbol of power and victory — though sometimes they seem to actually possess neither. We have been featured in famous stories, often fighting with some guy who'd been screaming at the top of his lungs while swinging on a vine in the jungle — name of "Tarzan," or something like that. Truth be known, if I was swinging on a vine in the jungle, I'd be screaming at the top of my lungs, too. I'm perfectly content living my life down on the ground, looking for my next meal.

But, if I'm going to be completely honest, while I may be fierce, and while I may be deadly, and while it may be true that you probably don't want to meet me if I've been a little short on meals lately, there is somebody to whom me, and in fact the entire animal kingdom over which I rule, will bow down to in a moment, without even having to think about it. So, who could get the "king of the beasts" to bow down like a common pocket gopher? I'll tell you who — my Creator. I may be able to fill my fields with the furious sound of my roar, but I am less than a helpless little kitten beside the One who made me, who made us all.

So maybe the greatest thing that has ever happened to me was when He chose me to represent Him, I mean, to actually be His symbol. What could be better than that. So let me tell you a story about Him — about a time where He showed more power and more majesty than any lion who ever lived.

It all goes back to a time where our Creator, totally because of a love and grace that frankly I'll never understand, sent His very own Son into this world, to undo all the trouble that being disobedient to our Creator had caused. Me, I would have destroyed them like so many crippled antelope but, for some reason, even though it was completely undeserved, our Creator sent His Son to give this world a chance to start a new life — based not on themselves but based on the life of the Son.

So down to this world He came. And it was awesome. Now every one of my subjects, every animal in my kingdom, knew who this was. We recognized the Creator's Son from the very first moment. We knew Him because everything His Father was He was. And as He grew up and started telling His story, and how much His Father loved everybody, we hung on every word. And then the amazing things He did — I think people called them "miracles" — just made us love Him that much more. Of course, we knew that these weren't miracles to Him; He was just doing what He did with power He'd always had. But the crowds went wild for them, and they just kept flocking to Him wherever He was. And that's how He spent most of His time — teaching them about His Father, sometimes telling stories, sometimes healing those that needed it; it was incredible to watch!

But all of us animals find our best memories of the Son in His prayer times. He'd go off alone, you know, to get away from everybody. And He'd start talking with His Father — and many of us would be there to listen. He didn't seem to mind our company at all. But what special times. Oh, His words were wonderful. None of us had ever heard as much love and passion and concern as we heard whenever the Son was talking with His Father. What a great relationship they had!

But then, as time went by, we started hearing something different in His words. Oh, He kept teaching and healing and all that, but now He was, at least every once in a while, talking about some really bad stuff — being made to suffer, even to the point that He would be killed. We all had a really hard time believing that; I mean, how can you kill the Creator's Son? He's as eternal as His Father. None of us understood — except that, for every time He talked about this, especially with those who were closest to Him, He also said He would be “raised” back to life. He wouldn't be dead long — only three days — and then He would be “raised” back to life. He kept saying that; He never changed that part of the story.

So, I'll never forget the day that we got the word that our Creator's Son had been captured by His enemies, that they had “bound” Him. Surely that wasn't possible; nobody had more power than He did. We thought, He's probably just letting His enemies think they have Him; then in one single moment He will destroy all their plans, and maybe their lives as well. But He didn't. We kept waiting for the drama to end. But instead, we saw Him beaten worse than anything I had ever done to anybody — and I've left animals in pieces. And then He got Himself fastened to this long piece of wood with another piece of wood to hold His hands and arms. They pounded these long pieces of something into His hands and feet to keep Him in place. They even had some round thing of thorns on His head. I've had thorns in me before; very few things hurt as much. But they seemed to be trying to hurt Him in as many ways as possible.

But some of us kept remembering what He said: He'd be raised to life. Then, all of a sudden, it hit me, and I passed the word: To be raised to life, I think you have to die first. But this was the Creator's Son; how could He die? But we knew how strong the Son's words were: Along with His Father, He had created the whole world, as well as everything in it — just by the power of His word. I told everybody not to panic, but just to watch and wait.

But finally, after what seemed like a very long time, we saw His head slump down on His chest. And we knew His life had ended. Somebody standing there even had the nerve to jam a spear in His side to make sure. I never wanted to kill something so bad in all my life! Finally, they took His body off of those two pieces of wood. And then some of His friends took His body and placed it in a nearby tomb.

Now everybody knew that He was dead. But some guys in these really fancy robes were scared that He wouldn't stay dead, so they arranged to have a marker of some kind placed on the tomb and then some soldiers to stand guard around the tomb. I think I remember hearing that they thought maybe a bunch of His disciples would try to sneak in and take the body out of the tomb and then tell everybody that He had risen. His disciples? Are you kidding me? The moment the Son was captured, all His disciples had run away. Reminded me of how a herd of animals scatter whenever they see me. They start running all over the place; they can't get moving fast enough — just like those disciples. And those guys are going to come and take His body? I'm sorry; not happening.

But then an idea, almost like a picture, began running through my mind, and all of a sudden I got really excited, and I couldn't wait to share it with all my subjects. What grander display of who the Son really was than to walk out of that sealed, guarded tomb — alive!

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 — Matthew 28:2-4.

And no sooner was I thinking that that something incredible, something wonderful, happened. We could all feel the ground begin to shake. And all of a sudden, there He was — our Creator's Son. We started to make all the sounds we animals make whenever we're excited. He paused for a moment, looking at us long enough to smile, and then He walked off. But the ground kept shaking, and things got louder and louder. What was happening? That huge stone, the one that had been placed over the front of the tomb, began to move. One of the Son's helpers from heaven came and rolled it away. He was smiling, too. The soldiers who were there guarding the tomb? No; none of them were smiling at all. Fact is when they saw that helper, they were flat on the ground, terrified. But after a little while, they collected themselves, got up and ran into the town.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put Him!" — John 20:1-2.

In the meantime, it was starting to very, very slowly get light. And we started watching a whole parade of people coming to the tomb. First just one woman showed up. The guards had gone by then but the tomb was sitting there wide open. When she saw that, she went running as fast as she could back to town, probably to tell some of the Son's followers.

Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid Him. But go, tell His disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see Him, just as He told you.'" Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid — Mark 16:2-8.

In just a moment, a couple of other women came along, carrying some pouches or packets with them. Anyway, they saw the tomb had been opened, too. But they peeked inside. Another one of the Son's helpers was there, and he gave them the word: "If you're looking for the Son, don't bother; He's not here. He has risen. If you need to, see the place they laid Him. But go tell His followers, especially Peter, that He will meet them back in Galilee." I don't know how they could run and be shaking so badly all at the same time, but they managed it somehow. And they were gone.

While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; He has risen! Remember how He told you, while He was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'" Then they remembered His words — Luke 24:4-8.

Then some other women came, and they too went into the tomb. This time two of the Son's helpers were there to give these women the same counsel: "This is not a place of the living but of the dead. The one you are looking for has risen; He is alive! Don't you remember? He told you

all this stuff.” And they hurried off to tell the Son’s followers the same story. And while all this is going on, we started to understand something very exciting: The angel had not come down to roll away the stone so the Son could get out. He had rolled away the stone so that the Son’s followers could get in.

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus’ head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) Then the disciples went back to where they were staying — John 20:1-10.

Finally some guys showed up. I had wondered when that might finally happen; so far, it had all been females. To be honest, guy-types weren’t looking all that good during all this; in fact, it was kind of embarrassing. The disciples had all run for the hills when the Son was captured. Hardly any of them showed up when the Son died. The soldiers had scattered like a bunch of baby chicks. But, at long last, a couple of His guys showed up. The one that got there first didn’t go into the tomb; he waited for the other one, the older one, to go in first; then he followed. It was funny when they left — the first one in looked like he didn’t have any idea what to believe, but the second one had this really peaceful look on his face, like he maybe had an idea of what might have happened here. Anyway, after a short pause, they went back to town.

Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?” “They have taken my Lord away,” she said, “and I don’t know where they have put Him.” At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. He asked her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” Thinking He was the gardener, she said, “Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have put Him, and I will get Him.” Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned toward Him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means “Teacher”) — John 20:11-16.

Now the first woman to come and see the open tomb came back. I could see that she was really upset; it seemed like she had been crying. She took a couple of steps into the tomb and there saw two of the Son’s helpers. When they asked her why she was so upset, she explained that someone had taken away the body of her Master, and she just wanted to know where they had put it so she could retrieve it. Just then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw my Creator’s Son, quietly walking toward the open tomb. The woman must have heard a rustling because she turned around. I kept waiting for her mourning to be changed to joy. But instead, I’m really not sure why, she thought she was talking to a gardener or something. Anyway, she again asked where the body of the Son was. This time the Son said just one thing: “Mary.” Finally I saw joy as she threw herself down at His feet. He was alive — just like He’d said He would be.

Now I heard that all His followers eventually came to understand and believe that the Son was truly risen from the dead and alive. It took them awhile; one even refused to believe unless he could put his fingers in the Son’s wounds. It’s crazy; it seemed like His enemies were more worried about His returning to life than were His closest followers. But they finally all came to

understand that He was alive and that, by being alive, He had the final proof that He was truly the Creator's Son.

APPLICATION

The Son may have gone into that tomb seen as a defeated misfit. But He came out of that tomb the greatest "lion" of all time — a completely powerful and majestic ruler, truly an incomparable king, worthy of all honor and all glory — which we in the animal kingdom have been only too glad to give Him. After all, where would any of us be without Him? From the smallest slug to somebody as great as, well, as great as me, we all bow down — to the only king and conqueror who can bring joy instead of sorrow by bringing life instead of death. But what does it all mean — the suffering, the death, then coming back to life? Well, here is the way it was explained to me, in a way that only the "king of the beasts" could understand. Most basically, this "lion of Judah" has attacked and completely destroyed His greatest enemies — sin, death and the power of the devil. As a result of His victory, sin and death have been rendered powerless because Satan has been rendered meaningless — and here's how:

This lion will never die. He took that possibility away when He Himself was raised to life. And that eternal life is guaranteed by Him to all His followers.

This lion will never abandon any of His followers — not the greatest of them, not the least of them. They will always have His company, and a clear set of paw prints to show them where He is leading.

This lion will never leave His followers empty-handed. He has a never ending supply of all things good based on the infinite supply of riches found in His Father.

This lion will never leave His followers alone against their enemies. Their enemies will become His enemies — and He never loses. He never will!

What a wonderful Creator I have been privileged to know — and what an equally wonderful Son. I mean, how He rules puts me to shame. Think about this: He was the hero in this great story, and yet He died for the villains. My enemies always stay my enemies, but He has always seemed so intent on changing that where people are concerned. What can I say? There'll never be anybody like Him. It has been a joy to watch Him every moment that He walked this world. Thank you for allowing me to share. Farewell!

CONCLUSION

We're always so quick to tell people about the great celebrations in our lives, particularly in our families: weddings, babies, graduations, all that stuff. And if somebody asks us how our weekend was, we're very quick to share whatever good things happened. So a natural question: Does Easter fill you with a spirit of celebration? Does Easter fill you so completely with God's incredible story that you just can't keep it to yourself? If you have surrendered your life to God through Jesus Christ, then you have a story to tell; you have a celebration to share. That's what we're here for. That's what makes Easter as relevant today as it first was 2,000 years ago.

To God be the glory; great things He hath done. And nothing of all His great things has ever mattered more than the events of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Just ask any animal; they'll tell you. But if anybody asks you, you tell them. Happy Easter, everybody; God bless! Let's pray!