



Sermon

Matthew 28:1-10
Easter Sunday
March 23, 2008
Historic St. George's UMC
Rev. Alfred T. Day III

Easter Inside Out

Pilate said to [the chief priests and the Pharisees], "You have a guard of soldiers; go, make [the tomb] as secure as you can." So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone. Matthew 27:65

If you haven't seen or heard about this ad, then you're liable to sleep right through the resurrection.

Ring. Ring. Ring. It's 3 a.m. Your children are safe and asleep. There's a phone ringing in the White House. Something's happening in the world. You will decide who will answer that call. *Ring. Ring. Ring.* Who do YOU want answering that phone?

Do you want the hero? Do you want the one with the most experience? Do you want the one with the best judgment? Who will make us the most safe and secure? Who will secure our borders? Who will keep our streets safe? Who will do the best for our security?

"Go," Pontius Pilate says to the religious establishment. "SECURE the tomb as best you can." So they sealed the tomb, sealed the stone, and posted guards.

Apparently we are not the only people worried about security.

Security has been a powerful word all Holy Week long. They arrest Jesus and scare his friends away, the temple guard securing him with swords and clubs. The scared-off disciples flee the garden of Gethsemane, desert Jesus finding their security under the cover of darkness, or by running as fast they can to some safe house. Peter swears an oath that he does not know Jesus – three times – to protect and defend himself against any possible identification with the Galilean. Pontius Pilate's wife tries to keep her husband safe from the prisoner, Jesus,

whose been appearing in her dreams – "have nothing to do with that righteous man," she tells him. Even after Jesus is dead and buried, the chief priests, knowing that when you have some power you can't be too careful about keeping it, ask Pilate if they can post a guard. "Go for it!" the governor says. "What have we got to lose? Make the tomb as tight as a drum. Take some yellow crime-scene tape. Protect the perimeter. Here's my official seal. Guard it. GUARD IT."

If the people who try to sell us things are any indication, security is a pretty good market. Security sells. The need for security stirs and stokes our imaginations like the "It's 3a.m...." ad, like Peter, the rest of the disciples, and the religious and political systems all seeking their own version of the best defense is AN EVEN BETTER DEFENSE.

Ever see this ad. Dark road. Stormy night. Mom driving. Toddlers safely in car seats, napping. Lightning strikes. A tree falls across the road. The music underneath makes your heart beat like a scary movie. I'll tell you what. When I see the tire in that ad promising to keep my wife and family out of the ditch or worse – I'm buying.

Or the Life Insurance ads. Two 55+ women having tea. One lamenting not only the loss of her dear husband but being left with a stack bills and insufficient insurance coverage. The other woman turns to the camera, looks right at you, and gives a number to call so you won't be in the same fix.

Everyone is interested in keeping us safe. Cell phones. Security systems. Take your shoes off for airport security. Leave the shampoo home. Get this test or that done by the time your fifty. Something both in us and out there is very concerned with our security.

Come to think of it, maybe we ought to market the church that way – sell security. Maybe then we'd get more people.

- Come to Historic St. George's Try our newly cushioned pews. Hear sermons safe enough to sleep through!
- Wondering if God has YOUR best interests at heart? Come to a church that promises to keep God right where YOU need God to be.
- Troubled by risky discipleship? Come to a church where the only thing that changes are the vestments and the light bulbs.
- The United Methodist Church: Cozy Hearts. Satisfied minds. Protected Doors.

It will be OK. You'll see. Let's make the tomb as secure as we can.

But it doesn't work. It doesn't work for Peter to follow Jesus from a safe distance. It doesn't work for Pontius Pilate to wash his hands of the whole thing like he's the innocent victim. It doesn't work for the chief priests who seal the governor's lock down at the tomb. All the best security they knew, Matthew says, ran up against an earthquake. And when the tectonic plates are shifting, sturdy tire treads, having enough insurance or even an army won't help. Ask New Orleans. Or Baghdad.

Is making and keeping faith some kind of bunker mentality?

Matthew says there was an earthquake and the appearance of an angel descending from on high, bright as lightning. The guards fainted. There was no page in the military manual of general orders for what was happening.

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary somehow keep consciousness. Maybe they had entertained angels before. "Don't be afraid," the angel says. "There is nothing to fear here. I know you're looking for Jesus, the One they nailed to the cross. He is not here. He has been raised, just as he said. Come and look where he was. Now get on your way quickly and tell his disciples. He is risen from the dead. He is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there."

The women did what the angel said except for one thing. They were afraid. Matthew says they left the tomb with a mixture of fear and great joy. They may have been filled with joy and wonder, but they did not feel particularly safe. They were living in a world where the ground was shifting under their feet, where the tectonic plates heaved and their dead teacher and friend had not stayed dead. How's that for inspiring security?

Frightened and joyful they told the others. On the way, who do they run into but Jesus. And what are the first words out of his mouth: "Do not be afraid." What is it with these God-connected people and this "Do not be afraid" stuff? Somehow this word takes effect with the women. It is the last time anyone speaks of fear in the gospels.

Someone was telling me about their experience of coming to communion, receiving the cup with the words, "the blood of Christ poured out for you." Except on a certain Sunday, the person said, she heard (by happenstance, I'm sure) a different emphasis on the preposition – "the blood of Christ poured out FOR you." The line usually is spoken "the blood of Christ poured out for you" with no particular emphasis on the "FOR." On that day she heard the "FOR." She said for the first time in her life she thought, "My God, it could have gone the other way. The blood of Christ could have been shed/poured out against me."

I know we don't think about this. Conditioned as we are, it may even be difficult for us to imagine. But what if, because of Jesus' horrible crucifixion, what if because of Jesus' terrible death, what if God poured out wrath instead of resurrection? What if God took the world down instead of raising up new life?

When Jesus says "Do not be afraid" he makes it clear what might have happened did not happen. A person could read into Jesus' gruesome death, the earthquake and even the resurrection a signal of the end of things. But what kind of end? What about those who deserted and denied Jesus? What kind of end for them? Or those who stood powerless to do anything but look on and cry, helpless at the scene of the crucifixion? What kind of end for them?

“Do not be afraid!” Jesus says. “Do not be frightened like that? I have gone ahead of you to Galilee... I will meet them there.”

From what we hear about the first witnesses to the resurrection, after some initial earthquake shifts in their lives, they came to boldness and freedom of speech as never before. Here’s what changed. Here’s what got raised up. It was as if their sense of security came from a different place, came from the inside out not outside in. The wind of the Spirit blew and stirred them from inside out. Then they came out from behind locked doors and bolted windows. Their security moved from inside out, moved into and through their lives and the way they related to the world. They said and did things they wouldn’t have had the strength or vision to do before – from inside out. They were fearless in the face of the same systems, authorities and life challenges that paralyzed them before.

What might this kind inside-out power mean for you and me? What might this type of new freedom mean for us? How might it change the way we listen to the news or vote in an election or pass a stranger on the sidewalk or continue captive to fear in our very own locked-down places, worried about who is for us or against us? How might we be emboldened to risk new life and hope where we have been bolted, tightly closed, secured.

Hear me well. I am not saying no one ever means us harm. Or that there are not real dangers to be concerned with. Or that safety

and security issues aren’t real and important. Certainly the first disciples were in harms way even after their experience of the resurrection.

What I’m saying is that even when threatened, the threat did not own them. When there was reason to be afraid, the fear did not define them. Someone else’s power did not become the only thing they held onto or knew about themselves.

They also knew that mistakes, failures, disappointments and all, apprehensions, fears, doubts and all, Jesus had not only come back to them, he was for them and not against them. He was ahead of them in an unfolding life that wasn’t over. Life was not sealed closed. It was open.

“Do not be afraid.”

In the life of Jesus Christ, we see the face, the life of God not held in a tomb or restricted by containment strategies and security systems. If the ground under our feet is shifting, if the tectonic plates of our lives are heaving at all, it is because God is moving, making and loosing new life, new creation..

Out ahead of you. Out ahead of us. Christ is alive. Life is alive. We are alive.

Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed.

Amen.

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