

Kirby Lawrence Hill                      Abington Presbyterian Church  
April 9, 2023                      Easter  
Matthew 27:55-66  
Matthew 28:1-10; 16-20

## SECURE

The Easter story we just heard is permeated with fear. After Jesus' body has been entombed, religious leaders are afraid the Jesus story would take a turn that would extend his legacy. We have Roman guards so filled with fear when an angel appears that – we'll come back to that. We have the women who had the frightening experience of watching their Lord die on the cross. They were the few who stuck with him to the end. After feeling the presence of God when Jesus had been with them, it must have been so frightening to wonder where God was as this great tragedy occurred. And what would life be like without their leader who had brought them so much inspiration, love, and hope? Mary Magdalene and the other Mary look on with fear and sadness as a man named Joseph uses the tomb he had intended for himself to inter Jesus' tortured body in an honorable way. This takes place just before the Friday sun sets and the Sabbath begins. When the women go back to the tomb at the crack of dawn on Sunday, they are frightened once more, this time by an angel.

A lot of fear - what do we do when we are afraid? We tend to look for something to make us feel more secure. On the day after Jesus' death, religious leaders go back to the Roman governor, Pilate. They were aware that Jesus had predicted that he would be killed, but would on the third day be raised from the dead. They were anxious that his followers would steal his corpse from its tomb in order to extend the Jesus hoax, so they ask for security for the tomb through the third day. The governor grants their request, but his statement to them sounds odd: "You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can."

When they received their orders, the Roman soldiers must have winked at each other with their simple assignment. Some cement was placed around the edges of the large stone to seal it, or so they thought. Those poor guards, in actuality, were very poorly equipped for their task. Just how could soldiers make the world secure

from the Author of Life? Their training had neglected to teach them how to stop an earthquake with a sword or a miracle with a spear. That's what shook them at dawn on that Sunday morning, as an angel showed up, disregarding all their security initiatives. The guards were so filled with fear that Matthew tells us they "became like dead men." The gospel writer had to be grinning while including that literary detail about the military detail that had all fainted.

As the two women named Mary arrive at the tomb, they too are met by the angel, who had rolled the stone back. After telling them not to be afraid, the message was that Jesus had been raised. They could look - the tomb was empty. They were instructed to tell the disciples that Jesus had been raised and he would meet them back where they lived in Galilee. After the angel's message, Matthew writes: "The two women left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy." Fear hadn't been vanquished, but with Easter, their fear had a new partner named joy.

Before the women could deliver the message they had been given, they meet the One whom their message was about. The women fall at the feet of their risen Lord and hold onto him for dear life. Jesus echoes the angel's message for them not to be afraid, and reminds them to tell his disciples to head to Galilee, where they would see him, where they would be commissioned to continue his ministry. The women become the very first apostles of the risen Lord.

As I think back over this amazing account, I keep going back to Pontius Pilate's comment: "You have a guard of soldiers; go, make (the tomb) as secure as you can." Matthew does not tell us about the encounter when the two Marys tell the others that they had seen the risen Lord. I dare say that the other followers received the news in a guarded way. I have known individuals who have suffered such a great loss that their very heart became akin to a tomb. They rolled a large stone in front of it and guarded it closely, trying to secure themselves from any future vulnerability. I understand such an inclination. Yet even with our best efforts to carefully guard our hearts in ways that would seemingly close them off to the possibilities of new life, on this day, with this God, we are reminded that such efforts may go for naught, and new life comes forth in surprising ways.

I know others who seek security in their closed understanding of God and the world, convinced that God works only within the parameters of their set expectations. But to the extent we have placed God in a box or even in a tomb, on this day, with this God, we may just find that enclosure to be an empty one. This is a day for us to realize that we'll never be adequately equipped to keep God from doing something fresh and new.

There are also those who try to find security in their own cynicism. They interpret the wonders surrounding us in ways that fit their jaded outlook. They look for ways to criticize what they don't understand. But on this day, with this God, there are new possibilities and joy for all who are in any way open to God's story being woven into their own.

We live in an unsettling world and many long for a sense of security in their belief system. We worry that the fabric of our own society has been torn beyond repair by angry politics. We fear getting test results back from the doctor. We worry over children who struggle. We fret over our place in this world. Then there's the granddaddy of all fears – the fear of death. Nothing knocks our knees together like the Grim Reaper. I'm not going to tell you that an 'Alleluia' is a security blanket that keeps us safe from all harm – it isn't. Neither is whatever person who stands in the pulpit the source of your security.

However, on this day, with this God, we are secure in the steadfast love that is poured out for us. We are secure in the life-renewing power that sustains us even in the face of that which kills and destroys. We are secure in the awareness that the pain and death of Good Friday are not the end of the story. On this day, with this God, an additional chapter is authored which fills us with resurrection hope and joy for this day and the life to come.

I recently heard about a couple named Beth and Joe, retired professors from Tulane who are members of a Presbyterian Church in New Orleans. They live in a retirement community. Joe, who suffered a severe stroke a few years ago, lives in the memory care unit, and Beth lives in an apartment at the other end of the facility.

Before Covid, Beth went every day to Joe's room and wheeled him back to her apartment where they would listen to books on tape, talk, and sing together. They always sang the same German hymn: *Geh aus mein Herz und suche Freud* – “Go Out, My Heart, and Seek Joy.” They re-translated this same hymn from German into English every single day. For Joe, as a consequence of his strokes, each time was a little like starting over from scratch.

When the Memory Care wing locked down during the pandemic, Beth could no longer wheel Joe back to her apartment to begin their daily translation. Finally, after three weeks of painful isolation, the facility set up a video chat for the couple. Once each day, for twenty minutes, they were able to talk. They used their time to translate a single stanza of their favorite hymn, after which Beth would repeat three phrases that Joe came to call her litany: *“I love you. I miss you. I have not abandoned you.”*<sup>1</sup>

Our risen Lord shares the same litany with you and me: *“I love you. I miss you. I will not abandon you.”* We still have fears, but that litany is the secure source of our joy that comes to us on this day, with this God. We don't have to be those who become like dead people in fear - it's not just Jesus who comes back to life on Easter. By God's grace, it can be us, as well. Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.

<sup>1</sup> From a sermon entitled, ‘Empty,’ by Scott Black Johnston on [day1.org](http://day1.org)

