

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 25:6-9
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 28:1-10
April 9, 2023
EASTER SUNDAY

“Death Is Defeated”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

A man, his wife, and his cranky mother-in-law went on vacation to the Holy Land. While they were there, the mother-in-law passed away. The funeral director told them, “You can have her shipped home for \$5,000, or you can bury her here in the Holy Land for \$500.” The man thought about it for a while and told the funeral director he would just have her shipped home.

The funeral director asked, “Why.... why would you spend \$5,000 to ship your mother-in-law home when it would be wonderful to be buried here and spend only \$500?”

The man said, “A man died here about 2000 years ago. He was buried here and three days later, he rose from the dead. I just can’t take that chance.”

The Sabbath ended on Saturday evening. Jewish days are counted evening to evening, not morning to morning. It was early the next morning—what we now call Sunday, when Mary Magdalene and another woman named Mary went to the tomb. Early is very early—dawn in fact. They wished to avoid as many people as possible.

Matthew’s gospel is the only account that tells of a violent earthquake, as an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and rolled the stone away that blocked the front of the tomb. The stone was not a huge round boulder as we sometimes see in artist’s renditions. It was a huge disk set in grooves and rolled into place. The stones carved to block tombs required a large number of very strong men to put in place. There is no way two women could have moved it.

According to Matthew the angel of the Lord 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. But while the guards were struck dumb with terror, the women were told, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.” They were then instructed to tell the others that Jesus had risen from the dead, and as they were hurrying away, they encountered Jesus himself. They grabbed hold of him, overwhelmed with both joy and shock. Once more they were told, “Do not be afraid” this time by Jesus. It was a terrifying and overjoying moment.

But how on earth could this have happened? How could the tomb be

empty? What could stop well-trained soldiers from doing their job? Regardless if they were from the Jewish Temple Guard or Roman soldiers, these men knew how to run a proper security detail. A guard detail varied in size from four to sixteen men. When sixteen participated in overnight duty, each quaternion, or group of four men, took watch for three hours at a time. Four men were awake at all times and they were not taking their ease. Those on guard stood, while the other twelve slept in a semicircle with their heads pointed inward. Each soldier was armed with a six-foot pike, a sword, and a dagger. We don't know the size of the guard posted in this case, but it would be a minimum of four.

Roman armies were extremely disciplined, because failure in guard duty was a capital offense. For this reason, it is far more likely that the guards were Jewish and directly employed by the Temple. Either way, they were neither inexperienced or unmotivated. For them to be so overwhelmed that they became like stone and did nothing is extraordinary.

Matthew is the only one of the four gospels that mentions a guard. It was not necessary for the Jewish leaders to have feared the resurrection for them to place a guard, however. They may have simply thought of it as an afterthought once they realized on Friday night that Jesus' body was being placed in an actual tomb, as opposed to being thrown into a common grave as was the normal fate of executed prisoners. The United States had Osama bin Laden's body buried at sea because they did not want to provide a focal point for his followers.

The obvious charge made against the Christians at the time was that they came and stole the body. The Christians responded that that was not possible because there was a guard. If this had NOT been true, if there had been no guard, then the Jewish authorities would have said so. Instead, they countered with, "the guards fell asleep." But that would never have happened. The stone weighed between 1 ½ to 2 tons. It would have required a group of very strong men to shift it. There is absolutely NO WAY a group of strong followers of Jesus could have stepped over the sleeping bodies of four highly trained guards, who allegedly were the only guard in the entire Roman Empire that would take the risk of having an extended nap on duty. They could not have shifted the stone, and stolen the body without being caught. And of course, if the story had been true, these particular guards would have been punished and everyone knew it. Instead, they quietly disappeared. To save their own hides' the guards must have satisfied their superiors that they were powerless to prevent what happened. Perhaps the authorities believed it was sorcery. The Jewish authorities never denied that the tomb was empty. Instead, they attempted to explain it away.

Jesus died. He actually truly died. And on the third day he rose again. Jesus is the first born of the resurrection, the first to be resurrected to a new form of human existence. He was given a new body, a body that was changed. When Lazarus was raised from the dead and when Jairus' daughter was raised from the dead, both returned to their normal human lives. They were restored to life, but ultimately, they died again. The resurrection of Jesus is different. This resurrection body will never decay, never become ill, and never die. It is perfect and eternal. Paul used the example of a seed and a tree. Many today have found the caterpillar and the butterfly to be a good image. The caterpillar

is suited to survival on the ground. Its knowledge of the world is earthbound. The butterfly lives to fly through the air. It experiences a world without the limitations of the caterpillar. Yet they are the same creature. And just as it would be impossible for even a highly advanced caterpillar to imagine what life would be like as a butterfly, we can't really imagine life in a resurrection body. We won't understand until we get there. But we do know this: when we die we will not fade into an impersonal oblivion. When our loved ones die, we can be comforted in knowing that we will see them again. The terror of death is loss. In Christ, we are lost no more.

This is the good news of Easter. Death, our ultimate enemy, is defeated. The thing we fear most no longer has to rule our lives. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God destroyed the power of sin and death forever. Because he lives, we too shall live. Hallelujah! Amen.

Isaiah 25:6-9

⁶ On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and the finest of wines.

⁷ On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;

⁸ he will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears
from all faces;
he will remove his people's disgrace
from all the earth.

The Lord has spoken.

⁹ In that day they will say,
"Surely this is our God;
we trusted in him, and he saved us.
This is the Lord, we trusted in him;
let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation."

Matthew 28:1-10

28 After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

² 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.³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. ⁴ The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

⁵ The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his

disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."

⁸ So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."