

# Guarding the Tomb

Isaiah 42:1-7, Matthew 27:55-66

April 8, 2001

“You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can.” What an odd thing to say! Questions arise immediately. How hard could it be to guard a dead man? How many soldiers would it take to guard a dead man? What is the dead man going to do, get up and walk away? And why this strange order from Pilate, “Go, make it as secure as you can”? He does *not* say, “Seal the tomb!” He does *not* say, “Secure the cemetery!” He does *not* say, “Keep that dead man down!” He does *not* say, “Keep the riff-raff away from the tomb.” He does *not* say, “Lock down the city.” Nothing absolute like that at all. Nothing doable like that. Pilate says, “Make it as secure as you can,” suggesting that there are limits to their abilities, suggesting that his authority goes only so far, suggesting that their strength will meet a greater strength, suggesting that the tomb of Jesus Christ is inherently insecure and ultimately insecurable. It is as if Pilate knows what is going on! It is as if he is laughing at them and at the impossibility of what they ask even as he grants their wish. It is as if he knows that the chief priests and the Pharisees and the soldiers of the guard will not succeed, cannot succeed, and indeed, must fail in their efforts to keep Jesus in the tomb. It is as if he knows that something is amiss, that something is wrong, that something is afoot, that something new and different and terribly unexpected and completely inexplicable is about to happen, and he cannot do anything about it, he cannot prevent it, and he cannot stop it. Why had Jesus not answered Pilate’s questions at the trial? Why had Jesus not contested the charges? Why did Jesus bear the scourging without complaint and the mocking without reply? Why did he cry out to God from the cross, and why did Pilate’s own centurion, soldier in charge of a hundred soldiers, confess his faith at the foot of the cross, “Truly this was the Son of God”? What were the chief priests and the Pharisees so worried about? Why were they babbling about his rising from the dead? Pilate had already provided for the crucifixion of Jesus. What more did these people want from him? “You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can.” It is as if Pilate knows what is going on! Maybe so, maybe not. We cannot tell now, about him. But we know now. We know something is going on. We know, despite the reality of death, that the soldiers of the guard are going to fail miserably in their assigned task of securing the tomb. How hard could it be? How hard could it be to guard a dead man? And yet, “as secure as you can” will not be secure enough. It will not work. It will not hold Jesus down. This is not the end of the story. It is the next to the last word, but it is not the last word. The last word is new life.

Before there is a burial, there is a death. In addition to the Roman soldiers, there were many women, who had ministered to Jesus, and who, unlike the disciples, stayed and watched and saw him die. That evening, Joseph of Arimathea “took the body, and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud, and laid it in his own new tomb.” Again, the women witnessed this. Whatever else today’s reading tells us it tells us this: Jesus was dead. His preaching was silenced. His healings were halted. His ministry was ended. He quit breathing. His body was cold. They laid him in a hole in the ground. Jesus was dead.

This should seem obvious. The Roman Empire was good at killing! They did not make mistakes in executions, not in terms of whether or not someone was dead. They did not take living people down from crosses. They did not release comatose criminals to their friends. Jesus was dead! The Roman Empire certified it. And yet, because of what was soon to happen, we have

to affirm this again. The inherent insecurity of the tomb has made some doubt that it was a tomb. The ultimate insecurity of the tomb of Jesus has made some doubt that he was dead. But how can we doubt the terrible efficiency of brutal empire? Jesus was dead.

Some years later the Christian faith was summarized in the Apostles' Creed, which says in part, "I believe...in Jesus Christ... who...suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried." Those are different ways of saying the same thing. What is so important about his death that both his death and his burial are recorded in great detail in Matthew and emphasized repeatedly in the creed? There are at least three things going on here, all interconnected. First, Jesus was faithful and obedient all the way to death. Jesus was not just a fair weather follower of God. Jesus kept the faith when there was no obvious reason to do so. He was obedient when obedience cost him his life. Nothing less than death could have proved this. One time in human history the powers of sin and evil were broken. Nothing less could have defeated them. There is a terrible necessity in the death of Jesus Christ in the price that had to be paid. Second, the death of Jesus Christ is the negative presupposition of the positive reality of the resurrection. No death, no resurrection. No burial, no Easter. You cannot have the latter without the former. Resurrection is not resuscitation. Resuscitation is what happens to people who are almost, but not quite, dead. Resuscitation, by definition, rules out the presence of death in any particular instance. Resurrection is not restoration to this life. That would be interesting. That would be something for which we would be grateful, and we are grateful when people are healed and restored to the land of the living. But again, what that means is that they never really died. Jesus was dead. Jesus was dead, and the resurrection is qualitatively different from resuscitation or restoration. Resurrection is not coming back to this life. It is being carried forward into the next life, the same person, but a new and different life. The truth of Easter, the reality of the resurrection, is premised upon the reality of death. It is the reality of death of which we learn today. Jesus was dead. They buried him. Third, the death of Jesus Christ forms the basis of the wonderful exchange he accomplishes for us. He is cursed that we may be blessed. He is counted as sin that we may be forgiven. And he dies in order that we may be made alive. He dies for us. He dies for our sake. He dies so that we may live. Yes, that is terrible! And yet, it is wonderful! It is terrible that he had to die for us. It is terrible that we have brought this upon him. And yet, it is wonderful that he was willing to do it. It is wonderful that he did it. It is wonderful that he died for us, for without his having done that we would have been lost, alone, abandoned, and without hope in this world. But now we are found, we are loved, and we have good hope for this life and the next. These are the reasons we face and embrace this morbid reality. Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried.

And yet, there are already indications that this is not the last word. The "great stone" which Joseph rolled to the door of the tomb was not enough. The chief priests and the Pharisees sought additionally the order of the governor. They sealed the stone, not so much with caulking as with an official seal, a government document, a posted warning, a line not to cross. No disciples were to go in. Little did they know the master would come out. They set a guard, undoubtedly sufficient against human intruders, utterly unprepared for angelic visitation, absolutely incapable of keeping Jesus in the tomb. The stage is set for that which is yet to come.

How does this strange, morbid, negative aspect of the gospel affect our lives today? On the one hand, we admit the reality of death. Jesus was dead. Each of us will have to die, unless the end of the world comes first. There is no more denying that. We live in a world which would like to deny the reality of death and which stupidly worships the supposed glory of youth. We know better than that. Death is real. It comes to us all. And by placing a limit to life as we know

it, it increases the value of the life we have. The fear of death can destroy life. The reality of death can help us appreciate life. We admit the reality of death, in the midst of a world which prefers not to face it.

On the other hand, we do not admit the finality of death! How can that be? Death is real, death is complete, death is the end of life as we know it here, and yet, we do not admit its finality. We do not admit that it has the last word. It has the terrible next to the last word, but it does not have the final say so about who we are. There is another force, a greater power, the author of all life, the source of all being, the ground of all existence, the basis of all reality, the God and Father of Jesus Christ, who has made us for himself. God has the last word. God has the final say so. God is greater than death, so death is not final and cannot be final. Therefore, we live facing the reality of death, and yet we live expecting the reality of new life. This sets us apart from the rest of the world.

Pilate said, “You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can.” How hard could it be to guard a dead man? How many soldiers would it take to guard a dead man? What is the dead man going to do, get up and walk away? Don’t bet on the soldiers!

*To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.*

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