

# WHEN TOMBS ARE NOT SECURE

Matthew 27:62-28:10  
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**62** The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate **63** and said, "Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise again.' **64** Therefore command the tomb to be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, 'He has been raised from the dead,' and the last deception would be worse than the first." **65** Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can." **66** So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone.

**1** After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. **2** And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. **3** His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. **4** For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. **5** But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. **6** He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. **7** Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." **8** So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. **9** Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of 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."

**I**t is good to see you here today. I thank God for you. Whatever brought you here today, whether you came with the confidence of the Hallelujah's ringing in your ears, or whether you entered with a bit of trepidation, even skepticism, not knowing what to make of this faith thing, it is my hope that there is something for you this morning, and that somehow there might be something, perhaps the music alone, to help you believe the unbelievable and comprehend the incomprehensible.

Most of us know at least the basics of the main story of Easter, even though the culture we are in downplays its significance. I went into a bookstore several years ago and noticed that on a display in the front of the store there were children's books pertaining to the season. The books on Passover recounted beautifully and accurately why for Jews the Passover is so significant, the story of liberation from slavery and the exodus into freedom. The books on Easter, every one of them, had to do with the Easter bunny.

Reminding me, of course, of the man who went up to the pearly gates. St. Peter noticed that he had lived a good life, and just wanted to check things out. "So tell me the story of Jesus," he

said. And the man nailed it, from the manger to the teachings and healings and miracles and the triumphant entrance into the city on Palm Sunday and the crowds deserting him and his final meal with his disciples and the betrayal and denial of his closest friends and his crucifixion until finally, three days later, the earth shook and the stone rolled away and the Easter bunny came hopping out. Let's make sure we get our story straight this morning.

Each gospel tells the story a bit differently, and Matthew's story is the most dramatic. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (possibly Jesus' mother) gather up the courage to head to the tomb, knowing that they would probably have to pass by the soldiers. I wonder what that must have been like for two women to go by the hated Roman soldiers. They knew what soldiers had done to women in that region. But as they draw near the tomb the earth began to quake—6 points on the Richter scale? Who knows? But the earth shook and rolled. The next thing that happened (and here is where we try to explain the unexplainable) an angel appeared and rolled away the stone, and the angel sat on it. Kind of casual if you ask me, as though it were a bench in the park. The angel appeared like lightning and the clothes were white as snow. I think that's Matthew's way of saying that something of God's presence was there measurable, visible, so real you could see it in its blinding brightness. The guards? Forget about them for now. They had succumbed to fear and were numbed, dumbstruck by it all.

And the angel spoke. "Do not be afraid," he said, "for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay." Now, here's an odd thing. Jesus didn't come walking out of the tomb when the earth shook or the angel rolled the stone away. "He is not here," the angel said. Resurrection had already happened. "Go quickly and tell the disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold he is going before you to Galilee; there you'll see him."

So they went running from the tomb, "with fear and great joy," according to Matthew. I wonder what happened to the angel. Did the angel sit there until the guards awoke and say the same words to them: "Do not be afraid." If so, would they dare to listen? Would they be open to the possibility of Easter? Or would they believe only in what they had known: the power of Rome, the rule of fear, the keeping of good order, the protection of the status quo? We don't know, because the story doesn't stay there. The women meet up with Jesus. They fell to their knees and grabbed his feet and they worshipped him. Then Jesus said those same words they had heard earlier: "Do not be afraid," and he told them he was going to Galilee and asked them to tell the disciples that. And the women got to their feet and ran to the disciples. That's the story of Easter that we tell over and over again.

But there is another story that brackets this story. It is a story of intrigue, power and deceit. It starts the day before the story I just recounted. Pilate was hoping he was done with the whole sordid mess, even washing his hands of it all. He had gone home the previous day, Friday, and mixed a couple of scotch-and-waters and kicked the dog and put up his feet on the ottoman and finally said to his wife "You won't believe the kind of day I've had." Pilate was very cautious, did not want to make a misstep that might jeopardize his good record of government service and his pension in hopes that he might eventually be transferred out of that little hell-hole called Palestine. But he was now done with that little brushfire.

But he goes to the office the next day hoping for a little peace and quiet, and there they are again, the chief priests and the Pharisees. They want him to dispatch some of his soldiers to stand guard at the tomb for a few days to thwart any move on the disciples' part to steal the body and whomp up Easter. This is a hot-potato getting hotter, he thinks, and so with great diplomatic skill that belies his perspiration forming on his upper lip, he tosses the potato back to them. "You have a guard of soldiers; make it as secure as you can." And as Matthew tells us, they "went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone."

Whew! That settles everything. Now, if Easter happens anyway, they at least have their story straight, and they can tell everyone: "It didn't really happen, because we made that tomb as secure as any humans could."

Frederick Buechner has written that these chief priests and Pharisees had two reasons for wanting that tomb to be so secure, and we've already covered the first reason—the concern about the disciples stealing the body. The other reason, he suggests, was unspoken. It was "the fear that the man whom they had crucified would *really* come alive again as he had promised, that the body that now lay dead in its tomb, disfigured by the mutilations of the cross, that this body would start to breathe again, stand up in its grave clothes and move toward them with unspeakable power. To the extent that deep within themselves the elders feared this as a real possibility," says Buechner, "their being told by Pilate to make things as secure as they could was to have the very earth pulled out from under them. How does an old man keep the sun from rising? How do soldiers secure the world against miracle?" Trying to prevent this thing from happening, Buechner goes on to say, was "like trying to stop the wind with a machine gun."<sup>1</sup>

The more I read these stories, the more I find myself in the shoes of the chief priests and Pharisees. You see, I kind of like things secure, controlled, orderly. We preachers, you know try to make things as secure as we can. Fred Craddock tells the story of the time he was a young, wet behind the ears preacher. He went into the hospital to visit a sick parishioner who was near death. He went into the room; the shades were drawn; she was hooked up to a half dozen tubes. He went in intending to pray one of those generic prayers that would practically give her over to God, but she begged him to pray for a miraculous healing, and so, against his better judgment he prayed for that. But he didn't hold much hope. A week or so later, he went back. The shades were pulled up, the sunlight was streaming in, and she was sitting up in her bed. No tubes anywhere. She said, "The doctor took some more x-rays and he can't find a thing. I'm going home tomorrow. Thank you for your prayer." Craddock says he had a brief prayer of thanksgiving and then, in the parking lot on the way to his car, he stopped and shook his fist at heaven and said, "Don't you ever do that to me again!"<sup>2</sup>

I know how he feels. I've prayed some of those prayers when I really wanted the tomb to be secure. Let me stay in control of things. Someone comes up to me and says "I've changed!" And of course I'm polite, but I know that person well and say to myself, "Sure you have!" Sometimes we're right. But sometimes we're wrong.

Some of you might know John Kiltzer. Tall lanky guitar player. Used to play basketball for Memphis State. Toured with a band. Got into every kind of drug that was available. Bottomed out. Ended up down at the jail, again and again from what I understand. One morning after yet another arrest and night in the slammer, he called his wife from the jail and said, "Honey, last night I found Jesus." To which his wife replied: "John, you can't even find your car keys!" John is now an ordained Methodist minister with a special ministry with strugglers and addicts.

The truth is that many of us are like his wife was, more at home in the culture of premature certainty and death, that we fail to pray for or even hope for the possibility of resurrection life. Which makes us seem a lot like those chief priests and Pharisees. And their story wasn't over. After Easter happened (and Matthew is the only one to tell us this part of the story), the elders and priests contrive a story about how the guards were bribed to say that the body of Jesus was stolen in the night while they were sleeping. If Pilate hears this, everything will be OK.

You see why I hope that there might be something in here for everyone? There are two stories to choose from, but perfectly plausible and utterly ridiculous at the same time, depending upon which point of view you take. To many of us, the story of the first Easter and the resurrection is believable; faith makes it so. And the story of the politicians and priests manipulating behind the scenes seems absurd because it is so contrary to what we believe.

But for the skeptic, the story of the intrigue and back room deals and the stolen body is quite plausible and reasonable, while the story of the resurrection is utterly absurd, most likely the fabrication of overzealous devotees. Matthew said that this story is repeated even today.

So on Easter, we have a choice. I have to admire Matthew for even opening the door to other possibilities than the one he believed. He just reported them and let us decide for ourselves. There is one that puts faith in human beings, especially the powerful, to keep tombs sealed, to control events that seem to be out of control by their cunning, manipulation, bribery, and deceit. If that's true then God is either insignificant or non-existent and only what we do by our own will and force has meaning. If that's true then you better get out there in that dog eat dog world and get on top of the pack as soon as you can and don't let anyone else get ahead of you. It means that the fraudulent, false, and corrupt things of the earth are more powerful than the shining and good and true things of heaven. And death is the end of the game.

Then there's the other story that Matthew relates. It is a story of God... of God's self-giving, self-sacrificing love, of God's endless and eternal hope in us, of God's forgiveness and goodness toward the Creation, of God's desire that the earth shall be fair and all its people one.

I cannot convince you of the truth of the resurrection by showing you some grave clothes with the right carbon dating or any other hard evidence like that. According to Matthew, even the disciples after meeting the Risen Lord in Galilee, "worshipped him *and* they doubted." I cannot convince you of the truth of the resurrection by intellectual argument. We can comprehend it only by faith, see it with eyes that can see more than eyes see, and capture it only by minds open to truth larger than the mind can capture.

How do we do that? We do it by going to Galilee. We don't stay at the tomb. It is in Galilee—that is, where we live-- that we encounter the Risen Lord and see for ourselves that even though we have made the tomb as secure as we can, it's not secure enough—not in a world which, thanks be to God's divine intervention, is filled with miracle.

Still not convinced? It's a lot to believe, isn't it? We have to be open to wonder. Last week during all the festivities of Palm Sunday with children parading down the aisle, congregation singing Hosannas, presentation of a Duty to God award to a Cub scout, collecting cans and goods for the hungry, dozens of children standing up here singing in a combined choir for the first time, time stood still as we heard the voice of a little angel.

*“God is here today. As certain as the air I breathe...  
As certain as the morning sun that rises,  
As certain as I sing you'll hear my song.”*

For me it was one of those liminal moments, a time when the distance between heaven and earth was thin. Everyone wanted to know who this was singing, including people on the radio. They emailed me wanting to know who this angel was.

Her name is Madeline, Madeline Flack. She is a student in our weekday Kindergarten. I have her parents' permission to tell this story. But she was born the tomb was secure. There was no reason for her to defy death. She was born with a hole in her heart, and by the time she was 10 months old she had already had three surgeries of different kinds on her heart. That tomb, I am sure, seemed pretty secure to many. But there she was last week, sounding like an angel, singing her heart out. “God is here today.”

Here, in Galilee. Here, where we proclaim that the tomb is not so secure as it seems. Here, where we repeat for your sakes and for mine, the life-giving proclamation of this holy day: that, since Jesus Christ got up from that grave and emptied that tomb of its power; then hope is unceasing, sins are forgiven, life is eternal, and our loving and generous God has more surprise and wonder in store for us than our hearts have yet imagined.

The Risen Jesus promised to meet his disciples in Galilee, back where they lived, which is as well a promise to meet us where we live, in the experiences this side of heaven that give us an inkling of the truth of heaven broken through to earth confirming the highest of all affirmations of life: “ He is risen. He is risen indeed!”

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (New York: Seabury, 1979), pp. 76-77.

<sup>2</sup> I first heard Dr. Craddock tell this story at a workshop at Columbia Theological Seminary around 1990. I searched, but it is not in his *Craddock Stories* book.