

Kirby Lawrence Hill Abington Presbyterian Church
April 12, 2020 Easter
Acts 10:34-43
Matthew 27:57-28:10

SECURE?

The women watched as the large stone was rolled into place to cover the face of the tomb. The stone's placement made it all seem so final. This One who had been so filled with life, who had filled so many others, including them, with a zest for life, a zest for God - how could it be that Jesus was now lifeless and entombed behind that large stone?

Oh, they knew how it happened. Mary Magdalene and another woman named Mary were among the women who had been there at Jesus' crucifixion. Never had there been someone who had lived so good a life, and he, of all people had to undergo the most inhumane death imaginable! Their hearts hurt not only because they had suddenly and dreadfully lost someone for whom they cared deeply. They also must have felt a deep loss of faith and hope, for they had come to believe that God was doing something very special through Jesus. They had witnessed new purpose and wholeness coming into God's world through his compassionate ministry. They had seen faith and people given new life. Jesus had shown them that religion and joy were not mutually exclusive. His teachings and the example of his life thrilled and challenged their hearts. When they had come into Jerusalem with him on Palm Sunday just five days earlier, their hopes had been as high as the heavens. But now, deep sadness and despair engulfed them. As the sun was about to set that Friday evening, the women must have wondered where God was in the midst of this great tragedy.

They had been at the cross, they had looked on as his body was entombed, but the women had not been present for a meeting between religious leaders and Pontius Pilate the next day. These leaders had been pleased that the Roman governor had been willing to deal with their 'Jesus problem' in a conclusive way. However, now they were back to ask for another favor, because 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 concerned that his followers would steal his corpse from its tomb so they could stir up even more trouble with a further deception asserting that Jesus' outlandish prediction had come true. For whatever reason, the governor granted their request. But his statement sounded 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, saying, "This assignment of making sure a dead man stays dead will really test our mettle." Little did they know! Some cement was placed around the edges of the large stone to seal it, or so they thought. Those who made up the team of guards were actually 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 soon after dawn on that Sunday morning, just as an angel showed up and rolled back the stone from the front of the tomb. The messenger from heaven then sat on the stone as if to show how easy that task had been. The guards, at the appearance of the angel, 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.

The angel then addresses the two women named Mary who had arrived at the tomb, telling them not to be afraid, that Jesus had been raised, and that they could look to see the empty tomb. How much they needed, how much we need that message to not be overwhelmed with fear. They were hearing from an authoritative voice that suffering did not endure forever, that death did not have the last word. All they had thought was irreversible or inevitable, God had upended. Then they were instructed to tell Jesus' disciples that he had been raised and he would meet them back where they lived in Galilee. Like the soldiers, the women were also filled with fear, but theirs was mixed with overflowing joy. So instead of fainting like the soldiers, they sprinted to carry out their task. For the love of God, we too get to tell all, that death does not get to set the terms of God's will, and that life, eternal and abundant, cannot be held at bay. However, before the women could deliver the message they had been given, they met the One whom their message was about. He did not leave them alone in their bewilderment. The women fell at the feet of their risen Lord

and held onto him for dear life. But after Jesus echoed the angel's message for them not to be afraid, he reminded them of their mission – to tell his disciples to head to Galilee, where they would see him. Actually, instead of the word 'disciples,' Jesus referred to the very ones who had denied and abandoned him as 'his brothers.' He had taught about forgiveness and reconciliation – clearly, he also embodied it! The women went as they were sent, the very first apostles of the resurrected 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 told the others that they had seen the risen Lord. I dare say that there was not immediate acceptance and celebration, but 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, particularly at this time of great fear and loss. 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 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 a tomb, on this day, with this God, we may just find that enclosure to be an empty one. God is not confined to our view of how things work or don't work in the world. This is a day for us to realize that we'll never be adequately equipped to keep God from doing something fresh and new. At this time of death and mourning, God has something powerfully life-giving going on.

There are also those who find security in their own cynicism. They interpret the wonders that occur on a regular basis in ways that fit their jaded outlook. They may continue to find ways to criticize what they don't understand instead of being

open to the wonder of God's life-giving goodness. 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. A lot of us had felt our lives, livelihood, and way of living were quite secure until just a few weeks ago. I'm not going to tell you that an 'Alleluia' is a security blanket that keeps us safe from all harm – it isn't. I commend those who are trying to keep themselves and others safe through good handwashing and social distancing. But ultimately, we cannot make everything we have and are secure.

However, Easter tells us we are secure in the steadfast love of God that is poured out for us in our time of challenge and suffering. 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 that the pain and death of Good Friday is not the end of the story. There is that additional chapter that God authors which fills us with resurrection hope for this day and the life to come. So, receive and be shaped by the glorious good news of this day. We don't have to be those who are frozen 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!