

As Secure as Possible
Matthew 28:1-10
(and also 27:66-69)
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Northminster Presbyterian Church

Gosh, that seems, short doesn't it? We almost stumble when we get to Matthew's version of Easter, because it's just so stark—guards, earthquake, angel, he's not here, but he is there, worshipping at his feet, fear not, go to Galilee.

Where is the poetry of the Gospel of John or the great storytelling of Luke? Where are the befuddled Peter and John who run to the tomb to check out the unbelievable story? Where is the eloquent pastoral conversation between Jesus and Mary Magdelene?

Matthew and Jesus don't seem to have time for all of that, even though Matthew's telling of this miraculous day is dramatic; it seems almost clinical.

And, so, different, the earthquake is new and so are the guards. They are the "new" things in Matthew I notice the most. They aren't there in the other gospels; why are they there today?

To answer that we have to go back to yesterday morning--not April 20th, but the first Holy Saturday, and just four verses before today's text.

"The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, "Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive--'After three days I will rise again.' 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." Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can." So, they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone."

As secure as possible.

We've heard that phrase before, haven't we?
It's become a watchword for our day.

We want to make things as secure as possible. We crave safety, escape from the dangerous anxiety of the world we live in today--a world where Sir Lankan Christians and tourists lost their lives today in terrorist attacks on churches and hotels. It's not bad to want to be secure. We look at the tragedy of Notre Dame and check our fire alarms. We hear of school shootings and hire security guards and install metal detectors in schools. We hear of church shootings and develop emergency plans. We make changes in our lifestyles to keep living the lives we have, but with more awareness and safety.

But that's not the kind of secure that Pilate is talking about. Pilate is talking about security for HIM--the symbol of Roman power among the Hebrew people; he's talking about security for the powers that be, who condemned this Jesus as a heretic for proclaiming a new way--a way of grace and hope and compassion, and not a way that keeps those folks in power as the final arbiters of what God's law says is holy and right.

This is the kind of security that built a wall between East and West Berlin 50 years ago and is still building walls today. This is the kind of security that hides behind the letter of the law while shredding its intent and spirit. This is the kind of security that posts guards at the places where new life might break through old understandings.

It's the kind of security that is built on a myth--that what keeps the powerful powerful, is good for everyone else; that security for the Roman occupier is security for the people.

But, the stone rolled away reveals the truth.

The powerless, dumbfounded guards reveal the truth.

The light of the morning on the first day of the week reveals the truth.

That nothing can ultimately stop the life that God brings into the world.

For Matthew, and for us who live in a world tangled up in the quest for security, and for all of us, this is the ultimate good news--that the only security that matters in the end is that found in the author of the Universe, the spirit of love and hope, the

Christ who stands before the two Mary's that morning, the Christ who mourns alongside the Christians in Sri Lanka this morning.

And they, like we, cannot help but worship when we encounter this promise fulfilled; when the one who was dead by our hands is alive and standing before them. But did you notice? Their worship lasts exactly one sentence. Jesus won't let it last any longer for there is life to live, work to do, hope to fulfill and love to be loved.

So, Jesus tells them they must Go and Tell--Go and Tell of Pilate's quest for security, for the powers of death and oppression, thwarted by life, by grace and by hope. And where are they to go? To Galilee.

I'm not sure I'd ever noticed this before, but, it's right there in her name-- Mary of Magdela. Magdela was the 1st century Hebrew port city on the Sea of Galilee which was a center of commerce in Galilee. Jesus is sending her home. To the place where he first met her.

In Luke and John, the disciples and the Risen Christ stay in and around Jerusalem and Jesus appears on the road; when they are fishing and promising Pentecost and eating fish and all of that.

But not here or in Mark. Here, there is some urgency about going to Galilee. Why? Why is Jesus sending Mary home and all of the disciples back to the sea where he first called many of them away from their nets?

When have we been to Galilee before in this Gospel? Way back just after Christmas, Galilee was where Joseph and Mary settle after their flight to Egypt for Jesus' safety. A few chapters later, Galilee is where Jesus called the disciples. Galilee is where he began his public ministry after John Baptized him. Galilee is where he fled to when he heard that John the Baptist had been arrested.

Hmmm...I wonder. Is that why he's sending them there? It's back to a place of safety away from the powerbroker and crucifixion obsessed public officials? Is he saying the equivalent of meet me at the safe house in Galilee? That would make sense, wouldn't it—Jesus' own kind of making things as secure as possible?

Maybe, but I don't think so, for the resurrected Christ is beyond fear.

Who does he have to fear now? He has vanquished even death. Why would he possibly fear Pilate now? Maybe he's not sending them back there for safety. Maybe what he's actually doing is sending them back, back to when and where their time together began.

In the musical "Jesus Christ Superstar", with Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Weber, we don't get an Easter story. In an effort not to have their show tagged as a religious piece chose to end the show with the Crucifixion, there is no happy ending in the musical. It is truly a Good Friday kind of musical, not an Easter one.

But there is a moment, a moment that perhaps creates a space for Matthew's Easter to echo through the violence and emotion that make up the last 30 minutes or so of that show. It happens between Jesus' two appearances before Pilate: the Roman Governor, as all of these political maneuverings are underway in the halls of power, for a few moments, the action shifts away from Jesus and back to Mary Magdelain and the disciples. Jesus is about to face the trial that will sentence him to death. And, Mary Magdalene starts singing a very simple song that Peter and the other disciples eventually join.

*I've been very hopeful, so far
Now for the first time I think we're going wrong
Hurry up and tell me this is just a dream
Oh could we start again please?*

Is that what Jesus is doing in telling the disciples to go back to the beginning? Is he staying "Yes, you can start again..."? What might it mean if that is a central message of Easter? What if that is Jesus' way of making things as secure as possible, by reminding us that we can start again. That Mary can go home. That the disciples can go back to where it all began and start again.

There is grace in that, isn't there? We like starting over, don't we? Whether it's in Candy Crush where we can try that level again or in golf games when we get a Mulligan or school papers when they let us redo them; or when trust has been broken in a relationship and after much hard work it is restored. We like second

chances at getting it right. And after all, isn't being forgiven about God wiping the slate clean and saying try again?

And often isn't home the safest place to lick our wounds and start over when things go hard? Just ask the millions of Millennials who have gone back home after broken jobs or a broken marriage and you'll know the answer to that is yes.

But wait, when we start over again, we're never actually the same as we were before, are we? We never actually find a way back to what was, but a way back to a new NOW.

What if Jesus is sending the people back to the beginning to say, "Now that you know that death doesn't win, know that you know that Herod and Caiphas and Pilate will still have murder on their minds. But, they won't get the final say. God's will, can they see the world differently? Now that they have encountered the risen Christ, aren't they changed by a new kind of freedom? They can go back to the beginning, but, still be forever changed by resurrection hope.

And, surely that says something to us today--we who confront a world that is still so centered on death.

If the resurrection means anything at all, it means that though we may begin each day anew as those forgiven, loved and freed, it means we encounter the world differently--changed by the cross; changed by our encounter with the Risen Christ. Yes, we can go back to the beginning each day.

But, now we encounter a world that has been drawn together by the one who in his own body, in his own self-offering took on all the sins of humanity.

We encounter a world where Christ on the cross broke down every barrier and turned to us all and said, 'Father forgive them'; where the same Christ looked down upon us and said 'This is your mother, this is your son, this is your brother and this is your daughter making of us one human family.

We can go back to the beginning, but we get there only after having traveled by way of a cross and an empty tomb. And, so it means that we can never see the world or our friends or our enemies as the same.

The self-offering death of Jesus and resurrection of the living Christ means that though we still live in a world where Peter will lead the church and be martyred--where Paul will deliver this good news across the Mediterranean and be put to death in a Roman jail; where Martin Luther King Junior will visit the mountaintop and die on a motel balcony; where Oscar Romero will proclaim justice for the peasants of El Salvador and be gunned down celebrating mass in a hospital chapel. But, none of them were defeated for each of them has victory in how they lived and even in how they died.

Resurrection hope lives on. Peter and Paul's church, imperfect as it is, would become the greatest force for good and for justice and for human dignity the world has ever known. Dr. King's dream would be at least partially realized when a black man with a white mother would become leader of the most powerful nation in the world. Bishop Romero's legacy lives on in a Pope that once again is calling the world to remember that we encounter God more in the faces of the poor than we do in the admitted beauty of a stained-glass window.

We live in a world where there are still tragedies and where we are called to help end them, but never in a way that surrenders Resurrection Hope; never in a way that surrenders our humanity, our unity in Christ or our willingness to love and forgive as we have been loved and forgiven.

There will be times, soon and in many of our tomorrows, where each of us will have to go back to the beginning--when you or I or some of us will have to start over. It may be tempting in those times to lose hope and to feel defeated; to live in fear and scarcity and to surrender to Pilate's kind of security.

But, today means we can't. Today means we won't because we have seen the end of the story. The end of the story is life. The end of the story is forgiveness. The end of the story is unity in the one who says go back to the beginning, freed from all that has been, and I will meet you there. You will never be alone and you will never be the same and you can face it all with joy, with hope and with courage.

Halleluiah! Thanks be to God.