

April 24, 2011 Easter 10:30 Service Matthew 28:1-10

By Pastor Jon Deibler

At Arlington National Cemetery is the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. It is guarded at all times as a sign of respect. I understand it is a great honor to be one of the soldiers who guard it.

Our gospel tells us that guards were placed at Jesus' tomb, but I doubt they considered it much of an honor. Probably it was more of a joke. Here they are great Roman soldiers from the most powerful army on earth, and they are guarding the tomb of a recently died rabble rouser. At least from their perspective that's what Jesus was. And why bother guarding it? The guy's disciples had fled. None of them so much as risked their eyebrows to stand up for their leader. They were just a bunch of cowards.

Perhaps the soldiers considered this assignment a cake job – guarding a tomb in a cemetery. What could happen? Perhaps they considered it embarrassing. The other guys in the cohort would be bragging about what they had done that day – how they had helped put down a near riot, or beaten up some Jews, or all sorts of other things soldiers would do that you don't want me to talk about on in an Easter sermon. All the guys at Jesus tomb could say was that they watched the grass grow 1/8 of an inch taller!

Were they ever in for a surprise: earthquakes, angles, and empty tombs! The Gospel of Matthew presents the whole Easter story in a surprising, almost comic way.

Two Jewish women, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary – probably Jesus' mother, come to the tomb at early dawn. There's a great earthquake and an angel comes down, rolls back the stone and sits on it. His appearance is like lightning and his clothing is white as snow.

Now, how are those big burly Roman guards doing? These guys represent the might of the great Roman Empire, the greatest power on earth. These guys have seen battle. They are hardened killers. They're true tough guys. They know how to keep their fear in check and keep on fighting. How are they doing against one solitary angel who's now placidly sitting on a rock?

They certainly aren't going to tell their commanding officer how well they did! For fear they're shaking and becoming like dead men. I suppose if they're going to be frightened to death they're in a good place; by a tomb and all. And yet the truly dead guy they're supposed to be guarding has been resurrected and isn't there! Worse yet, these two Jewish women are a bit scared, yes, but not frozen in fear. Talk about being embarrassed as a soldier! Failing while on duty, being overpowered by two women and an unarmed angel who's sitting on a rock.

We'll come back to the story in a minute, but we have to note something else here. This is a story about power. We see already that the great power of the Roman Empire is nothing but a joke compared to God. And you know the story well. Even the power of death is no match for God. Jesus was raised!

I know that in our scientifically critical age the story of the resurrection is a bit of a stretch. Oh, I'm sure we can set aside our critical thinking to come into church on Easter Sunday and hear the almost fairy-tale like story of the resurrection with vivid imagination. And if I preach on it well enough you might get the same pleasure that you get from watching a fairy tale animated by Disney. It is a dream world where the good guys win and everyone lives happily ever after – except, of course, the bad guys who get what's coming to them.

But then you leave here. The happiness may continue through Easter dinner, and if I tell a good enough joke in the sermon you might even repeat it then. But pretty soon it is like leaving the movie theater. You're confronted with reality again and you have to leave the fantasy world behind. The resurrection is easy to believe in childlike innocence. It is much harder to believe when it has to work in the adult world of reality.

There is no scientific proof I can offer for the resurrection. It cannot be proven. The four accounts of the resurrection in the Bible do stand up to critical literary study. That is, when you study the stories not from the Christian perspective of faith, but just take them as stories from the ancient world, you do come away with the conclusion that they are based on historical truth. These are not fairy tales or fabrications of the first century. But that is still not proof.

While there is strong evidence to suggest the historic truth of Jesus resurrection it is still a matter of faith. Do you live its truth or not? Do you take the fairy tale like story of the world in here and make it the reality that you will live at work tomorrow? That is the real question of how true it is to you.

Here's the truth of the matter. On Good Friday the fullness of God in Christ was humiliatedly crucified at the hands of humans. God paid the ultimate price to have you. No one can ever pay a higher price because God the Creator, your Creator, has paid a higher price than anyone or anything else ever can. God given the wholeness of himself to you as a gift. God didn't pick you up cheap at a dollar store. You weren't on the clearance rack of Target because no one else wanted you. God didn't get you as a dumpster dive where he was searching for free stuff. God paid the highest price for you.

Three days later on the first Easter Sunday that power of God was proven to be greater than death. Jesus did not come back as a ghost. Jesus did not come back as just a warm feeling in the hearts of the disciples. He was raised from the dead, the proof and promise that resurrection is real.

It is easy to believe in everlasting life. It is easy to believe in heaven. These are things many people think about when they don't want to admit their mortality. These things are vague hopes for immortality. But that is not the nature of God's plans for resurrection. And they are not God's plans for you.

For that we need to go back to Matthew's gospel. The women leave the tomb quickly with fear and great joy. They're heading to tell the disciples when Jesus meets them. According to our English translations Jesus says, "Greetings!" How lame! What is this, a Hallmark Card or the

Bible? If that's what Jesus said he might just as well have said, "Hi there. How are you doing?" No, let's get closer to what Jesus said which was, "Rejoice!"

Picture Jesus here with a beaming smile on his face, a twinkle in his eye, and greeting the women with, "Rejoice!" as he breaks into a hearty laugh. This is a glorious time, a real surprise. It's a complete shock! The women are so joyously excited they are filled with fear at the power they've just encountered. They take hold of his feet and worship him.

This might be a tiny detail, but it is Matthew telling us that this is no ghost. You can't grab hold of a ghost's feet. And unlike the scary angel who they never touch, Jesus is here as before where they can see him, touch him, and talk with him.

For our lives tomorrow as the Easter story fades into "real life" we remember that God's version of resurrection is not to have it be something theoretical for the future. It is not a vague promise. It is God's real power breaking into our lives for today.

Good Friday might be sad and Easter might be joyful but we need both. Both must be held. On Good Friday the price is paid for you. True love is revealed. On Easter the power of that love comes to life in real flesh and blood for real lives today.

God meets you, not as an angel, not as a fuzzy feeling in your heart, nor as in the words of a story from an old book, but real and with a big hearty smile that says, "Rejoice with me. Dance with me! Death is not the end. My love for you is for today, for real, for life." May the resurrection reality guide you this day and every day. Amen