

## *The Cast* | People Engaged In the Story of Jesus Christ

### *The Fearful*

*Matthew 27:57-28:11*

*March 27, 2016 (Easter)*

*Now on the next day, the day after the preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with Pilate,<sup>63</sup> and said, "Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I am to rise again.'<sup>64</sup> "Therefore, give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, otherwise His disciples may come and steal Him away and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last deception will be worse than the first."<sup>65</sup> Pilate said to them, "You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how."<sup>66</sup> And they went and made the grave secure, and along with the guard they set a seal on the stone.*

**28.1** *Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave.<sup>2</sup> And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it.<sup>3</sup> And his appearance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow.<sup>4</sup> The guards shook for fear of him and became like dead men.<sup>5</sup> The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified.<sup>6</sup> "He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying.<sup>7</sup> "Go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going ahead of you into Galilee, there you will see Him; behold, I have told you."<sup>8</sup> And they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples.<sup>9</sup> And behold, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him.<sup>10</sup> Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and take word to My brethren to leave for Galilee, and there they will see Me."*

<sup>11</sup> *Now while they were on their way, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all that had happened.<sup>12</sup> And when they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers,<sup>13</sup> and said, "You are to say, 'His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.'<sup>14</sup> "And if this should come to the governor's ears, we will win him over and keep you out of trouble."<sup>15</sup> And they took the money and did as they had been instructed; and this story was widely spread among the Jews, and is to this day.*

The topic this morning is, as you would expect, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christianity is a way of looking at the world that uses the resurrection as a lens. Everything is seen in a new way when seen through this lens. Every issue is interpreted through this event.

And today we want to use this lens to look at a topic not very comfortable for us to discuss,

especially if we get personal about it. And that is the issue of fear. It might be bearable to talk about fear in an abstract way but if we will allow ourselves to be searched, if we would/could actually admit our own personal fears, then the whole discussion might become a little jarring.

I've used this eerie illustration before: George Orwell's book, 1984. It's a dystopian vision of an all-seeing government, "Big Brother" taking care of everything. And in that perfectly controlled society, love - romantic love between a man and woman cannot be allowed; too unpredictable and messy, a threat to ORDER!

So, when the main character, Winston, falls in love with Julia and Big Brother finds out, well Winston and Julia are hauled in...separated...interrogated.

And he's forced to reject her. But Big Brother won't settle for a half-hearted denial. So the "thought-police" review all the tapes of Winston's life and discover his greatest fear: a deep down insane horrifying terror of rodents. And they engineer a situation where Winston has to face his greatest fear.

And in the face of that phobia, Winston is absolutely terrified. Orwell writes, "Again the black panic took hold of him. He was blind, helpless, mindless."

And a few minutes later he's screaming, "Do it to Julia! Not me! Julia! I don't care what you do to her...Not me! Julia! Not me!"

And he really meant it. He'd really betrayed her from the heart. It's a creepy scene.

What if someone could somehow review the tapes of your life and somehow determine what are your greatest fears? It'd be like Superman with kryptonite. Winston didn't even know what his greatest fear was and probably most of us don't know.

Fear is complicated; a vast variety of shades, types, categories of fear. It's why people use so many words: dread, terror, phobia, panic... "the creeps", "jitters" worries, anxieties, concerns...cares.

In and around the story of Jesus Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, you meet all kinds of fears. People motivated, moved, twisted by fears. So I want First to notice how pervasive and powerful a thing fear is. Second, let's look at some tactics people use to deal with fears. Third, I want to see what the resurrection of Jesus Christ speaks to our fears.

I've mentioned before some scholars claim that it's the most frequently stated imperative in the whole Bible. "Fear not/Do not be afraid." You find that command over 60 times in the Bible. Humanity is apparently pretty fearful. Fear is pervasive.

It seems that everywhere Jesus Christ went He encountered fear. He frequently had to tell people, "Do not be afraid." He said that to Peter when He called Peter to be His disciple, "Peter, do not fear." (Luke 5.10)

And Jesus says it to Jairus, whose daughter had just died: "Do not fear. Only believe." At the Transfiguration, "Arise and do not be afraid." In the Sermon on the Mount, "Do not be anxious" occurs five times in the last verses of Matthew Chapter Six.

As we get closer to the crucifixion, fear is pervasive and coercive: the fear of Judas, the fear of the religious leaders that they may be losing control. "Look", they say, "The whole world is going after Him." The fear of Pilate, fearing that a riot might break out, fearing his wife's dream and fearing Jesus. The disciples are afraid and run away, out of fear. Then this wealthy man Joseph of Arimathea came to Pilate (John) "secretly for fear of the Jews". And finally the women, twice told, "Do not fear" and another reference v.8 seems like everywhere you look, fear.

IF these few hours are a typical cross-section of the human condition, fear really is rampant among us.

Today we're particularly interested in the fear of one group in this whole story and what their fear says about the ways people try to deal with their fears. That's our second point.

Look at the "fear management tactics" of the clergymen. They come to the Roman governor, Pilate.

Pilate doesn't much like Jerusalem; he's governor of Judea but he lives on the coast (Caesarea). He's only in Jerusalem because it's Passover and the city has five times more people than usual. And on this particular visit to Jerusalem - it couldn't just be uneventful - no he had to deal with that whole unpleasant Galilean thing - this Jesus whom the Jewish leaders hated so much -- almost a riot.

And the Jewish leaders use a little fear to make Pilate nervous. "You don't want these Galilean agitators to steal the body and say He rose from the dead. Then you'll have a real riot on your hands, Pilate!"

"Good point," says the fearful politician. "You want a squad of soldiers? You got it! Make it as secure as you know how!! You can even put an official seal on the grave. No one would dare break THAT!!"

Did you know Matthew's first use of the phrase, "He has risen from the dead" (in verse 64) come from the opponents of Jesus? And I know it's not really an announcement, it's a statement of fear. "Order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him

away and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead,'" It's another irony – in their fear... they give voice to the resurrection!

Or when they say, "Oh, if they steal the body, the last deception will be worse than the first!"

Well, they had no idea! I mean before the cross and resurrection Jesus had a few hundred followers all gathered in one tiny strip of land but after the resurrection...well, here we are 2,000 years later...and all over the world... still celebrating!

Or the fact that the ones sent to guard the dead man in chapter 28, v. 4 "became like dead men". One German scholar wrote, "The laughter of God roars through the [episode]." ("Pericope" see Hagner, vol. 2, page 864). The fear management doesn't work!

Frederick Buechner (BEEK-ner) raises the possibility that in this atmosphere of paranoia and suspicion and fear maybe there was also an unexpressed, suppressed dread in these guys, NOT that the body would be stolen...but that it might actually come alive; that this body or some new and terrible form of it would start to breathe again...stand up again in its grave clothes and come after them...to get them!

And you do wonder why in this fearful boys' club, why they have to be so emphatic that Jesus was a deceiver...they have to keep repeating those words, "Yup, he's an imposter alright. That's what he was, a downright deceiver. Uh huh." It reminds me of Hamlet, "The lady doth protest too much." Maybe they're desperately trying to convince... themselves. Maybe they FEAR that THEY were wrong!

But if this body IS going to rise, what good is some sort of wax seal with the governor's name on it and a handful of security guards? C'mon!

If this Man really was who they secretly fear that He was...if He was who He claimed to BE...can the governor's seal stop Him? Can a few guards stop Him?

They're doing cartwheels to manage their deep fears. What IF this Jesus really was the Christ, whom THEY had crucified and whom THEY could not resist?

They put together a little plan. When that doesn't work, there's a Plan B. It's a cover-up, they throw money at it. They use a little bribery in chapter 28 (12ff).

And I'm sure that even when these soldiers swore on their lives that the body came to life – there were some who just plugged their ears, closed their eyes, and counted to ten and just managed their fears...

And when the disciples of Jesus later testified “We have seen Him risen... changed, alive, indestructible!” and when they refused to change their story even when it cost their lives, (All they had to do is say, "Ok time out. I recant. We actually stole the body. He never rose." Any disciple who did that would've become no longer a hunted criminal but a celebrity. And yet not a single one said anything like that because they saw what they saw.)

And probably Pilate and the chief priests, many of them, even in the face of all this overwhelming evidence, many of them just kept managing their fears, inventing stories they themselves didn't even believe, protesting too much. "If I just close my eyes and count to ten it'll all go away."

And of course these are only a few of our tactics for dealing with fear. Fear is the flip side of anger – anger calls for the FIGHT response. Fear calls up the FLIGHT response. We can deny the value of fear and deny the presence of fear in our lives (“I don’t fear nuttin’!”; like the Cowardly Lion!). Or it can just close in on us... keeps us from doing things... trying things... engaging in relationships because we fear loss or fear failure and exposure and shame in those relationships. We stick to the comfortable and familiar. We may use a variety of escape or avoidance mechanisms. All these are attempts to stay safe and manage our fears. And the comfort zone gets smaller and smaller.

But ya' see what this story is really about and what the resurrection of Jesus Christ really SAYS about fear is not just "Stop fearing and be brave!" It's that body came alive again. It's Jesus Christ Himself saying to these women and to you, "Don't be afraid!" The only One to really fear is God Himself and I the God-Man, God Himself, I now say to you, "Don't be afraid." See how He repeats it?

You fear all these forces and disasters and people and powers, fear failure... fear for your children... fear bombings and bacteria... fear cancellations and cancer... but I've plundered all these forces and I have conquered death – the sum/source of all fears. I Am the only One you should fear and I say, "Don't be afraid... only trust Me... I have triumphed!"

Wouldn't you like to hear God say that to you: "Don't be afraid"? Jesus Christ lives to say, "I have conquered all your fears, all the forces including your sin/guilt/shame. Don't be afraid. I have you. I triumphed for you!"

If I can take you back to that creepy scene in Orwell's book, listen to what Winston realized as he actually faced this horrible fear. (QUOTE) "For an instant he was insane, a screaming animal. Yet he came out of the blackness clutching an idea. There was one and only one way to save himself. He must interpose another human being, the body of another human being between himself and the rats. He suddenly understood that in the whole world there was just one person to whom he could transfer his punishment - one body that he could thrust between himself and the rats."

It's not Julia ...but he's right... it is Someone. We need a person who can interpose... can face what we fear.

See, how do the Christian martyrs die with smiles, singing hymns, praying for their killers? Not mind games! They realize another Being has stepped in. He took the fall. He absorbed our guilt and shame and death and then, He arose. "Lord! by the stripes which wounded Thee / from death's dread sting Thy servants free..."

See Jesus Christ intervened. He faced your rats: your bankruptcy, your being victimized in a terrible crime, your losing a relative/child/spouse. He faced your fears, your loss, your moral failure, your dementia/memory loss/failing health, your loneliness, confusion, disfigurement, abandonment, unemployment, straying child.

And IF your trust is with the Risen Conqueror, these forces can even become redemptive in your life.

All our fears are ultimately only echoes of the fear of death. The Bible says in Hebrews chapter 2 about Jesus Christ, "(He partook of our flesh and blood) that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death (that is the devil) and might rescue those who through fear of death were held in slavery all their lives."

Look, fear is a big thing (like a cruel master!) but the untamed God has landed - shared our flesh and blood.

We may want to keep Him in the grave or out of our lives by our puny tactics - by life management, willpower and morals, analysis, or whatever. By guarding our hearts and covering up our sin and failure and fears, by refusing to face ourselves and see that someone must face death for me. But good news: someone has and the body has come to life.

See, you can either spend your life running away from God and from yourself and from your fears and from the evidence and try to fool yourself into not fearing, "I will not fear."

OR you can hear the voice of the Conqueror Jesus Christ says, "I faced death...guilt...shame for YOU. Nothing you fear will ultimately destroy you – I was destroyed so YOU won't be. Don't be afraid. Only believe (Luke 8.50)"