

The First Sunday after Easter

Matt. 27:62-28:15

ILC/FELC/ZLC

Pastor Huber

“Watchers”

Grace, mercy, and peace to you on this first Sunday after Easter as we take a look at some of the immediate **aftermath** of Easter.

I just read a story by a fellow pastor who was sitting behind a 5-year-old boy at his church's annual **Easter pageant**. The little boy was absolutely **enthralled** by it, but when the **crucifixion** scene took place, he got **really QUIET**. But then, Jesus came **BACK** from the grave, and there was a song of **celebration**, and his eyes lit up and they got as big as **SAUCERS!** He looked at his mother and shouted, *“He's ALIVE, Mom! He's ALIVE!”* and began to **CLAP** his hands as hard as he could. And then he **hugged** her around the neck. Wouldn't it be great to **watch** the resurrection again...but with **“new eyes”**, like that little boy?

When St. Matthew wrote his account of the resurrection of Jesus, He emphasized **TWO groups** who **WATCHED**. In fact, his account of **Easter morning** is framed by two **different** kinds of **“WATCHERS”**. In Matt. **27**, at the end of his account of the **crucifixion**, listen what it says in vss. **55-56**, *“There were also many women there, WATCHING from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to Him, among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.”*

The next paragraph tells how Joseph of Arimathea had Jesus' body placed in his own, unused, rock-hewn tomb, and in v. **61** that, *“Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.”* Now let's fast-forward through Saturday to **Sunday** morning in Matt. 28:1, *“After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.”* (Keep in mind, these **“watching women”** provide one very important **“set of eyes”** on this story.)

The **OTHER** “watchers” are the **GUARDS**. Vss. 62-65 explain that they were posted there at the tomb to be sure the disciples didn't **“steal the body”**. But then it

goes on to say in Matt. 28:4, when these guards felt the **earthquake** and saw the **angel**, they *"were so **afraid** of him that they **SHOOK** and become like dead men."* Then v.11 goes on to say, *"Some of the guards then went into the city and reported to the **chief priests** everything that had happened."* **HOWEVER**, these guards were persuaded by a handsome **BRIBE** to say that *"they hadn't seen a thing"*.

The **FIRST** set of **watchers** see in the **resurrection** the reason to trust Jesus Christ for their very **lives!** The **OTHER** set of **watchers** refuse to **believe** the resurrection, even in the face of overwhelming evidence. **TWO** sets of **WATCHERS**. The question is, *"Which kind of watcher are YOU?"*

You see, there are two incredible **aspects** to this story. The **first**, of course, is the resurrection **itself**—a dead man **alive**...and alive in a new way **altogether!** The **other** incredible thing, though, is the response of the **unbelievers** in this story. These guards decided to **deny** an experience so **terrifying** it very nearly **killed** them!

We get our word "seismic" from the Greek word "*seismos*" that St. Paul used in this morning's epistle lesson for "*earthquake*". Matthew used another form of the same word to describe the guard's **fear**: *"they trembled"* literally means *"they quaked."* They **themselves** were the **aftershocks!** Now check out vss.13-15: *"You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole Him away while we were asleep.' And if this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble."* So, the soldiers **took** the money and did as they were instructed. *And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day."* These "**watchers**" denied it ever **happened!** I don't have much trouble believing that people would lie for **money**, but I can't understand how those guards lied to **themselves!**

And then there are the **Chief Priests and Elders**. Did you notice that when the guards showed up to tell them the story of what happened, they didn't go, *"No way, Jose! Nyuh-uh! You guys are out of your **mind!**"* There's no suggestion that they **doubted** the guards, or that they believed their **own** lie that the disciples stole the bodies while the guards **slept**. Pilate's guards didn't sleep on the job...unless we're talking about the **BIG SLEEP!** A Roman officer who found a guard **asleep on duty** was required to take a burning **torch** and throw it **on** the clothing of the snoozing guard! And so, the religious leaders were simply refusing to admit the **obvious**.

There are **TWO** incredible aspects of this story: the resurrection **itself**, and the stubborn refusal of the guards and leaders to believe the clear evidence **OF** a resurrection! Here's the point: The proof for the resurrection **was** and **remains OVERWHELMING**: **First**, there was that violent **earthquake**. In fact, this was the **second** earthquake in **three days**, the **other** happening at the moment of Jesus' **death** and then at the moment His tomb **opened**. This wasn't **random seismic activity**. It was a **divine message**! Later, the guards would claim they had "fallen asleep", but the very earth **beneath** them had made sure that wasn't the **case**! God Himself **shook them up** to pretty much say, "*Listen! I'm speaking!*"

Secondly, there was the appearance of God's own shining **angel** rolling back the tombstone. And by the way, people back **then** were no more accustomed to seeing angels then than we are **now**! Suddenly, in that eerie hour just before dawn, we read that "*an angel of the Lord came down from heaven!*" His face shone like **lightning** and his garment white as the **brightest snow**. The guards were **dazzled** and **dazed**. Then, as if it were mere **styrofoam**, the angel tossed the massive, sealed, ton-and-a-half stone back from the mouth of the grave. There couldn't have been any doubt in those guards' minds that this angel **came** from God on an **assignment** from God!

Thirdly, there was the **empty** tomb. Maybe you imagine the scene like this: this really sparkling angel appears in front of the stone, **leans** on it and whispers, "*Yoo-hoo! Jesus! Wakey, Wakey! Are You **READY** in there?*" And then, with a **flourish**, rolls back the **stone**, and there stands **Jesus**, all **smiley** and **bright**, eager to be released from His **three-day incarceration**. Well, that's **NOT** what happened!!!

According to **1 Peter 3:19**, by the time the **angel** got there on Easter morning, Jesus had already and **literally** gone "**to hell and back**". No, not to **suffer**—that already was finished on the **cross**...but instead to **proclaim** His Messianic **VICTORY** to whom Peter refers to v. 19 as "**the spirits in prison**"...no doubt, Satan and his **minions**, as well as the souls of the **unbelievers**. It was Jesus' **VICTORY LAP**! And so, the angel didn't move the stone to let Jesus **OUT**, but to let His followers **IN**...to show them that Christ had risen **indeed**! (**Alleluia!**) Now I don't know if the guards saw that the tomb was already empty **before** they passed out, but I'm certain they **checked** when they **came TO**! They may not have known what happened while they were out **cold**, but it's a safe bet they knew that God and His

angels had something to **do** with it and that it certainly wasn't the work of some frightened, grave-robbing, body-snatching **disciples!** And the incontrovertible evidence for the resurrection of Christ is equally overwhelming **TODAY**. It takes an act either of **ignorance** or determined "**ill will**" to **deny** it!

Maybe you've of Albert Henry Ross whose better-known pseudonym was **Frank Morison**. He was the agnostic British **journalist** who was **certain** that the resurrection was nothing more than a **fairy tale**, so he set out to **prove** it. But examining all the data, he was forced to the unexpected conclusion that the story had to be **TRUE!** His book, *Who Moved the Stone*, became a best-seller with over a dozen republications since 1930. B. F. Westcott, an English **Greek** scholar, wrote, "*Indeed, taking all the evidence **together**, it is not too much to say that there is no historical incident **better** or more variously **supported** than the resurrection of Christ*".

Some of you may remember or **heard** of the late preacher, J. Vernon McGee, and his two-decade long, "**Thru the Bible**" radio & TV broadcast. A woman once wrote to him: "*Our preacher said that on **Easter** Jesus just **swooned** on the **cross** and that the disciples nursed him back to health. What do you think?*" McGee replied, "***Dear Sister**, beat your preacher with a leather whip for **39 heavy strokes**. Nail him to a **cross**. Hang him in the **sun for six hours**. Run a **spear** through his heart. **Embalm** him. Put him in a **near airless tomb** for three days. Then see what **happens**.*"

There comes a point when **unbelief** is not the product of a **rational mind** but of a **stubborn heart**. People who make fun of the Resurrection as a **myth** try to **portray** themselves as "**the real thinkers**". But actually, they are **heirs** of these **guards** and **priests** whose minds were so entrenched and determined **not** to believe, that they **stopped thinking!**

There is always a great deal at **stake** when someone has to seriously consider the resurrection of Christ. The **resurrection** takes religion out of the realm of the **abstract**...and of "*believe what you **want**, just so long as you're **sincere***" mentality. The **resurrection** removes the possibility that we can each believe and rely on whatever we deem as "**our own TRUTH**". The resurrection actually **happened** as Jesus **promised** it would...and because it **DID**, it defined Jesus as the great "**Truth Teller**", as well as the **Lord of Life** and the **Judge** of the **living** and the **dead**...the

One Who must be reckoned with on **HIS** terms, not **ours**! The **resurrection** takes away all our religious options...but **ONE**—that because **Christ** lives, we shall live **also**!

As with those chief priests or **guards**, surrendering to the resurrected Christ is **costly**, because it requires **humility** and much **more**. It means saying you were **wrong** and bowing to what the St. Paul referred to in 1 Cor. 1:18 as "**the foolishness of the cross**", because the cross and the resurrection are worthless without each other! And yet, many would rather **lie to themselves** than face the **REALITY** and the **meaning** of **BOTH**.

To **deny** or even **ignore** the place of Christ's resurrection in your life is to play into a great **deception**. In fact, that's one of the **themes** of St. Matthew's account. Remember how the religious leaders set the guard to—quote—"*lest the disciples steal the body and the last deception be worse than the first*"? But in the end, where **IS** the deception in this story? Isn't it settled deep within the hearts and testimony of the stubborn **UNbelievers**? Isn't the **actual travesty** of it all that their lie **was** and **is** still perpetuated...and even **more** that they succeeded in lying to **themselves**? We're not told how much those soldiers were **paid** to lie, but **whatever** the price, they were **swindled**! After all, as Jesus Himself said in Lk.9:25, "*What does it **profit** a person if he gains the **whole world** yet loses his own **soul**?*"

As a young man not long after graduating from Harvard, one of our greatest American novelists, John Updike, wrote this **Easter** poem, "*Seven Stanzas for Easter*", for the Lutheran Church he attended. It eloquently pounds home the necessity of acknowledging of a **REAL** Easter with a **REAL** resurrection:

"Make no mistake: if He rose at **all** it **was** as His **body**; if the cells' dissolution did **not** reverse, the molecules **reknit**, the amino acids **rekindle**, the Church will **FALL**!

It was not as the **flowers**, each **soft Spring** recurrent; it was not as His **spirit** in the mouths and fuddled eyes of the eleven apostles; it was as His **flesh**: **ours**!

The same hinged thumbs and **toes**, the same valved **heart**. that—pierced—died, withered, paused, and then **regathered** out of enduring **Might** new **strength** to enclose.

Let us not mock God with **metaphor**, **analogy**, sidestepping, **transcendence**; making of the event a **parable**, a **sign** painted in the faded credulity of earlier ages: let us walk through the **door**!

The stone **IS** rolled back, not **papier-mâché**, not a stone in a **story**, but the vast rock of **materiality** that in the slow grinding of time will eclipse for **each** of us the wide light of day.

And if we will have an **angel** at the tomb, make it a **real** angel, **weighty** with Max Planck's quanta, vivid with **hair**, **opaque** in the dawn light, robed in **real** linen spun on a **definite loom**.

Let us not seek to make it less **monstrous**, for our own **convenience**, our own sense of **beauty** lest, awakened in one unthinkable **hour**, we are **embarrassed** by the miracle, and **crushed** by remonstrance.

St. Paul warned in 1 Cor.15:17, *"If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins"*. In the face of overwhelming evidence, it is not **safe** to stubbornly deny the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But there are yet **other** watchers today, much like the women watchers back **then** who were **silent**, **unobtrusive**, "**watching from a distance**" ... still **peripheral** watchers today who are **drawn** to Jesus yet still keeping a **respectful distance**, sobered and **sad** about Jesus' **sacrifice**, and perhaps even believing that He also died for **THEIR** sins. I've **SEEN** some them pop in at **EASTER** services, carrying a spark of **HOPE** within them that morning that the risen Christ brought to **LIFE**. And yet, they still **REMAIN** **watchers** at a **distance**.

It reminds me of how Jesus **MET** just such hesitant **watchers** and turned them into out-spoken **witnesses**. Matthew 28:8-10 reads: *"So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell His disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. 'Greetings,' He said. They came to Him, clasped His feet and worshiped Him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see Me.'"*

John, the beloved disciple, wrote in the **first** verse of his **first** letter, “*That which was from the beginning, which we have **heard**, which we have **seen** with our eyes, which we have looked at **and** our hands have touched—this we **proclaim** concerning the Word of life.*” The resurrection was always intended to turn passive **WATCHERS** into active **WITNESSES**, who boldly **proclaim** that Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! **AND** through their **baptism**, possess the same resurrection life that Christ **Himself** has.

The physical resurrection of Jesus **matters**. It changes both life **and** death for every person on this planet. Do you have a friend who’s been “**watching**” Jesus for a while and might be willing to draw closer to the resurrected Savior through an invitation from **you**? Would today be the day for **YOU** to go from **watching** and but also begin to more actively **PROCLAIM** Him to others?

During the upcoming Sunday messages, Pastor Duerr will be explaining what it means for us members of Christ’s resurrection community to experience the **FULLNESS** of God in our lives. But the **first step** will always be for us to move from being **BELIEVING WATCHERS** to **PROCLAIMING WITNESSES**, unafraid to boldly say together in any **PLACE** and at **ANY TIME**: *(JOIN ME!!!) “Christ is **RISEN!** He is risen, **INDEED!** Alleluia!”*

Amen!