

Matthew 28:1-10

Easter Sunday

April 9, 2023

Someone did not want you to believe that Jesus is risen from the dead. This someone went to a lot of trouble to try and make that happen. You heard the Easter account this morning from St. Matthew. But have you heard what happened before and after?

Matthew tells us that the chief priests and Pharisees went to Pilate after Jesus was dead, saying that they were worried that His disciples would steal His body and tell people He had risen from the dead. So, Pilate told them to make His tomb as secure as they could. And they did by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

How did you sleep last night? Fair? Well, the chief priests and Pharisees slept very well on that Saturday night because they made it virtually impossible for the disciples to make off with Jesus' body.

First, they rolled a very heavy stone in front of the tomb. This stone was rolled down and into groves so that it would take tremendous effort to roll it away. Next, they sealed this stone, likely with the seal of the Roman Caesar. The penalty for breaking this seal was a very painful death. And finally, they stationed a guard, likely Roman soldiers. There would have been sixteen of them. They had one job – guard the tomb. And if just one of these soldiers fell asleep on the job, all sixteen were put to death.

Wouldn't you sleep well with these three measures in place? There is no way that Jesus' body could be stolen away, and the story be spread that He had risen from the dead. No way.

I'm glad, aren't you, that the chief priests and Pharisees went to such lengths to make Jesus' tomb so secure. If they hadn't, if there had been no stone, no seal, and no guard, it would have been easy for anyone, the disciples or someone else, or even an animal, to make off with His body.

Now granted, we believe the resurrection account by faith. But it does bolster our faith to hear how secure they made Jesus' tomb. The only way the story could be spread that Jesus rose from the dead is the way the Easter Gospel tells it: He really and truly rose from the dead!

But have you heard the competing account? This is unbelievable, really! Turn to the back of your bulletin and let's check it out. The verses right after Matthew's Easter account. *"Some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers and said, 'Tell people, His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.' And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble. So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day."*

It would be easier to believe in the Easter bunny than in what the chief priests and elders made up here. But it worked. This laughable story spread far and wide for decades, even up to the time when St. Matthew wrote His Gospel account.

So, who is it that wants to keep people, and you, from believing the truth? The chief priests and elders of the people? Yes, except that they are just pawns, pawns of the devil. The devil knew that He had risen from the dead because Jesus went to hell to show that He had triumphed. The power of sin could not keep Jesus in the tomb. The power of death could not keep Him in the tomb. The power of hell

could not keep Him there. The only thing the devil could do, therefore, was to concoct a story to compete with the truth.

But you don't buy it, do you? You believe the resurrection account. You believe what Matthew writes, that the angel told the women not to be afraid because Jesus had risen from the dead just as He said. Isn't this why you are here this morning? Would you get up so early on a Sunday morning and make your way here to church to celebrate the stealing of Jesus' body by His disciples? Of course not! You are here to celebrate Jesus' physical resurrection from the dead. The devil has lost that battle with you. And you believe because the power of Jesus' resurrection is greater than the power of the evil one.

So, the devil has lost, right? Think again. He cannot convince you that the disciples stole Jesus' body from the tomb, so instead he attempts to keep what you know to be true in your head, and only in your head. The devil cannot keep you from celebrating Jesus' resurrection on Easter, so he tries to keep you celebrating Jesus' resurrection only on Easter and not the rest of the year throughout the rest of your life.

He could not do that to the women and to the disciples of Jesus. And you know why? They were directed, not to the open tomb, but to Galilee. "You will see Jesus in Galilee," said the angel. And they did. For these early Christians, Easter meant so much more than the empty tomb. It meant going to where Jesus promised to meet them, and that was in Galilee.

What does Easter mean to you? A once-a-year celebration that the tomb is empty? If that's all it is, then Easter will stay only in your head. But if Easter is going to affect your life and be the power over your sin, over death, and over the power of hell, then you will delight in meeting Jesus in Galilee. You will rejoice to meet Him where He promises to be for you: in your Baptism, in His Holy Meal on the altar, in the faithful preaching of His words of life. This, His holy house of worship, is not the empty tomb. If it was, Jesus would not be here. This is Galilee because Jesus is here for you as He promises.

And I pray that you are here for Him. Here to receive His gifts because you need them. His gift of forgiveness because you are sinful, and you know the truth that you cannot overcome the power of sin in your life. But Jesus does by His death and resurrection. And so, His gift of the forgiveness of sins is here for you in holy water, holy words, and holy food. His gift of life and salvation, because you will die, and you will not be able to raise yourself from the grave. But Jesus defeated death by His death and resurrection. And His gift of life, eternal life, is for you in your baptism, and no one can take that away from you. And then, too, His gifts of joy, peace, and hope. All these gifts, and much more, He gives to you not once-a-year when you celebrate the empty tomb, but every time you meet Him here in Galilee.

And so, friend, come here often to Galilee. If you have failed to do so in the past, do not be afraid, Jesus forgives you. In fact, He forgives you for all your sinful failures. And not just some of you. All of you He has forgiven.

This is what you get here in Galilee. Not a lecture on how to improve yourself. You get the living Lord Jesus Christ. You come here to Galilee faithfully and just watch as He, by the power of His resurrection, will change your life. Amen.