

April 4, 2021
Christ the Rock Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Easter Sunday

Sermon Text: Matthew 7:62-68

⁶² The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. ⁶³ “Sir,” they said, “we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise again.’ ⁶⁴ So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first.”

⁶⁵ “Take a guard,” Pilate answered. “Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how.” ⁶⁶ So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.

Sermon Theme: “He Did It! -- Just as He Said He Would!”

In the name of our risen Lord and Savior, brothers and sisters in Christ,

Harry Houdini – the *Great* Houdini, they called him. Back then, 100 years ago, everybody in show business was called *great*. It was like an actor’s first name. But Harry Houdini really was great. He was the greatest escape artist of all time. There wasn’t a lock he couldn’t pick, a safe from which he could not escape. In 1912 Houdini added the Chinese water torture cell to his act. Handcuffed and suspended by his feet, Houdini was lowered upside-down into a glass cabinet filled with water. The cabinet was then padlocked. Harry had three minutes, the length of time he could hold his breath, in which to escape. Of course, he did. Still, Harry Houdini had his doubters. On one occasion he had to appear in court because his enemies had accused him of defrauding the public. His defense was to allow his critics to lock him in a large safe of their choice. When Harry opened the safe and stepped out, his detractors were speechless and the case was dismissed. He did what he said he would.

When it comes to locking someone away in a safe or a tomb, no one’s enemies were more concerned that the job had been done right than the enemies of Jesus. The grim faces of the chief priests and Pharisees could not hide the glee they felt as Jesus’ body was taken down from the cross, wrapped in a sheet and laid in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. The Nazarene was dead. The One who had once called them hypocrites and white-washed sepulchers full of dead men’s bones – well, it was His bones that were now lying in a sepulcher.

So, were they satisfied? Nope. They wanted to be sure, absolutely certain that this was the last anyone would hear of Jesus of Nazareth. Little did they know that God would use their foolish efforts to secure the tomb as one of the best testimonies to the resurrection of Jesus.

1. His enemies foolishly tried to stop the inevitable

To the credit of Jesus’ enemies, we note that they remembered what Jesus had said, “***After three days I will rise again***” (vs.63). They remembered, while those whom we would expect to

remember, His closest followers, did not. In their fear, confusion and despair, the disciples had deserted Jesus and gone into hiding. All He had taught them over the past three years was erased by the sight of their Lord hanging on the cross. Three of these disciples had seen Jesus' divine glory on the Mountain of Transfiguration. All had witnessed His miracles, including most recently the resurrection of Lazarus at Bethany. On numerous occasions He had told them that He had to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the chief priests and religious leaders, and be killed. But, He also told them plainly, on the third day "I will rise again" (Mt.16:21). They heard in advance what was going to happen, but the memory was erased at the very time when this promise should have done them the most good.

To the credit of Jesus enemies, as I said, they remembered – they remembered His words so clearly that they called an emergency meeting of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, the day after Jesus' crucifixion. Now get this: that was a Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath Day, and it was also an especially holy Sabbath because it came in connection with the Passover celebration. Though it was a violation of their Sabbath laws to do business on the Sabbath -- the same law they often accused Jesus of breaking – they were so fearful that they didn't care. Even more astounding, it didn't seem to matter to them that they would become unclean by meeting in the home of the Gentile Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate. Fear that the Rabbi from Nazareth might still be a threat to them caused them to throw out their rulebook.

So, as a group these enemies of Jesus came to Pilate. ***"Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again'"*** (v.63). I find it amazing how clearly they understood Jesus' words. At Jesus' trial they had accused Him of threatening their precious temple when He said, ***"Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days"*** (Jn2:19). But now, before Pontius Pilate, they reveal that they understood very well that Jesus was referring not to their temple of worship, but to His own body. What if Jesus made good on that statement? After all, He had raised Lazarus from the dead, had He not? Of that there was no question. Or, what if His disciples were to steal the body and claim He rose again? How would they prevent the people from rallying around a resurrected Christ, even if it was only a hoax? What if? ... Everything must be done to prevent such a possibility, they agreed. Can you sense their fear? Can you also sense behind their fear the absolute panic of Satan, whose power is about to be taken from him?

This past week a series of tornados slammed into populated areas of the South. The weather bureau called out warnings. People could see the black funnel clouds lifting cars and roofs into the air, but they were powerless to stop those spinning winds.

Well, the priests and Pharisees were to learn that you don't stop the God who made the sun and hung it in its place in the solar system by pushing a rock in front of His tomb. You don't stop the God who commands legions of heavenly angels with a contingent of soldiers armed with metal swords. But they tried.

The Jewish leaders requested from Pilate a squad of soldiers to guard the tomb. They also had the tomb sealed. The seal bore the mark of Rome threatening severe punishment to anyone who would violate that sepulcher in any manner. Why such precautions? Again we note that the Lord's enemies clearly understood the ramifications of a resurrection, real or hoax. They knew it

would bring the blame for His death down on their heads. They would lose their cherished positions as leaders of the people. That seal on the stone and the guards around it were symbols of the fears of Jesus' enemies. They would also become symbols of their failure to prevent the inevitable.

Perhaps worse than the seal on Jesus' tomb and the guard that Caiaphas and his henchmen requested was the barricade they had erected to shield their hearts and minds from the truth. Sadly, many still follow their example. There are many people today who have decided that the claims of Jesus Christ were those of a deluded man or a deceiver. They refuse to believe that He rose from the dead and lives and rules over all things. So His name becomes little more than a curse upon their lips. But just as the sealing of the tomb and the placement of the guard became symbols of defeated men, so all the doubt and sneers of a Christ-denying world are but signs of men living in defeat. For if Christ is still in a tomb somewhere in Israel, why all the contempt? Why the concern? Unbelief is always its own judge, for it feels forced to take precautions against the possibility of error. Unbelief, you see, has to have its stone and its guard.

2. Because He lives, we too live through Him

But as the angels rolled that stone away to reveal that the tomb was empty, that the Lord had risen, so it is the mission of the church and of the people of God to roll the stone of unbelief away. And we have the means to do it: the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and behind that Word, the power of a death-defeating, life-bringing Lord! *"I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come"* is our triumphant shout today because Jesus could not be sealed in a guarded tomb. Jesus' resurrection was not a hoax. There was no great lie behind the news His followers spread.

My friends, we have what it takes to roll that stone of doubt and unbelief away from the hearts of people today: the Gospel of a Christ who said that He would die and rise again, and then did just that! He did it, just as He said He would. Will it really matter whether we proclaim that message or not? Caiaphas, an enemy, was sure it would make a difference. Are we that sure? Does it really matter that the precautions taken allowed for only one possibility – that if Jesus was to come out of that tomb, He would have to do so on His own? Yes, it really does matter! Our very life, our hope for the future, our expectation of a life beyond this present life – all rest upon the certainty of the Lord's resurrection. So let's be certain.

Examine the evidence: First, the testimony of angels. Would we question their word? The women who came to the tomb saw the risen Lord for themselves. Disciples saw Him. Thomas touched Him. The Apostle John opens his first epistle with these words: ***"That ... which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim..."*** (1 Jn1:1). The disciples saw with their own eyes. They heard Jesus' voice in their ears. They touched His warm body with their hands. There was NO deception. The angel's words were true. Jesus did just what He said He would. He rose from the dead on that third day.

Moreover, the disciples saw, heard and touched the Lord not once or twice, but over a period of forty days. The Lord's resurrection is the most outstanding, singular event in the history of the world, but it was not limited to a single appearance which might then be attributed to hallucinations brought on by extreme grief. No, time after time the risen Lord appeared to His followers. He walked with them; He talked with them; He ate and drank with them. The evidence is overwhelming.

And we should also note that the silence of those who did everything in their power to secure the tomb – their silence over against those who told of seeing the risen Lord – that silence proclaims just as loudly, “He did it! Jesus rose from the dead, just as He said He would.”

This is what we celebrate this happy morning. This is the Good News we are privileged to hold in our hearts and share with our voices. Because Jesus lives, we shall rise from death too. Because He made full payment for our sins, we are forgiven. Because He lives, we have peace with God and eternal life awaits us. So rejoice this Easter day because He did it! He rose from the grave, just as He said He would. Because Jesus lives, we live too. That's the message and the joy of Easter!

Amen.