

This Day Belongs to God¹
Matthew 28:1-10
First Presbyterian Church
Easter Sunday

Matthew 28:1-10

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ²And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” ⁸So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

Sermon

The Scripture lets us know that this day, which appears to belong to Pilate, instead belongs to God. The love of God WILL NOT DIE... and it shakes the earth!

The thing is that everyone in the story believed otherwise... they believed that this day, like every day, belonged to Pilate. The guards believed it... having been given the job of watching a dead man. And yet, the irony is that when this is all over, the dead one is alive, and the ones who thought they were alive are like they are dead. The disciples believed this day, like every day, belonged to Pilate. So, they went into hiding to avoid Jesus' fate.

The women also knew this day belonged to Pilate. I mean, they'd been in Jerusalem and had seen it all – the betrayal, the trial, the mocking, the long walk to Golgotha, the sword piercing his side... THEY HAD SEEN THE CRUCIFYING.

In this room on Thursday evening, we held a hauntingly beautiful Tenebrae service which ended with all candles extinguished... and out of the silence a single voice asking the question: “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” The women could have only answered yes... and days like that always seem to belong to Pilate.

¹ For inspiration and content, I am grateful to Rev. Tom Are, “Jesus 101: He Is Risen!,” preached to Village Presbyterian Church, Prairie Village, KS, March 23, 2008.

But the Scripture makes it clear: this day belongs to God. The earth shakes... Jesus steps from the tomb... the crucified one is now alive! And he says some powerful Easter words: "Do not be afraid." A very young pastor heard these Easter words from Kelly. Kelly was an elder in her church, she taught a women's Bible class for two decades, she had only retired the year before, but cancer has no respect for the golden years. She was dying... and it was this young pastor's very first memorial service. I can tell you; no seminary class can prepare you for that. Well, he visited Kelly before she died, and she said, "Preacher, just tell them there's nothing to be afraid of." It was just like her to make one of her last acts of ministry to comfort a young, terrified pastor staring death in the face for the first time. "Tell them there is nothing to be afraid of." So, when they gathered for her memorial service, they sang "The King of Love My Savior Is" and "For All the Saints" and he told them what she said, "There is nothing to be afraid of."

These last words were also the first words, do you remember? It was Christmas... and angels had appeared to Mary and then to Joseph and finally they would find their way to the shepherd's field – and each time the angels said the same thing: "Fear not. Do not be afraid." It is how the story begins... it is how the story ends... and I wish it were that easy to not be afraid.

Pilate appears to be the Commander in Chief that day. Matthew tells us he ordered guards to watch the tomb. They were probably just kids wearing armor and carrying a sword. They were given a simple task... watch a dead man! But the Scriptures tell us this is not Pilate's day; this is God's day. And when the love of God did not die, the world was shaken. And when the world was shaken, the guards became like dead men... they were literally scared to death. Because that's what fear does to us... it drains the life right out of us.

We will all die... we know that. Death WILL eventually have the last moment of our lives in this world. Yet, death is greedy and wants more... it wants not only our last moment, but all our moments... and death's great weapon is fear.

The truth is we live much of our lives in fear. At least I do! Afraid of losing control of things... afraid of not having enough... afraid of losing what I have... afraid of not measuring up... afraid of what the future holds for me and those I love. Jesus said, "You don't have to be afraid anymore" – but this is not to say there is nothing to fear. Who can forget the feeling of seeing your teenage child, driver's license in hand, pulling out of the driveway for the first time alone? The doctor says, "The surgery was successful, but we'll need to wait several days for the pathology report." I read this week that there may be glimmers of good news on the climate change front, but only if nations do what they've said they will. Having lived through what we have the past two years, who among us is not just a little afraid of what may happen next? There is much to fear... and Jesus never denies that. But the Scripture is clear - this is not Pilate's day. This day belongs to God! And because this is God's day, we do not have to fear either that last moment in our lives or any of the moments until then. I love what Emily Dickenson says in one of her poems: "I will die, but that is all I will do for death." We all will die, but that is all we have to do for death because today Jesus speaks an Easter word... because today belongs to God.

In a sermon, Tom Long once said, "We imagine death standing at the end of a hallway holding up an alarm clock, saying: "time belongs to me, and you are running out of it. There will never be enough." But we forget that this is not Pilate's day. This is God's day. The Resurrection declares that God makes time for you, has time for you, takes time for you, is time for you." You do not need to be afraid because the moment Jesus walked out of that tomb, it is no longer life that is running out of time... it is not hope that is running out of time... it is not love that is running out of time... it is death that has run out of time." Death has no power to pull us away from the living God. And when you and I come face-to-face with the love proclaimed this day, it will chase away our fear. And every time that happens, the earth will shake again, and all will know that this day does not belong to Pilate. This day belongs to God.