

Isaiah 25:6-9  
Matthew 28:1-15

*April 4, 2021*  
Easter Sunday

## **Letting Down Your Guard**

On January 6, the Capitol of the United States was stormed by an assortment of domestic terrorists, haters, crazies, racists, sore losers, misogynists, radicals and misguided fools who fell for the lie. The nation watched in horror and, in the post crises analysis of security deficiencies, it was determined that the people in charge of security had let down their guard. They underestimated the protesters and assailants, and because of that a Capitol police officer lost his life and many others were deeply traumatized, one to the point of suicide. Another tragic death of a police officer this week at the Capitol speaks to the dangers of letting down your guard. We pray for the family of William Evans.

According to the religious leaders, in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 27, the tomb of Jesus needs protection and surveillance. The chief priests and the Pharisees were worried that the followers of Jesus would steal his body to fake a resurrection. It is not enough that they used their cozy relationship with Rome to get Jesus crucified, so they went to Pilate to ask that a guard of soldiers be placed to make it secure until the third day. Some Jewish people believed the soul departed the body after three days, so they asked for a three-day guard.<sup>1</sup> It seems as though Pilate tells the priests and Pharisees to send their own soldiers, so, on Saturday, an outfit of soldiers was posted and additionally the tomb was sealed. The religious leaders were not letting their guard down, and we see what they missed.

Last at the cross, first at the tomb, the women come to watch to confirm the death.<sup>2</sup> It was not proper for the women to visit the tomb on the Saturday Sabbath: contact with death was not permitted. So the first light on Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, both benefactors of Jesus, dragged their despondent souls to the edge of town to mourn properly for their executed friend and rabbi. They maintained a respectful distance. They too kept a guarded watch.

This all could be literary genius and faith enriching imagination because earthquakes are not mentioned in Mark, Luke and John, and I'm not sure how things work in heaven, but I am wondering, if you are an angel, whether you have to apply for the "divebomb the soldiers, smack them with lightning and earthquake" job, or is it preordained? I imagine also that if your job, as a troop of soldiers, is to protect the tomb of a dead rabbi, you could let your guard down, especially late at night, eyes heavy just before dawn. All the

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew by Anna Case Winters Westminster John Knox Press, 2015 page 335

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

more than would be the shock and awe of heaven incoming with white lightning and angel swoop, for the guards shook and became like dead men. If you let down your guard, you can be hurt.

On the other hand, if you let down your guard, there just might be enough room for the sacred to sneak in. Despite the cruelty of crosses, despite the plotting of priests, the betrayal of Judas, the acquiescence of the governor, the denials of Peter, the disappearance of the disciples, despite the spears and armor of guards, despite the trauma burdened hearts of the women, Easter comes, and an angel speaks!

Matthew is addressing the complexities of faith. His core theological point is that you can't talk about resurrection in ordinary terms. Easter at the empty tomb is not about human capabilities or possibilities. It is wholly about God's unlimited capacity and the sacred determination of the Holy to interrupt the world in a decisive and healing manner.

After dispensing with soldiers, the angel turns to the women and consoles them, "Do not be afraid." The Gospel of Matthew concludes much the way it began. Do not be afraid Joseph to take pregnant Mary for your wife, for the child conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. What if Joseph had not let down his guard?

Do not be afraid Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. "I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified; he is not here, for he has been raised." The Angels of Christmas and Easter deliver the same solace. "Do not be afraid. Come and see the place where he lay." Angel light and crucifixions are odd opposites, so with echoes of fear and germinations of great joy, the women set out for Galilee.

As for the soldiers, they had the unenviable task of having to go back to their commander to report lightning, earthquake, angel attack and empty tomb. Here is the image of a humorous easter card sent to me some years ago. The captain is back at the scene of the crime yelling at the troops, who are still trying to pull themselves together. "Who moved this rock?" he screams. The soldiers scared witless by the awe of heaven, must now endure the wrath of command. Soldiers are often put between a rock and hard place. On Easter morning, this was a literal predicament.

According to Matthew, the solution to the problem was a large bribe. The religious leaders told them they must say that the followers of Jesus came by night and stole him away. Stop the steal. Pay people to lie—fib, rinse, repeat. Lie, rinse, repeat. Whopper, rinse, repeat. Bribe them, for the truth is unbearable. The tale grows taller down the line—an age-old trick. Jesus is rejected by the religious authorities, crucified by the political powers and guarded by an armed contingent. This resurrection "rumor" must be suppressed, because if there is no resurrection, empire wins and maintains control.

These words, “do not be afraid” are not some pie-in-the-sky assurance that nothing can go wrong, because we each know from our life’s experience that plenty does go wrong. Easter on camera, and in safe-distanced circles, *bah humbug*. “Be not afraid,” this is not some syrupy slogan of assurance that everything turns out for the best, because if we are honest, everything often doesn’t. What we get instead is something better—if you let down your guard, God can come close. If you are able to crack open your heart, just a sliver, you have God’s assurance that whatever may happen, whatever a day may hold, the Holy One has the power to strengthen you and uphold you. We don’t go it alone. Nothing we encounter, not even the worse trauma, is stronger than God’s love. We saw, this week again, in the snippets of the trial on TV, how the violence of George Floyd’s murder traumatized so many people in Minnesota and beyond. We cannot not dismiss the enduring acuity of this pain. We cannot dismiss the oppressive conditions of the Palestinians, or the people of Myanmar, or the grief of people who have lost loved ones to COVID. What we can say is that God gets the last word. And that God sometimes even gets a word in before the end: God’s love is transforming, healing and triumphant.

The Mary’s are sent by the angel to tell the disciples that Jesus has been raised from the dead, and so they ran with a paradoxical fear and great joy in their hearts smack into the risen Christ himself who said “greetings,” but in Greek a word that might be translated also as rejoice. And they took hold of his feet and worshipped him, the same word that Matthew used to describe the homage that the magi paid to baby Jesus, when they presented the gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The risen Christ repeats the words of the angel when he says, “Do not be afraid,” and he asks the women to tell the disciples to meet him in Galilee. Apparently, it takes some form of faith-courage to let down your guard, even for the risen Christ.

In the midst of the torture and crucifixion of Jesus, the disciples desert him and flee; they abandon him, while the women are last at the cross and first to the tomb. It was as if the cross were the end of him and the end of hope. They threw up their emotional walls. They closed the windows into their hearts. They went into shock and denial. They lamented their wasted time. They blocked out hope. Disciples and women of faith alike. These are the human coping mechanisms when we are attacked by trauma and grief.

Yet in the weeks that follow, we witness that they let their guard down, one sliver at a time, as they meet Jesus in a new way. In resurrection there was a remarkable transformation. Something took hold of the sorrowing band of deniers and deserters and welded them together more certain and committed than ever. The church was born. A body and a body of believers rose from the tomb. “Death is the boundary of our lives but not the boundary of God’s relationship with us.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jurgan Moltman as quoted by Anna Case-Winters *ibid*

Sometimes if you let down your guard, you will be significantly and irreparably hurt. Paradoxically if you don't let down your guard, you will constantly miss out on God's resurrections, which are breaking out all around us every day. Last at the cross and first at the tomb, letting our guard down just a sliver, you never know, all of heaven might just rush in—for Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.