

Text: Matthew 27:62-66

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.

This year we’ve spent the entire Lenten season meditating on the ironies of Jesus’ passion. Again and again, we’ve seen people say surprising things. We’ve encountered the unexpected and even the absurd. Today we have one more irony to consider: the words of Jesus’ enemies once he was in the grave. Jesus’ death didn’t happen exactly the way they had wanted it to. They ended up killing him at the least opportune moment, during the Passover festival when Jerusalem was full of visitors. They had ultimately gotten the job done though. Jesus was safely in the tomb. They could breathe a sigh of relief and go on with their lives. However, one nagging doubt still remained:

He said, “I will rise again.”

- 1. That would be a horror for Jesus’ enemies.**
- 2. That was the point of all that Jesus suffered.**

1. That would be a horror for Jesus’ enemies.

One of the great ironies of Jesus’ passion is how often his enemies said things that were true. That is the case once again. Matthew tells us that it was the next day, the one after preparation day. That means it was the Sabbath. Now, for the Jews, the day starts when the sun goes down. So this may still have been what we would consider Friday evening after sundown. Or it’s possible that the chief priests and Pharisees came to Pilate very early Saturday morning. Whenever it was that they came, they were certain that Jesus was still in the grave. Otherwise, their request would make no sense. So they came and told Pilate something the governor probably didn’t know: **He said, “I will rise again.” That would be a horror for Jesus’ enemies!**

They were so afraid of the promise Jesus had made that they risked their celebration of one of the most important Sabbaths of the year—the one during the week-long Festival of Unleavened Bread. If you think back to their first meeting with Pontius Pilate early Friday morning, they had insisted that Pilate come out of his residence to talk to them outside, because they didn’t want to be made unclean for this Sabbath meal. Now they gathered together and risked that uncleanness once again, because they had to put this doubt to rest.

What did they say to Pilate? *“We remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise again.’”* Of course, they were totally right. Jesus had said this. Unfortunately, they didn’t believe it for a minute. They called Jesus “that deceiver.” They were already trying to control the message and spin the events the way they needed them to go, but this prophecy terrified them. They understood that if Jesus really rose, then everything that he had ever said about himself would have to be true. That would’ve been a horror for them, because that would mean that they had been wrong for three years—wrong for all their lives as they taught what they thought God had said. So they wouldn’t allow themselves to imagine even for a moment the possibility that Jesus would really rise from the dead. They were terrified, however, that his disciples would come during the middle of the night, steal his body, and then tell the world that Jesus had risen.

So they went to Pilate and pretended like they had seen eye-to-eye all along. They explained their concerns, and Pilate gave them a truly ironic answer. *“Take a guard. . . . Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how.”* After all the static they had given him on Friday, Pilate could’ve told them, “Too bad! That’s your problem!” But he didn’t. Someone might argue that he was a realist. Jesus was dead, for good or ill, and he still had to deal with these men. There’s probably some

truth to that. However, there was more to it than that. The Jews had told Pilate that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God. And he had asked Jesus, “Where do you come from?” He had been terrified that perhaps it was true. Jesus had refused to answer, however. Jesus wouldn’t stop the execution. Now, Pilate needed Jesus to stay dead. He needed to know he had put to death a teacher, a revolutionary, a troublemaker—even an innocent man—anything but the Son of God.

So he gave them everything they wanted. Roman soldiers, not Jewish temple guards, secured the tomb. They stood watch throughout the day and night. They even put a wax seal on the stone to show that it had not been moved. Pilate and the Jews thought they had covered all their bases. When three days were done, they would be able to show everyone that the tomb was still sealed and Jesus had not risen from the dead. Finally, this problem would go away.

They exerted all this effort just to keep Jesus’ words from becoming reality. The terror those words inspired in their hearts should have told them that they were indeed true. In fact, I think it did tell them. I think they knew all along that Jesus was going to rise, but their hearts were so hardened with sin and unbelief that they had no choice but to try and stop it. You know why I think that? Because they actually had to face that reality on Sunday. When Jesus did rise, when they couldn’t deny it because the Roman soldiers had told them what had happened, do you know what the Jewish leaders did? They bribed

those soldiers to tell everyone they had fallen asleep and the disciples came and stole his body during the night. That’s how hard their hearts were. It shows that deep inside, they really feared more than just the people being led astray. They feared that they were wrong. They feared that Jesus would win. They feared that because they had no faith. Jesus winning meant they would go to hell. So they went to all this trouble to keep Jesus’ words from becoming reality. What a sad irony!

2. That was the point of all that Jesus suffered.

They couldn’t keep Jesus from rising—no matter how many soldiers stood guard outside and no matter how thick the wax was. Even if they had had an entire army trying to hold the rock down and a mountain of concrete poured on top of it—when that angel came down early Sunday morning, he was going to open the tomb and show the world that Jesus was already gone. He had already risen! It was never God’s plan to have the disciples steal the body. Jesus had told them God’s plan. **He said, “I will rise again.” That was the point of all Jesus suffered.**

Looking back on it today, we have to wonder about the disciples. If you page through the gospels, you will see that Jesus said this over and over again. He kept making the statement more and more clear. He kept adding details. He told the disciples that he was going to be arrested and executed. Then he told them that on the third day he would rise from the dead. The irony is that they never figured out what he meant. They kept thinking he was speaking in parables, because it just didn’t make sense for him to plan to die. What kind of king would that be? What kind of conqueror dies? So Jesus’ enemies took him at his word and trembled, but Jesus’ friends tried to find some other explanation.

So all this effort to guard and seal the tomb was wasted. The disciples had no intention of stealing Jesus’ body. They didn’t even understand until after Jesus rose that that’s what he always meant to do. And they were too stunned and shattered to think about plotting a deception. They loved Jesus. Now he was dead. That’s all they were thinking about.

Yet there was a reason God allowed all this effort. God used the fear and the unbelief of the Jewish leaders and the Roman governor for his own purposes. You see, Jesus always planned to die. That’s why he kept telling people what was going to happen. He didn’t lose. While it was a tragedy of inhuman proportions, at the same time, it was a victory. It was God’s love put into practice, because Jesus suffered everything that happened to him on Good Friday for us. The cross he hung on is our cross. Each of us deserves to hang there. When his Father abandoned him, he was inflicting on him what we deserve. He made his Son suffer hell there on the cross. When Jesus died, it was our death he died. He was buried in our tomb.

All that is what sin does to us. If you’re ever tempted to think that your sins really aren’t a big deal because there are so many worse people out there, stop and look at the cross. This is how seriously God takes our sin. God looks into our hearts, and what does he see? He sees sinful thoughts, desires, and feelings. And God condemns us already for that. That

doesn't seem fair to us. We say no one can tell us what to think or feel, but God does. God would send sinners to hell purely on the basis of sinful thoughts and feelings. Of course, where there are sinful thoughts and feelings, there are always sinful words and actions. Each of us is guilty. You might not like hearing that, but on Good Friday, it's undeniable. On Good Friday, we see Jesus doing what every sinner has to do: he died. The reason we die is because we are guilty of sin.

However, Jesus died in our place. He was buried where we will have to lie. Yet that wasn't the end. If the story ended with the watch and the seal, then, my friends, there would be no reason for us to ever gather here. The best we could do in life would be to enjoy what little we can before we go to hell. Jesus had a greater purpose. He came to rise. And the watch and seal are actually steps toward that resurrection. They prove that no one stole the body! Jesus stayed there in the grave until early Sunday morning and then he rose.

Because he rose, we know that all the suffering, the death, and all the hell Jesus experienced on Good Friday were enough. They paid for our sins, and we are forgiven. Jesus' resurrection is like a receipt that proves that he paid all that you owe. Now we are free and clear. Because Jesus rose, we trust that someday we will rise. These bodies will only fall into the grave if we die before he comes back. But even if we do, he will raise these bodies when he returns, and we will live with him in joy forever. Then, my friends, there will be no sin and death ever again.

That was Jesus' plan from before he was born. It was God the Father's plan before he created the world. But at the moment when the tomb was sealed, those who loved him couldn't see God's plan. All they knew was that their Lord was dead. All they experienced was darkness. I think we can understand their sorrow, but on Easter Sunday, the darkness ended. God brought them out of the darkness of sin and into the light of life. That is what Good Friday is all about. Jesus leads us out of the darkness. That was what he always planned to do.

Tonight, we're observing our annual Tenebrae service. *Tenebrae* is Latin for "darkness." We darken our sanctuary and worship in shadows. At the end of our service, the acolyte will take the Christ candle out of the church, and we will be plunged into complete darkness. That candle represents the life of Christ going out. But then, we will hear a loud noise called the *strepitus*. *Strepitus* means "crashing." That crash represents the rending of the tomb—the angel rolling back the stone to show the world the risen Christ. Then the candle will come back in, because our Jesus is no longer dead. He lives!

Because he lives, we too will live.

Amen.