

KEEPING THE LIE

Matthew 28:1-15

Second Sunday of Easter

April 23, 2017

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Has there ever been a time when you needed to make a big decision, and you did your due diligence and made the decision you believed was right, all the while having a gnawing feeling that maybe you were wrong? My answer would be yeah, pretty much every day. You might be more confident than I am and never have that feeling, but I suspect most, if not everyone does, at least, now and then.

If you have had that feeling, you should be able to relate to our gospel lesson, because in it plenty of people were wondering if they had been wrong about Jesus. The lesson is Matthew's account of the resurrection.

If we back up in the gospel, we discover that between Galilee and Jerusalem, Jesus had spoken often with his disciples about his impending death and resurrection. In fact, on at least three occasions he specifically told them that he would die but on the third day would rise. Now, the disciples believed Jesus was the Messiah. So convinced were they that they left everything to follow him. They took all of his words to be gospel truth. Well, he said that on the third day he would rise. So, we might suspect that on the third day they would be sitting by the tomb in lawn chairs, champagne in one hand and sparklers in the other, waiting for the big event. But none of them was at the tomb that day. Not one of them was there. Instead, they were huddled in a room somewhere thinking that they had been wrong about Jesus. They had decided to follow, thinking they were right and they had not been foolish to follow. He spoke with authority and performed amazing miracles and interpreted Scripture like no one else. There was plenty of evidence that he was the Messiah. But he died before their very eyes without so much as a whimper, and now he was gone. Maybe he was not who he said he was or who they thought he was. It looked as if they had been wrong about Jesus being the Messiah.

They were not the only ones wondering if they were wrong. The other people were the varied religious leaders who had orchestrated his crucifixion. Just as the disciples were convinced Jesus was the Messiah, these leaders were convinced he was nothing more than a troublemaker and a fraud. He had a following and somehow he was able to perform miracles; they could not deny that. But that only impressed the gullible, not them. The facts were that he was a lawbreaker, and he spent his time with the unclean. No holy man would do that. He went all over the country teaching nonsense and leading people away from a right understanding of God. They were so sure of this that they were willing to have him executed. No regrets. They were glad he was dead. Good riddance.

Except, they too had heard of Jesus' statement that he would rise from death on the third day. That was ridiculous, of course, but what if he did? What if they had been wrong about Jesus?

They went to Pilate asking for guards to be posted at the tomb. Their pretext was that the disciples might steal the body and then claim that Jesus had risen, perpetuating a terrible hoax. They wanted proof that Jesus had been a fraud and deserved to die. When he did not rise that would put an end to it. Right? We have to wonder, though, if there was not more to their request for guards. My guess is that they had just enough doubt in their hearts about what they had done and that they wanted guards there to prove to themselves that they had not been wrong about Jesus.

The irony is rich. The disciples, who were sure that Jesus was the Messiah, were not at the tomb because they thought maybe they had been wrong about Jesus. The religious leaders, who were sure Jesus was a charlatan, were represented at the tomb because they thought that maybe they had been wrong about Jesus. They all finally agreed on something! They all agreed that maybe they were wrong.

It is ironic, but not surprising. Doubts and life's experiences cause believers and non-believers alike to question their stands. Only the absolutely truest believers and most ardent atheists never doubt their positions. Everyone else questions now and then and, honestly, I don't think doubt is necessarily a problem. It can actually sharpen our faith and help us to grow. The problem comes when we are not open to new learning and new understanding, and consequently miss out on God. Look how this plays out as the story progresses.

Matthew tells us that Mary Magdalene and another Mary went to the tomb early the third day. To be clear, they did not go expecting to see the resurrected Christ. They went to mourn and hold vigil. They went to honor the dead, not to meet the living. When they arrived, there was an earthquake and an angel descended from heaven and rolled back the stone and sat upon it. He told the women that Jesus had risen as promised. As they ran back to tell the disciples, they encountered Jesus who told them that they should hurry and tell the disciples, and that all of them should go to Galilee to meet him. The women did, and the disciples did.

Not all of them had grasped what had happened immediately. The women and the disciples were surprised, shocked actually. They were confused. It did not sink in right away. It took a while for them to get their heads around it all. The testimony of the angel and their experience of the living Christ, though, brought them back to faith. The crucifixion had shaken them to their core. Jesus' death had caused them to seriously question about whether or not they had been wrong about Jesus. News of the resurrection, though, brought them back to belief. The truth of the resurrection made them faithful followers again. They were open to new learning and new understanding, so they did not miss out on God.

It is a different story with the religious leaders, however. As mentioned, they had guards at the tomb. The guards experienced exactly what the women experienced. In fact, the experience was so powerful that it scared the daylights out of them, and Matthew tells us that they froze like dead men. When they regained their footing, they quickly headed into Jerusalem and reported to the chief priests exactly what happened.

Well, this news hit the priests like a sledge hammer. Oh man, deep down they feared they had been wrong about Jesus and, sure enough, they had been. You can imagine the wailing

and gnashing of teeth. They had a hand in executing the Son of God! They tore their clothes in sorrow and fell on their knees in prayer, begging God for forgiveness and grace, promising to change their ways and be true disciples of the Lord.

Not! Oh, the news undoubtedly hit them like a sledge hammer, and they had a feeling of dread. There was no repentance, however, or prayers for forgiveness. They did not beg for mercy or promise faithfulness to the Lord. Instead, they paid the guards to testify that the disciples had stolen the body. They had told Pilate that they wanted to guard the tomb to prevent a hoax, and now they were bribing the guards to perpetuate a hoax.

This is incredibly sad. These religious leaders, who supposedly were all about maintaining a right relationship with God, were given yet another opportunity to recognize Jesus as the Son of God. It was another chance, after all they had done, to believe and become one with Christ. Instead, they chose to keep a lie. They had, indeed, been wrong about Jesus, but it turned out they did not care. They preferred maintaining their lifestyles and ways, built on lies, to living with God in truth. They did not allow new learning and new understanding to lead them to God, and so, again, they missed out on God.

The same could be said about the guards. They had personally experienced a holy encounter and were privy to the first announcement of the resurrection of the Lord, and yet they were willing to put all of that aside and keep a lie, instead, for money. To be fair, maybe they felt like they had no choice. Military protocol dictated that if guards lost a prisoner, even a dead one, they were to take their own lives. Who would believe Jesus had risen? The assumption would be that they had fallen asleep and allowed the disciples to steal the body. This was dereliction of duty, and they would be expected to fall on their swords, literally. The religious leaders were offering them a lot of money, and the promise that they would make things right with Pilate. Maybe they saw that not just as a good way out but the only way out. Maybe. Or maybe they were just willing to keep the lie for money. Hey, they experienced the resurrection of the Son of God, but that wouldn't put food on the table.

So, here is what we have. Both the disciples and the religious leaders wondered if they had been wrong about Jesus. Both had received eyewitness news of the resurrection. The news led the disciples to truth and life. The news led the religious leaders to lies and death, which brings us to the question of the day: where does the news lead us? The obvious answer is to truth and life, of course, except that Matthew has shown us that is not always true. Sometimes, we keep the lie that Jesus is dead. Why? Why would anyone do that ever?

The primary reason is because there are times we prefer Jesus to be dead. *Christ is risen* is not followed with *alleluia* but with *oh no*. The religious leaders are again exhibit A. For one thing, they had made it clear that Jesus was a fraud, to the point of deserving to die. To admit they were wrong and that they were complicit in the rejection of God's anointed one, would be embarrassing and humiliating. Better to cover it up and save face. Clearly, but look deeper.

More than being embarrassed, they were not willing to give up life as they knew it. They had it going on. They were prosperous and respected and influential. They did not need reservations at the best restaurants. A table was always available for them. They had no trouble

getting tickets to sold-out events. Tickets were always available to them. Important decisions did not get made without their input. They were honored wherever they went.

Jesus, on the other hand, constantly talked about humility and service and self-sacrificing love. He cared about those who could not get a reservation if they tried. He had no interest in money or the finer things of life, preferring to give whatever he had to the poor. He made it clear that the emphasis on law over love was misguided.

If they acknowledged that Jesus rose, they would also have to acknowledge that Jesus is Lord and so would have to live life differently. This is key. If they acknowledged that Jesus rose, they would also have to acknowledge that Jesus is Lord and consequently would have to live life differently. They would have to fit their lives to God instead of fitting God to their lives. So they preferred Jesus dead. The news of the resurrection was not good news to them. It sickened them. They did not want Jesus to be Lord.

Are they alone? The axiom still stands. To say that Jesus rose is to say that Jesus is Lord of our lives. What does that mean? That means that Jesus gets to say how we should run our businesses. Forget this notion that business and religion or politics and religion don't mix. Jesus is Lord of all, not select things. It means that Jesus sets the standards for our relationships: forgiveness instead of vengefulness; inclusiveness instead of exclusiveness; kindness instead of meanness; mercy instead of uncaring. It means that Jesus has something to say about how we spend our money, about how we use our time, even about the kind of work we do.

Whoa! That can be uncomfortable. When Jesus gets too close, the tendency is to stop thinking of Jesus as Lord and to start thinking of Jesus as a meddler and, well, who wants a meddler around? What happens then is we say that Jesus is alive but live as if Jesus is dead.

Understandable. The problem is that while we think we are protecting our lives, we are actually giving them away. Instead of staying in a relationship that gives us everlasting life, we settle for mortal life. The lie is that Jesus is dead. The truth is that Jesus is alive. This means that the truth is that the ways of life he has taught us are, in fact, the ways of God. It means that the testimony of the gospel is true: that God Almighty loves us so much that he came to dwell among us in the person of Jesus; that Christ's signs of healing and feeding are signs of the coming kingdom; that Jesus took our sins upon himself and died so that we can live. And, we can have that life right now, not only after death, but right now -- life that is joyous and abundant and grace filled and blessing filled and eternal.

Maybe there are times that you doubt and that you think you might have been wrong about Jesus. O.K. But let the news of the resurrection bring you back to faith. Don't keep the lie. Live the truth. Listen to what the guards actually saw, not what they said they saw. Jesus lives. He is our Lord and Savior. That's not a hoax. It is the truth. Thanks be to God.

Amen.