

*Make It as Secure as You Know How**

Matthew 27:55-28:10

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On a warm day in mid-November of 2001, a number of us from the seminary—faculty and students—were traveling to Denver to a meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion. In the airport in Atlanta, we passed through the security checks and made our way to our various gates of departure. Only when we were settled in, awaiting the call of our flights, did we hear the announcement that for some reason we were to vacate the airport. Toting all our carry-on luggage, we walked back through the airport, up the escalators, through all the security checkpoints, initially at least, not knowing exactly the reason for the evacuation. Thousands of passengers, plus pilots, flight attendants, and other employees were herded outside the airport to wait for about four hours (and with no access to restrooms). As you can imagine, we were not happy campers.

As we later discovered, a University of Georgia football fan, once having cleared security, had tried to go back and pick up his child's lost toy, and in doing so had run up a down escalator. His actions set the nervous security personnel aflutter. All of our flights were canceled, leaving us with the uncertainty of when we would ever get to Denver.

Of course since last September the issue of heightened security has become a national one. We have *all* had our experiences with security checks at the airport. The airlines probably own more pairs of nail clippers than anyone else in human history. We now have a new department of homeland security, and a member of the president's cabinet recently made the suggestion that rather than being neighborly we should keep a close eye out on our neighbors and report any suspicious activity we encounter. At the major Fourth of July celebrations last summer, planes from air force units circled overhead to reassure us that all was well.

Of course we have known about security measures for a long time. Many of us live in homes where we punch in the codes when we leave and when we return. Even here at the seminary we need to know the right combinations to enter the buildings at nights and on the weekends.

On that November afternoon last fall as Professor Kathleen O'Connor and I were standing outside the Atlanta airport, trying to be as cheerful as we could (she succeeding, as you could imagine, much better than I), I remember overhearing another passenger whom I did not know comment about the problem of security. He predicted that we would experience a number of false alarms in the future and give up many of our civil rights. "After 9/11 we are going to have to get used to security checks, even when they are frivolous. It is the only way to be safe, and we have got to make our country as secure as we can."

Somehow this passenger's words began to ring a bell in my mind. When had I

*Cousar preached this sermon at Columbia Theological Seminary's Opening Convocation on Sept 11, 2002.

heard that phrase before—"make it secure as we can"? It was at the burial of Jesus. In Matthew's account, Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy disciple, had claimed the body of Jesus from Pilate following the crucifixion, had placed it in a tomb, and had rolled a huge stone against the door of the tomb—a very generous thing to do, protecting the body from dogs and other wild animals.

Word had gotten out that Jesus had predicted that he would be raised on the third day. And so the religious leaders went to Pilate and petitioned him to make the tomb even more secure. "Otherwise his disciples may go and take away this imposter," they said, "and then tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. That will leave us in a worse mess than ever."

Pilate, who often speaks in the gospel narratives with an ironic twist, sneered at the religious leaders, "You have a guard of soldiers; go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." "Make it secure as you possibly can." And we, in our preoccupation with national security, begin to squirm a bit, and our hair to stand on end.

But the religious leaders did make the tomb secure. They sealed the stone and set a guard of soldiers to keep watch. The apocryphal Gospel of Peter goes to great detail in telling how the soldiers sealed the stone with seven seals. Then they pitched a tent before the tomb and settled in to prevent any tampering or deception.

Here's the picture: a dead body, laid in a tomb carved out of rock, with a huge stone covering the entrance to the tomb, the stone sealed up tight, and outside a squad of soldiers keeping watch. Sounds like pretty good homeland security to me!

Let's not be too hard on these religious leaders. They had worked to engineer this crucifixion. They had jockeyed back and forth between the high priest and the Roman governor. And they naturally wanted to keep things as they were—Jesus dead and the disciples scattered and fearful. That's the meaning of security—protection of what we have, protection against loss and risk; keeping things normal; not messing with our minds or our pocketbooks; not exposing us to change and the new. It's quite simple; we want to feel safe. After all, we've got things worked out pretty well. Why *not* take realistic precautions to keep things in place, to maintain the status quo?

What happened the next morning shattered such security forever. The two Marys, who had faithfully stuck by Jesus throughout the ordeal of his crucifixion, devastated by grief and despair, came to the tomb. They came to grieve the loss of their dear friend. Instead, they felt the earth tremble under their feet as they experienced God's rule erupting with volcanic force. They saw a strange messenger of God, a surreal figure, standing in the tomb, all dressed in white. The huge stone, carefully sealed, was rolled back, and the soldiers set to guard the tomb were so stunned by the sight that they were helpless and afraid, no more than corpses themselves. The body of Jesus was gone. So much for homeland security!

The women had come to see a tomb, to pay their respects to a deceased friend, to grieve the loss of one they loved; instead they met this messenger of God, who declared that Jesus has risen and would meet them in Galilee. Security left in shambles; protection gone; safe no longer; exposed in a way that they can hardly understand; open to all sorts of threats and dangers.

As we begin a new school year in a time of national and international insecurity, we do well to learn from these faithful women about what life is like after the shattering of a security—out there in a world of risk, of collapse, and now of a heightened uncertainty about the economy. Three features of their experience with the resurrec-

tion are significant. The first thing is *fear*. The same Greek word used for the fright of the soldiers, who are so stunned by the events as to be rendered helpless, is used for the women as well. No doubt about their fright at what they had seen and experienced. Their natural, normal world was disrupted. They had come to a quiet garden to meditate and to grieve; instead they had experienced an earthquake. What were they to think? This new and incalculable life had broken into their lives. It is not the fear of dying that engulfs them. If anything, it is the fear of life here and now, the scariness of the moment, the uncertainty of what living in the days ahead will be like.

Stuart McWilliam, who taught here for many years, used to tell of Robert Louis Stevenson's having received a letter from a rather pompous missionary. Stevenson was critically ill, and the missionary wanted to come and talk to him "as a man in danger of dying." Stevenson replied with his characteristic humor that the missionary should visit him as "a man in danger of living. I am a very sick man, but suppose I get better! Any fool can die; as a matter of fact, all do. I'm going to need much more help if I go on living." The resurrection, by opening up the past as it does—with its unresolved relationships and awareness of failures, always arouses in us the fear of living.

And yet the women left the tomb "with fear and great joy." Their fear differed from that of the soldiers, because though truly frightened, the two Marys had an inkling that the powers that had crucified Jesus were defeated. The ground under their feet had shaken. His promises made in his lifetime were coming true. No matter how much money the religious authorities paid the soldiers to concoct a story about his body being stolen, these women knew that the resurrection was no deception but the truth. They say to us that it is all right to be afraid, if fear can be experienced in the context of God's having raised Jesus from the dead.

Second, the two Marys were given a job to do. They were *to go and tell the others* what the messenger of God had told them. "Go quickly and tell his disciples that he is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you'll see him." And as Matthew reports it, they ran quickly to spread the news. Easter is a message about the God who raised Jesus from the dead and who is our only hope in life and in death—our only security. The women are given the risky job of telling the story that in the perilous face of death there is God.

It's not an easy assignment. In Luke's account we read that some thought their message an idle tale and dismissed the women as irrelevant. It's not just a story of a resuscitated corpse or the miracle of the empty tomb they were to announce, but the defeat of the power of death. And that's a hard word to sell when a war is going on and when people are frantically clinging to a national invulnerability and to the notion that God is "on our side." It's a hard word to sell when people would prefer to sing "God bless America" than to say "Let's go to Galilee."

And "to Galilee"—not so much a place on a map, as the place where Jesus had initially entered the routine of the daily lives of these disciples; where they fished and argued with one another. Galilee was not a place of power, but a less significant, marginal area; yet it was the territory where most of Jesus' ministry had been carried on. It was in Galilee, not in the holy city of Jerusalem or the power and glitter of Washington, where he promised to meet them. It was amid the routine of reading books and discussing theology, of visiting hospitals and leading youth groups, of spending a night at the shelter or demonstrating hospitality at East Lake, of writing papers and,

dare I suggest, parsing Greek verbs, that Jesus promised to bring God's reign of justice and love.

Finally, as the women go about their task of witnessing to the resurrection, Jesus encounters them. He doesn't say much really, except "Greetings!" and then repeats the messenger's word that they should go into Galilee. But they are confident now that his resurrection is no longer a promise but a reality, for we read, the women *worshipped him*. Actually the narrative says that they "took hold of his feet and kissed them"—a gesture to acknowledge their total dependence on him, their complete submission to the risen Lord.

Don't dismiss this act of worship too lightly. We are not talking about a narcotic trip into another world, when worship becomes an escape. This is no "sweet hour of prayer that calls us from a world of care." In face of an insecure world, these women were on their knees before Jesus. But the women had to let go of the feet of Jesus in order to carry the message they had to deliver. There comes the moment when we have to leave behind the sanctuary and go to meet Christ in the world. But worship, where we dare to acknowledge the insecurities of this world for the security of the risen Christ, is where it all begins. It is in this posture of self-giving that fires are ignited. To put it in Barth's famous phrase, "To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of this world."

So as we start this new academic year, our text poses the question: Where is our ultimate security to be found? What is our only "hope in life or in death"? Is it to be found in a national program of self-defense, in pistol-packing pilots who are to foil the efforts of every hijacker, or is it found in the God who sends us into an insecure world to tell the story and who goes before us into the many Galilees of this world? May God give us the grace to follow the two Marys, who acknowledged their fear, who obeyed the messenger's directive to tell the story, and who worshipped the risen Christ.

[Author's note: After completing the initial draft of this sermon, I came across a fine Easter sermon on the same text by Patrick Willson, pastor of the Williamsburg Presbyterian Church, Williamsburg, Virginia. I am sure I picked up some of Willson's phrases in my revision. I am grateful also to George Stroup, who read the draft and made several helpful suggestions.]