

**Sermon Notes for 3/26/16 (Easter Vigil)**

**Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN**

**Text: Matthew 27:57-66**

**Theme: SECURE TOMBS AND SECURE LIVES**

**Hymn: LSB 118 (Sing, My Tongue, the Glorious Battle)**

**The Point:** We who know the end from the beginning celebrate all of Lent's solemnities with the anticipation of the alleluia's that spring from God's people at the news of Christ's resurrection.

**Introduction:** Security occupies the hearts and minds of many in our world today. Whenever presidents, popes, governors or other important people travel, security teams sweep the areas where they are going for weeks in advance. Those same teams swarm the person as he or she gets out among the crowds, fearing the next attempt to breach their security measures. Security cameras in stores and on roads and highways beam our smiling (or not so smiling) faces to various places of examination and scrutiny. Security companies boast that their systems will keep you and your family safe from every possible threat. And yet we probably feel less secure than many generations past, who lived without such sophisticated protections. Terrorists find ever more highly developed methods to foil security plans. Scammers and hackers scout out territory for their plots to be hatched without the limitations of space. Bribery and corruption cause people in charge of security to allow or foster lapses. Where will we find real security?

We who know the end from the beginning have celebrated all of Lent's solemnities with the anticipation of the alleluia's that spring from God's people at the news of Christ's resurrection. We even insist on calling the Sundays between Ash Wednesday and Holy Week the Sundays **IN** Lent, not Sundays **OF** Lent, because they retain something of a festive character, even if it is somewhat subdued. We trust that there is security to be found in a living relationship with a living Lord who has conquered death and the grave. Our electronics experts and insurance agents and political leaders may promise security, but we know that their efforts are doomed to fail. We need something, Someone more reliable in whom to place our hopes.

One description of the Easter Vigil contains these words (LSB Agenda): "In some places throughout the early centuries of the Church's life, the people of God would hold vigil, which means 'keep watch,' through the night in expectation of Christ's return. A vigil in expectation of Christ's return at Easter became a common feature of the celebration of His crucifixion and resurrection. The vigil consisted of prayer, psalms and hymns, and readings, especially from the Old Testament, culminating in the celebration of the resurrection at dawn with the Lord's Supper. As the Church gathered in vigil, she waited in hopeful expectation for the appearance of the resurrected Christ in those most recently born in Him, the newly baptized. . . At the dawn of the new day at Easter sunrise, the newly baptized joined the entire Church in the chorus of alleluias at Christ's resurrection from the dead."

So on this occasion of the Easter Vigil, on this side of the original Easter event, we live in eager expectation of that announcement that Christ has burst the bonds of death. It was not so with the first disciples. They were absolutely devastated, demolished. Faith had nearly been extinguished as they had seen their Savior, their Master, their Messiah, their Hope for life and for the world's salvation die on the cross. Some (especially of the women) had stood by as Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus had taken Jesus' body according to Pilate's order and laid it in the stone-cold and stone-sealed tomb. Their hopes and dreams lay buried with the cold, stiff body of the one they had called "Lord." Security and peace had vanished from their hearts. All they could imagine was threat, disaster, hopelessness, now that Jesus was gone. They ran away at Jesus' arrest, and even though a couple of them surfaced at Jesus' trials, by evening it seems they were all hiding out behind locked doors. Even on Easter afternoon and evening – and even a week later – the disciples tried to find security behind locked doors. How foolish!

It seemed on that Good Friday that the only “secure” place was the tomb of Jesus. Pilate and the soldiers had seen to that. Interestingly, the grave of this Jewish rabbi from the back-water village of Nazareth turns out to be one of the most closely guarded tombs in all of history. The chief priests and Pharisees went to Pilate on Saturday morning because they had taken Jesus’ words seriously. He had said, “After three days I will rise again.” (Apparently they took His words more seriously than the disciples, who were the most surprised people on earth when Easter morning dawned to the glorious news that Jesus was no longer among the dead.) Pilate gave orders for them to “make it as secure as you can.” That was an interesting turn of phrase also, wasn’t it? “As secure as you can” – turns out that wasn’t nearly secure enough!

They posted a guard of soldiers – not just one soldier, but a group of experienced, practiced warriors, men who knew what it meant to keep watch. And they also placed the emperor’s seal on the stone, ensuring that there would be a high price to pay for anyone who would dare to break that seal. Indeed, violating the emperor’s seal called for capital punishment. This tomb was secure – as secure as they could make it.

But God turned all that security on its head in a blast of almighty power that shook Christ’s body to life and shook the earth around into a spasm that even rolled the tomb-securing rock back upwards in its channel. At that moment, emperor’s seal notwithstanding, in full view of guards paid to keep the tomb secure and closed, the power of God began to turn earth’s history on its head. The guards themselves passed out and became (in Matthew’s words) “like dead men.” Security would not be found in political and military power.

Daniel’s foes thought that they had put Daniel into a “secure” place. He was thrown into a den of lions, from which no one ever emerged alive. Hungry lions are not likely to become your friends in that place. In fact, they will be in competition to see which of them can eat most off your bones. But Daniel did not occupy that space alone, any more than his friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, had occupied the fiery furnace alone. He described it this way: “My God sent his angel and shut the lions’ mouths so that they would not hurt me.” He was as secure as anyone could be, because he lived with the confidence that the Lord would keep him and watch over him. And even if he were torn apart by the beasts, that would not end his relationship with his Lord or his trust in God’s promises.

Ironically, those men who had accused Daniel, who imagined that their places of power and influence were secure, ended their lives at the lions’ den to which they had committed Daniel. Security was not to be found in trading secrets with kings and princes or in building up centers of influence.

So for us, security is not to be found in more guards and more powerful weapons and more sophisticated electronics. Security is to be found in a living and personal relationship with the Lord who is alive, who is no longer subject to suffering and torment and dying and burial. Jesus Christ lives for you and for me. He is our security, no matter what dislocations we may suffer in this life. That does not mean that He will assure your safety and physical security from every disaster or harm or failure. Indeed, the very fact that Christ went through suffering, cross and death teaches us that His disciples can expect the same sort of path on their journey toward eternity. And yet we live as secure as we can be.

**Conclusion:** The 3-year old felt secure in his father's arms as Dad stood in the middle of the pool. But Dad, for fun, began walking slowly toward the deep end, gently chanting, “Deeper and deeper and deeper,” as the water rose higher and higher on the child. The lad’s face registered increasing degrees of panic, as he held all the more tightly to his father, who, of course, easily touched the bottom. Had the little boy been able to analyze his situation, he’d have realized there was no reason for increased anxiety. The water’s depth in ANY part of the pool was over his head. Even in the shallowest part, had he not been held up, he’d have drowned. His safety anywhere in that pool depended on Dad. At various points in our lives, all of us feel we're getting “out of our depth” – problems abound, a job is lost, sickness strikes, a loved one

dies. Our temptation is to panic, for we feel we've lost control. Yet, as with the child in the pool, the truth is, we've never been in control over the most valuable things of life. We've always been held up by the grace of God, our Father, and that does not change. God is never out of his depth, and therefore we are safe, even when we're "going deeper" than we've ever been. (Charles Ryrie, *So Great Salvation*, Victor Books, 1989, p. 137ff.) In our anticipation, we breathe with extra joy and enthusiasm as we reflect in our lives (and voice with our tongues) the great Good News: Christ is risen. **HE IS RISEN INDEED, ALLELUIA! AMEN!**