

**“Have You Heard?”
The Soldiers at the Tomb**

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April 9, 2023**

Welcome everyone! Happy Easter! It is so wonderful to have you with us at church today and to celebrate the love of God and his presence in our lives because of what he has done for us through Jesus Christ. Everywhere you look outside, there is evidence that spring is here. Flowers are popping up, the grass is turning green, buds are on the trees, and farm animals are having their offspring. Our neighbors have quite a few different animals. Not only a dog and several cats, but also goats, horses, and chickens. A few days ago, some of their little chicks hatched and they were kind enough to ask if my 4 year old little one wanted to come over and see them. He was all about it! We went to their house and he got to pet them and hold them. (The smell was wonderful, by the way.) Our neighbors go to church, so on our way out, as we said thank you, I thought they'd be encouraged to hear the new Bible verses Hudson has been memorizing, so I said, “Son, why don't you tell them what Psalm 100 says?” Hudson looked up and said, “Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness, come before him with joyful songs. Know that the Lord is God, it is he who made us and we are his, we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise, give thanks to him and praise his name. For the Lord is good and his love endures forever. His faithfulness continues throughout all generations.” I could tell that my neighbors were impressed and excited. They had huge smiles on their faces to see this little kid, memorizing the Bible. Then at the end, Hudson took his finger and plunged it all the way up his nose and said, “Look, a boogie.” All the credit I was getting for being a good parent went down the drain! If you meet my son around here, be sure to grab some hand sanitizer before too long!

As I reflected on that interaction, I started thinking that in a way, my son is a little bit like all of us. There are wonderful traits and qualities in every single one of us. We are made in God's image and have the capacity to do incredible things: to help people in need, to support a good cause, to do the right thing, even when no one is looking. We can do the sorts of things that make other people proud of us. But then we also have the tendency, just like my son, to get filth on our hands, to respond to our lower nature, to tell lies to make ourselves look better, to cut corners to try to get ahead, to use other people to try to get the things we want. There is selfishness and self-centeredness in all of us. That's what the Bible refers to as sin. It means falling short, missing the mark, not living up to God's standards for us. The Bible not only addresses the reality of our sin and gives us a name for it, but it also tells us that God has a plan for our sin. He doesn't intend to leave us in our sin but to redeem us from it. That is ultimately what Easter is all about—God's great rescue plan that not even death itself could overcome.

The last few weeks here at The Creek we have been talking about the events that led to Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. We've been listening to the stories of people in the Bible who were eye-witnesses to those events, picturing them in conversation with family or friends after they experienced what they did, hearing them ask the question, “Have you heard?” And then they share the details! But instead of listening to Jesus' followers, to his disciples recount the events, we've listened to the story from the vantage point of those on the other side of the table, not those who were rooting for Jesus, but those who were rooting against him. We listened to the story from the perspective of a man who arrested Jesus, then from a prisoner who was set free instead of Jesus, and last week, from the centurion who was there to oversee the execution of Jesus. Looking at the story from the other side of the table opened our eyes to a lot of unique and profound insights. Today we get to imagine a conversation with the soldiers who were posted at Jesus' tomb to make sure nobody came to take his body. Here's how I think the conversation might have gone.

It was just another ordinary day, another assignment given by the higher-ups. Honestly, of all the jobs they've given us over the years, this was one of the easiest ever. We were used to putting down rebellions,

chasing down criminals, and building bridges. This time, all they wanted us to do was watch a dead man's tomb for a few days. The cemetery isn't the most enjoyable place to pass the time, something about it always gives me the creeps, but it was an easy job—just make sure no one breaks into this guy's tomb, which, come on—who would even want to do in the first place? There were 16 of us sent to the tomb. We sealed it, we stamped the emblem of Rome over it so that everyone would know: you break this seal, we break you. If you break a Roman seal, that is punishable by death. After we secured the scene, as usual, we broke into teams of four, and we rotated shifts every four hours. Everyone stays fresh and on top of their game, even in the early hours of the morning. After all, no Roman soldier wants to fall asleep while on their post. I've only heard of that happening twice, and both of their throats were slashed. It was the last mistake they ever made. My first shift was business as usual. A typical Saturday afternoon. The Jews were on Sabbath, so no one was even outside their homes. It was a quiet shift. I went home, grabbed some dinner, and then went right to bed. I got six hours, and then was off to take the early morning shift, which of all the posts is the one I love the most. Sitting there, watching the world wake up, watching the horizon as the pitch black sky slowly turns a shade of deep navy blue, then red, and orange and yellow as the sky lights up, the birds begin to chirp—that's when I feel most alive.

But I'm telling you, on this shift (I was there with three other soldiers) we all saw the same thing. Something happened that I can't even begin to wrap my mind around. We were there, standing ten yards from the tomb, staring straight at it, just like we were supposed to. Armor and helmets on. Swords at our sides, ready to be drawn on a second's notice. And all of a sudden, we heard a rumble. It started off in the distance, but it approached us in an instant. The ground began to shake, we all fell down. It was the most violent earthquake I had ever experienced. When it finally stopped after a few minutes I looked at the other guys. We stood up, began dusting ourselves off, and then it happened. I couldn't believe my eyes. There was something, someone floating in the sky. Whatever it was, light was radiating from it. His clothes looked like they were lightning. Was this one of the gods? Apollo? Diana? Jupiter? We had no idea, but with the ground shaking and this heavenly being coming, we were terrified and knew something earth-shattering, world-changing was about to take place. That heavenly being didn't just descend, he came and landed right in front of us. It was the most terrifying moment of my entire life. All of us started shaking, then it was like we were paralyzed and couldn't move.

While we sat there motionless, that heavenly creature—I don't know, maybe an angel—walked up to the tomb we were supposed to be guarding, broke the seal we placed there just the day before, and rolled the stone away. It took 8 soldiers to get that stone in place. It must have weighed 2,000 lbs. How in the world did he have that strength? As we were trying to figure things out, still terrified, still paralyzed, three women came into the garden. They were carrying spices, the kind you place on dead people to honor their body and keep the smell down. They walked right into the tomb, saw this angel inside, dropped their spices, and fell on the ground in fear. But then in the most gentle tone we could hear this angel ask them, *"Why are you looking for the living among the dead. Jesus isn't here. He has risen. Don't you remember that he told you this would happen! Now go and tell his disciples what you have seen and heard."*

Those women ran away as fast as they could! We watched them leave the garden and when we looked back, the angel was gone—he just vanished. Twenty minutes later two guys (if I heard right, their names were Peter and John, two of Jesus' disciples) came at a full speed, running into the garden, right past us, and into the tomb. They looked at the grave clothes that were used to wrap up Jesus' dead body. The clothes were there, but the body wasn't. They walked out, one of them looking confused, like he didn't know what to make of it. But the other's face was filled with joy, a smile from ear to ear—it was like somehow he thought he knew what this all meant, and that it was good news not just for him, but good news for everyone.

After those guys left the garden, it's like the trance we were in broke. We could stand up, move, talk. We were back to feeling like ourselves, and we had no way of explaining what we just saw. The earthquake, this heavenly being, these people coming and going. All we knew for sure was that we were put there to guard the tomb. Now, on our watch, the seal was broken, the stone was rolled away, and the body was gone. As a Roman soldier, when you are given a task like this, and you fail at it, that's a death sentence. You fail to guard the tomb, they put you in a tomb. So with both shame and fear we went to the authorities to face our punishment. We knew it would sound insane, but we told them exactly what we saw—the earthquake, the angels, the people, everything. We of course expected them to be angry, we were sure we would face their wrath. But the leaders just huddled up and spoke with one another, and then they came back and said: "Here's the deal: if you help us, we'll help you. This story has to be buried. No one can know what happened! Not your friends, not your kids, not your wife, not even the other men in your battalion. No one. Now you're going to have to sacrifice your honor. You're going to have to lie and tell everyone you fell asleep on your post, that all four of you dozed off, and that while all four of you fell asleep people snuck into the garden, broke the seal, rolled that big stone away, and stole the body and that is why the tomb is empty." They swore to us that if we told their narrative, explained the situation away with their answers, not only would we not be punished, they would give each of us enough money that we'd be set for life; we'd never have to work again.

All the other men were ready to take the deal. "Are you kidding me," they said. "How could we not? We came expecting to be dishonorably discharged and sentenced to death, and now, not only do they want to spare us but make us rich and let us ride off into the sunset? All we have to do is tell one lie that no one is ever going to find out about? This is the easiest decision ever. We have to do it." But I sat there and thought wondered why. Why are they doing this? What are they trying to hide? Why save our lives? Why pay us off? What are they trying to hide? That angel, that earthquake, that empty tomb—they must know what it all means, and they don't want anyone else to know. At that moment I had a choice to make: try to get to the bottom of this, follow the facts and pay the price, or bury the truth, pretend like it never happened, and get on with my life. I'm not proud to say this, but I did the thing I promised myself when I was young that I would never do: I took the easy way out. We took the money and ran. But ever since that day I've never been able to shake the question of what it was all really about. What does that empty tomb really mean? I wonder if I'll ever know.

Can you imagine a Roman soldier asking, "Have you heard?" and then telling you that kind of story? That story would force you to stop in your tracks and think: if what he is saying is true, like really, really true, if the earth shook, the angel came down, the seal broke, the stone was rolled away, and the grave cloths were there but Jesus' body wasn't, that means something, and not just for Jesus' early followers—it means something for everyone; it means something for you. Because if Jesus rose from the dead, that's not only the answer that explains what happened 2,000 years ago with an empty tomb, it's a story that explains everything. It's a story that means God not only loved us to the point of death, he loved us beyond death, that he broke the power of death, that eternal life is now possible, not only for him but for everyone who places their faith in him. It means that our sins can be forgiven. It means that God isn't just a force or a power that lives someone out there, but that he has come here, to know us, love us, live with us, and restore us. That story has the ability to change everything.

But like that Roman soldier, everyone gets to decide what they are going to do with that story, how they are going to respond to it. Are you going to cover it up, pretend it didn't happen because it would be too costly, it would change your life too much to press in and tell the truth? Or are you going to reflect deeply on what the empty tomb means and follow the truth wherever it leads, no matter the cost? Even though the Roman soldier in this story ultimately denied the truth, there is another story of a Roman soldier in the Bible who followed the truth. His story is told in the book of Acts. Two of Jesus' followers had been beaten and thrown in prison. This soldier was the prison guard, responsible for keeping these men, Paul

and Silas, locked up. But one night, an earthquake struck, their chains fell off, and they walked free. The soldier was distraught. He knew that in Roman society, if you let a prisoner escape, you incurred their punishment. Several of the prisoners had death sentences, so when this soldier realized what happened, he pulled out his sword and was preparing to take his life, an honorable death. When Paul saw what was about to take place, he rushed to him and said, “Don’t harm yourself. No one has fled. We are all here.” At that moment the soldier called for the lights, the lamps were lit, and when he saw every prisoner still in their place, even though the doors were open and the chains were loosed, he knew this was of God, this was a miracle, and instead of the other soldiers who decided to lie about what happened and take the hush money, the Bible says he asked the most important question of all time: **“What must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30).**

To the most important question ever asked, we have the greatest, most hope filled answer given: **“Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31).** Place your faith in Jesus. Trust in him. Believe that he was the Son of God, that he died for your sins, that he rose from the dead. Instead of living your life for yourself and by yourself, live your life for him and with him. This soldier listened to those words and responded to them. He believed in Jesus and was saved. Not only him, but his entire household believed. In the next few verses, we read: **“Immediately he and all his household were baptized.”** As soon as he placed his faith in Jesus, he was baptized. Today, we are going to make the same invitation to you. As you hear the story of the empty tomb, as you hear the good news that Jesus Christ not only died on the cross for your sins but rose from the grave to give you victory, power, peace, hope, and eternal life, today, you may want to make the same decision, to publicly declare that you believe in Jesus and be baptized.

There have already been dozens of people at The Creek who have been baptized the last few weeks. Baptism is when you go under the water, symbolizing that you are joining Jesus in his death and burial, and then, just as Jesus rose from the grave, you are brought up out of the water and share in the new life of Christ. The water symbolizes that all your sins are washed away. Maybe today is the day for you to make that decision. Some of you might be thinking, “I was baptized as a baby.” That was your parents’ decision; you played no part in that. This needs to be your decision. You need to agree with and affirm that your parents dedicated you to God and personally make the decision yourself to follow him for the rest of your life. Others of you are thinking, “This isn’t practical; I didn’t bring a change of clothes.” Don’t worry about it—we have enough shirts and shorts and towels backstage for a hundred people! What are you going to do with the empty tomb and a Jesus who has risen from the grave? Are you going to cover it up and deny it like the first soldier, or are you going to place your faith in Jesus and be baptized? Every one of us has a choice to make. What will you decide?

As you are wrestling through that and trying to process what you need to do, I have one more story, and then I’ll be done. A while back a good friend was selling off a piece of land that had a pond on it, and he wanted to catch some of the fish from that pond and transport them to another pond so he could keep a strong population going. We went to the pond on the land he was selling with our poles and tackle and large buckets to put the fish in. Within minutes I hooked a big bass. Probably four pounds. Because we were trying to keep it super strong and transport it, I was being a bit too gentle with it, and when I went to unhook it, the fish flopped and jammed the hook into my hand. It was a treble hook, which had three barbs, two of which were now in two of my fingers. So you know I’m not exaggerating, here’s the picture (view the online sermon to see the photo). This was in rural Kentucky. We went to the nearest urgent care center for help and the doctor—I am not kidding—literally opened a utility closet, pulled out a toolbox, grabbed a rusty pair of pliers and said he was going to pull the hooks out. Keren looked at me with these big eyes and said, “You can’t be serious!” We got out of there as fast as Purdue got out of the March Madness tournament. Faster than you could believe. Then I remembered I have a friend who is a hand surgeon. He was part of the very first double hand transplant in history. I called him and he had me meet

him at his office. With actual medical equipment, he numbed my fingers, and with incredible precision and expertise, he removed the hooks.

Here's the reality: for every one of us, the hooks of sin have set in. The barbs are deep; they're stuck and there is nothing we can do to get them out on our own. Just like I was able to call my friend who is a world-class hand surgeon to help me, we are able to call on the name of Jesus. He is the great physician, he is the prince of peace, he is the wonderful counselor, he is the morning star, the good shepherd, the great high priest, the Passover lamb, he is the way, the truth, and the life. If you call on him, you can be saved.