

**THE TRUTH THAT WILL NOT DIE**

Matthew 27:62-28:10

*“You have a guard of soldiers; go, make the tomb as secure as you can.”*

EASTER SUNDAY

April 8, 2012

A sermon preached by Rev. David Handley

at the First Presbyterian Church of Clarksville, TN

Inspired by Rev. Dr. Frederick Buechner in *The Magnificent Defeat*<sup>1</sup>

Our text for this Easter Sunday comes from an interesting exchange that took place on Holy Saturday, the day after Jesus was crucified. Being the Sabbath, it must have taken place after sundown in the dark, candlelit halls of Pilate’s quarters. There the chief priests and the Pharisees came, anxious that this wild-eyed Jesus heresy be stopped, once and for all. It was to Pilate they said, *“Sir, we remember what this pretender said while he was still alive: ‘After three days, I will rise again.’ Therefore, command the tomb to be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal his body away, and tell the people, ‘Look! He has been raised from the dead!’, and the last deception will be worse than the first..”* Pilate said to them: *“You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can.”* These words of Pilate are what I want us to consider on this Easter Sunday.

A fellow Presbyterian minister, Frederick Buechner, said if he could commission anyone from history to paint this scene, it would be Rembrandt. The pious old priests in the front of the contingent, the glow of the candlelight dancing on their faces, accentuating the deep wrinkles. They lean forward, their eyes wide with a sudden shock, as Pilate’s enigmatic response hangs in the air. Pilate sits brooding on his impressive Roman chair, a magistrate commanding the authority of imperial power. His face is dark and tired, as a man who has not slept well these past days. He grips the arms of his chair, and he says the words, *“You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can.”* I hovers over them like a cloud...like an unspoken fear they had not realized was lurking just beneath the surface in the shadows of their souls: *“What if this man was the Messiah, the Son of God?...Well, then, how secure can one make it?!”*

Well, not very, I would suggest this Easter Sunday morning. History itself testifies that this stubborn belief that Jesus of Nazareth, who was dead as a doornail on Friday afternoon, actually rose from the dead on Sunday is “the Truth that will not die.” And I bring three historical facts to the witness stand this morning that are worth consideration for anyone who wants to believe, but cannot because he or she thinks it *unreasonable*. It is true that Reason can

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, (New York: Harper Collins), 1966.

not lead us to faith; but this does not mean that this “Truth that will not die” is un-reasonable. Some very intelligent people have said that to embrace belief is to commit intellectual suicide. It is not. Jesus said we are to “love God with all of our *mind*, and all our *heart*.” So, with minds fully awake, let us consider these three witnesses:

First, the Empty Tomb. This is one of the great unsolved mysteries of History. Everyone knew where Jesus’ body had been laid. Have you wondered why all the Gospels make a point of this? It was a very public execution; and a very well-known, wealthy member of the ruling Council of Jews, one Joseph of Arimathea who contributed his own grave for Jesus’ burial. When all the hoopla began, just a few days after the Crucifixion, with Jesus’ disciples now claiming that He was alive and that they had seen Him, there were two groups of people who desperately wanted to stop this public disturbance—the religious leaders, as already noted, and the Romans. And all that would have been necessary for this power block to squelch what they considered a dangerous rumor, was to go out to the tomb and produce the body. But they could not, because it was not there. The easiest explanation was what we have already heard from the priests: the disciples stole the body, and then claimed a resurrection.

But is that *reasonable*? Well, we all bet our lives on something. But for my money, it seems like a very insecure bet indeed—the idea that quite a large group of disciples would have been involved in a conspiracy like this, claim that they had in fact seen Him alive, and then were willing to die for what they knew was a hoax. Every one of the early disciples, except for John, died a martyr’s death, for the simple reason they would not recant what they knew was true, that “Christ is risen.”

A second witness I would like us to consider regarding this “Truth that will not die” is the existence of the Church itself. In every age, there have been aggressive programs to repress the Church of Christ, from outright violence such is found still today in places like Pakistan, India, Egypt, Nigeria today. Throughout history, political repressions that followed totalitarian revolutions, from the right and from the left, have tried to silence the witness of the Church. Hitler’s Third Reich co-opted much of the Lutheran Church of Germany in the 30’s, yet Bonhoeffer’s and Barth’s Confessing Church stood strong against facism. When the right wing dictatorship in El Salvador in the 1970’s tried to silence the Church’s voice of Jesus’ lifting up the poor and powerless, and Bishop Oscar Romero was gunned down while celebrating Mass in the capital city, the church’s protest only grew stronger.

From the left, Mao’s Cultural Revolution in China from 1966 through 1976 worked fiercely, through propaganda and imprisonments, to once and for all erase Christianity from the country, the Church went underground in countless house churches, much like the catacombs of ancient Rome. And today, like grass growing through cracks in the sidewalk, Christianity now

thrives and grows in the land where Mao's "Little Red Book" had replaced the Bible.<sup>2</sup> Many other left wing examples of religious repression in our modern times had similar results from Ethiopia to the Soviet Union. Are you aware that there are more people coming to faith in the risen Christ today than in any previous century? And the fastest growing churches in the world are those in the traditionally non-Christian countries of Africa and Asia, where tens of thousands are discovering this "Truth that will not die"--that there is a crucified Savior at loose in the world who is still calling people to come, take up their cross, and follow Him in giving up their lives for the sake of others.

You see the Church has never tried to *explain* the resurrection of Christ; because the fact is, it takes a resurrection to explain the ongoing existence and resilience of the Church in face of efforts to stamp it out.

"Go, make the tomb as secure as you can," Pilate said. Did his voice quiver as he said it? Do you think there may have been a hint of doubt, even as he tried to accommodate the religious leaders? History itself makes us wonder. The empty tomb. The survival of the Church. And finally, let me suggest another phenomenon that should make even the most closed minded skeptic wonder: the reality of Conversion. By Conversion I mean when a very normal person is minding his own business, pursuing his own goals, developing his own scientific and intellectual beliefs, not raised in the Church or having anything that could look like social programming, somehow does an about face and becomes a believer. Some conversions are dramatic, like the Apostle Paul's; most are not. Most are not "Damascus Road" conversions, but more gentle and gradual, as happened to two disillusioned disciples walking home to Emmaus.<sup>3</sup>

History is filled with these kinds of people; their spiritual autobiographies are fascinating to read. The Oxford professor C.S. Lewis, a staunch atheist, talks about his conversion in his book *Surprised by Joy*. Having done everything he could to explode every argument for Christianity, in lectures, research, and his own thinking, he writes, "Finally I was dragged kicking and screaming into the Kingdom of God, the most reluctant convert in all of England."<sup>4</sup>

Then there was the Japanese social reformer and peace activist, Toyohiko Kagawa. Disowned by his family for becoming a Christian, Kagawa was drawn inexorably to Christ who invited men and women into a new way of living by bearing the cross of others in their sufferings. A fresh convert at the age of 21, Kagawa moved into the slums of Kobe where he lived and worked as a missionary and social worker. He wrote his book *Songs from the Slums* that speaks of his own "Walk to Emmaus."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing*, (Washington, D.C., Regenery Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Compare Paul's experience described in Acts 9:1-19 with two others, Luke 24:13-35.

<sup>4</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins), 1952.

<sup>5</sup> Toyohiko Kagawa, *Songs from the Slums* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury), 1935.

Malcolm Muggeridge, the brilliant and iconoclastic British journalist, is another example of an intellectual moving from agnosticism to a passionate belief in the risen Christ. He was the one who brought to light the work of Mother Teresa on the streets of Calcutta. It was observing her work, and listening to her vibrant faith in the risen Christ, that melted his skepticism into a passionate belief he articulates in his book *Jesus Rediscovered*.<sup>6</sup>

Countless stories in every generation of those who have had no family, social, or cultural support for their faith but who, somehow, some way, have been magnetically drawn to the person of Jesus...just like He said would happen: “*And I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself.*” (John 12:32)

Oh, friends, Jesus’ arms are so wide... “all people”. And I want to close by bursting apart this notion that “Easter is for believers.” No! There are obviously believers here; we gather to celebrate what we, in our own way, have discovered. But where it began, you see, Easter was not for Believers; Easter was for Seekers! None of those first disciples were believers. After Friday afternoon, as they nails were pounded through Jesus’ hands and feet, their faith died with Him. They weren’t expecting a resurrection. But something happened. And He “appeared.”

I remember an elder in my former church named Fred Foster. Fred was a film maker who got caught in a career that flowed with way too much alcohol. He wrote a wonderful book about his conversion, entitled *The Up and Outer*.<sup>7</sup> It tells how Jesus “appeared” to him...not visibly but in his being brought to his knees through this addiction that was ruining his family, his career, his life. And when he reached out in desperation, he found another Hand reaching out to clasp his. Fred spent the rest of his life taking up his cross, the cross of the disease called Alcoholism, and using his wounds to heal others. One of those was a man Fred invited into his weekly Bible Study group that met early in the morning in downtown Chicago at one of the bars he used to frequent. Now with a coffee cup in hand instead of his favorite bottle of Scotch, Fred listened to a friend as desperate as he had been only a few years before. The man expressed an interest, but he said to Fred, “But I have no faith!” “That’s OK,” Fred said, “just borrow mine for awhile!”

Do not say, “Because I cannot believe in the resurrection, I cannot be a Christian!” Listen, just start reading the Gospels with one other person, ask God to show you what to do, and when He does, do it. Come hell or high water, do it. And watch your life change, and your faith grow, and watch Jesus “appear” as, one step after another, you get the feeling you are being led. Why will this happen? Because Jesus promised, “*As you do what I command you, count on it: I*

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<sup>6</sup> Malcolm Muggeridge, *Jesus Rediscovered* (New York: Doubleday &Co), 1969.

<sup>7</sup> Fred Foster, *The Up and Outer* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers), 1980.

*will be with you always!”* (Matthew 28:19-20) Alleluia! Amen.