

THE SOLDIER WHO WATCHED HIS TOMB **Matthew 27:62-66**

As a Roman soldier, I am accustomed to receiving orders. I've been commanded to do several difficult tasks. I've been commanded to do many boring jobs. I've been commanded to do a few dangerous operations. But it does not matter. An assignment is an assignment and whatever my commander tells me to do, that is what I must do: without question and without hesitation.

But one of the strangest orders I have ever received was the one that came on the night before the Sabbath during the week of the Passover one year.

Now, the period of the Passover is always an intense time. We get a lot of people coming into Jerusalem from out in the provinces. Sometimes these country folk don't know how to take the big city. And sometimes, the city folk don't know how to take their country cousins. But as soldiers of the army of Rome and as men under the command of the Caesar, we are tasked with keeping the peace no matter what.

Every year, during the season of the Passover, we have a few scuffles. Someone drinks too much and mouths off to somebody else and a fight breaks out. Another person misplaces some of his money; he accuses someone of taking it and we have to intervene. And every year, there are some Jewish zealots who, inspired by the stories of their past, decide they want to try to take on the entire Roman army, one soldier at a time. These can be the worst to deal with because they are fanatical, irrational and unreasonable.

Regardless of the reason or the season, our assignment remains the same: maintain the *pax romana* (the Roman peace).

During this one particular Passover season, the Jews had been especially unruly. Early in the week, the majority had been ready to renounce the Caesar and enthrone one of their own as their new king. He was a carpenter and rabbi from Nazareth in Galilee. His name was Jesus. He was on a watch-list that had been created. This list detailed the dangerous people we needed to look out for. A man identified as Jesus of Nazareth had claimed to raise a man from the dead. The fellow was from the village of Bethany and he went by the name of Lazarus. There were a lot of witnesses to the event and word had spread throughout the land.

(I will tell you that Jesus and this fellow, Lazarus, were reported to have been very good friends. I think it is entirely possible that they staged the whole resurrection thing just to build Jesus' reputation. He had been telling people that he was the Son of their God and that he had been anointed by their God to be the Jews' king. I don't know how they pulled it off but I'm quite certain that this so-called resurrection was a hoax perpetrated for the purpose of making Jesus

look good. So, because he had said he was the king of the Jews, he was on our watch-list. And we had developed intelligence that showed he had been in Jerusalem for the Passover each year for most of the last 30 years or so. So we had been told to keep an eye out for him.)

Anyway, when he came into the city for the Passover, crowds lined the road and created a procession out of his entrance into the city.

He was riding a little donkey, in fact, more of a colt. People lined the roads and cheered as this Jesus and his companions came past. People were stripping branches off of the trees and waving them. Then, when Jesus got close to them, they would spread the branches on the road like some kind of a green carpet. Some of the people danced in front of him while others fell in behind him and followed him. They were chanting things like, "Hosanna to the son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest!"

All of that was incendiary and likely to inflame the Jews. We needed to arrest him and get him off of the streets but we couldn't do so that day when all of the people were cheering for him. We just waited and watched for him to slip-up and give us a reason to pick him up.

But by the end of the week, the masses had become disenchanted with their new king. In fact, some were so frustrated with him that they wanted him executed.

On the Thursday of the Passover Feast, a number of the chief priests of the Jews went into a garden in an olive grove and seized him. It turns out that one of Jesus' own supporters had turned him in.

Once the chief priests had him, they held a quick trial and convicted him for the crime of claiming that, if the temple were torn down, he could rebuild it in three days. That was such an outlandish claim that the High Priest, who was trying this case, asked Jesus if this meant that he was claiming to be the Son of God. Reportedly, Jesus replied, "Yes, it is just as you have said."

With that, the High Priest tore his robes, declared that blasphemy had been committed in his presence and he pronounced him guilty. Then he asked the chief priests what they thought.

"He is guilty," they replied. "And he deserves to die." Then, according to what I was told, they started to scream at him, spit on him, slap his face and double up their fists and punch him.

This went on for the rest of the night. Early in the morning, Friday morning, they brought Jesus to Pilate, our Governor, and told Pilate they wanted him executed. You see, the Jews had their own courts but they could not sentence anyone to death. Only a Roman court could hand down the death-penalty.

So these chief priests brought Jesus to Pilate and they asked him to sentence Jesus to death. Pilate didn't want to do that. He thought that this was really a theological question and not a civil matter. He didn't think someone should be put to death because of a difference of doctrine or belief.

But the chief priests wouldn't hear of it. They would not settle for anything other than for Jesus to be executed.

Do you remember that I said that we were responsible to maintain the *pax romana* no matter what? Well that was not just true for soldiers, it was true for the Governor, too. Old Pilate knew he had to quiet these Jews or he would have a riot on his hands. So, reluctantly, he agreed to have Jesus executed. After all, as their High Priest had said that it would be better for Jesus to die than for the whole nation to be destroyed. "It would be good if one man died for the people," he had said.

So, on Friday morning, Jesus was sentenced. And by Friday evening, he was dead.

And that is really where I come into the story. On Saturday, the chief priests told Pilate that Jesus and his followers had claimed that if he died, he would come back to life. These Jewish leaders wanted Pilate to post a guard at the tomb to make sure Jesus' supporters didn't steal the body and claim that he came back to life. They figured if they could keep the tomb guarded for three full days, that would be enough to quiet the crowds.

Some other soldiers and I were assigned to guard the grave of a dead man.

Pilate had told the chief priests and the Pharisees, "Take a guard and make the tomb as secure as you can." We went to the place where the tomb was located and we sealed the tomb.

The grave in which Jesus was buried was a family tomb belonging to a man from Arimathea by the name of Joseph. None of Joseph's family had yet been buried there so it was a new tomb.

The tomb was carved into solid rock as a kind of cave. When it was being carved, stone benches were fashioned into the walls. It was on these benches that bodies would be laid when they were placed in the tomb. But as I said, Joseph had not yet had occasion to use the tomb for any of his family so it was empty.

After Jesus' body had been placed in the tomb, a large stone had been rolled in front of the doorway opening. A slope had been created with an earthen ramp so that the giant stone would roll across the doorway to the tomb and stop in front of

the doorway. Balanced at the top of the slope, the large stone was kept in place by a smaller rock that was placed as a chock at the base of the stone. Once the body was in the grave, the chock was removed and the great stone was allowed to roll down the slope, blocking the entrance to the grave. The purpose for doing this was to keep animals out so they would not disturb the body. But in this case, the stone would also keep people out: grave robbers, vandals and especially Jesus' supporters who might want to steal the body and claim that he came back to life.

Just to make sure we would know if the large stone had been disturbed, we sealed it. We took a long thread and stuck it to one side of the doorway with sealing wax. We stretched the thread across the stone to the other side of the doorway and secured it there with another drop of sealing wax. And then the High Priest stuck his signet ring into the soft wax to leave an imprint in it. That way, if anyone tried to move the stone to enter the tomb, they would have to break the thread or break the seal and we would know that the stone had been moved.

With all of that, the chief priests left us alone to keep watch and make sure the grave was not disturbed.

The night passed in uneventful boredom. The other soldiers and I talked until very late and then we took turns sleeping.

But just about dawn, we felt the earth start to rumble. There was a violent earthquake and I watched as the stone in front of the tomb began to vibrate. Then I saw what must have been an angel who placed one finger of one hand on the massive stone door and it looked like he pushed it very gently. The stone started to roll slowly...uphill...until it came to rest at the top of the ramp again. Then the angel sat on the stone and just looked at us.

The angel was all dressed in white but he, himself, looked like a bolt of lightening. This was the strangest thing I'd ever seen. And the most awesome. I began to shake with fear and that is really the last thing I remember.

You have heard about people being scared to death. I must have been. I don't know if I passed out or went into a coma but when I woke up, there was the stone at the top of the ramp. There was the angel sitting on top of the stone. But the grave was open and empty. And across the doorway, gently swinging in the breeze, was the thread that had been stretched across the stone: still sealed on both ends. How that angel ever rolled away the stone all by himself, I cannot say. But how he did it without breaking the seal, I'll never know.

Well, when all of us came to, we decided that some of us would have to go back and tell the chief priests what had happened. The rest would stay near the grave and keep an eye on the scene.

Those of us who were going back to report to the chief priests were plenty worried. We figured they wouldn't believe us and that they would file a bad report with our commander. We knew we were in big trouble.

When we got to the temple and told the chief priests and the elders what had happened out at the grave, they huddled and whispered for a while and then called us back in and made a deal with us. They told us that if we would NEVER tell ANYONE ANYTHING about what really happened at the grave, they wouldn't report us. And they told us that if we would say that Jesus' supporters came at night and stole the body, they would pay us handsomely for our trouble.

They had us over a barrel so we agreed. They gave us a lot of money and that is the story we've been telling. That's the story we've all been telling. Until today. And I can't tell that story any more.

I can't tell that story any more because I know it is a lie. I was there. I know what really happened. Jesus' followers did not come and steal his body. At the time, I did not know for sure what happened because I was unconscious. But later, from some of Jesus' supporters, I heard the rest of the story.

After the earthquake, after an angel rolled back the stone, after we went unconscious, Jesus sat up, stood up and walked out of the tomb. And as if that isn't remarkable enough, as he was getting up, his body passed right through the cloths that had been wrapped around his body. Like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon, Jesus passed through the grave clothes and left them behind, undisturbed, looking just like they did when he was in them.

Many of Jesus' followers saw him over the next few weeks. They saw him alive. He had scars in his hands and feet from where he had been nailed to the cross. He had scars on his head from a crown of thorns that had been pushed down into his brow. He had a scar in his side from a spear with which he had been stabbed while he was on the cross. The scars proved it was him and his presence proved he was alive.

One of Jesus' followers explained all of this to me and then pointed out a rich irony. We had been sent to make Jesus' tomb as secure as we knew how. But, in reality, Jesus had made our tombs secure. His disciple told me that if I place my faith in him, Jesus makes my tomb a womb from which I can be born again to live forever.

I'm still pondering all of this but I have concluded a few things. I know that I can no longer lie about what really happened to Jesus' body. His friends did not steal it. Nor did his enemies. No one did. I know that an angel rolled away the stone and I'm told he came back to life.

And I know this: if Jesus really did come back to life, then that really will make my tomb secure. If this is true, I will not need to be afraid to die because my tomb will have one door through which they will carry me and another through which I will rise again, just like he did.

And here is what I believe: if Jesus can make my tomb secure, he can make yours secure, too.

*Because He lives I can face tomorrow;
Because He lives all fear is gone.
Because I know He holds the future,
Life is worth the living just because He lives.*

Is your life worth the living? It certainly could be.

INVITATION: #358:1,3 – “*Because He Lives*”