

Gotcha!!!!

As I was reading over the Easter accounts in preparation for today's message there was one scene in particular which caught my attention. It is something that is mentioned only in Matthew 28; Matthew 28:2 says, "And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it." The angel sat on the stone. He rolled that humongous, sealed stone away from the entrance to Jesus' tomb, and he sat on it. I'll tell you something else as well: that angel was smiling. I can't point to chapter and verse to prove this one, but I know he was smiling.

I thought, what a great picture! What a great and powerful symbolic picture! Do you know what the picture says? I was thinking about this the other day and it came to me: This is God's "**gotcha!**" It's one big exclamation point! It's God saying, "So there!" It's God saying, "What are you going to do about this, devil?" "Let's see you top this one!" "You thought you had the last word, but that last word belongs to Me." "**Gotcha!**"

It seems to me that the main thing about our lives as Christians is pretty well summed up in this one picture. The angel sitting on the stone rolled away from the empty tomb of Jesus is all we need to know. If we could just get this one picture etched into our minds so that it is the first thing we see when we get up in the morning, the thing we see as we go about our days, and the last thing we see before we go to sleep at night, we would be undefeatable, unconquerable, indiscourageable; invincible! It would be pretty much impossible for us to ever have a bad day again.

And, I'm not kidding. April Fool's Day was last week; I'm 100% serious about the truth of this message. It seems to me that we need to live our lives backwards and forwards from this one extraordinary moment in time. This is our birthright and inheritance as those who believe in Jesus as Savior and follow Him as Lord. But what does this look like in practice? What are the implications of the angel of the Lord sitting on stone that he rolled away from Jesus' tomb?

The first implication is that we no longer need to be afraid of death. Death has been defeated and cheated of it's prey. The angel of the Lord is sitting on the stone that he rolled away and he is looking toward and pointing at the empty tomb of Jesus. "See there, death; **Gotcha!**"

Look at I Corinthians 15:19-26: Eugene Peterson in The Message, translates this passage this way: "*If all we get out of Christ is a little*

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inspiration for a few short years, we're a pretty sorry lot. But the truth is that Christ has been raised up, the first in a long legacy of those who are going to leave the cemeteries. There is a nice symmetry in this: Death initially came by a man, and resurrection from death came by a man. Everybody dies in Adam; everybody comes alive in Christ. But we have to wait our turn: Christ is first, then those with him at his Coming, the grand consummation when, after crushing the opposition, he hands over his kingdom to God the Father. He won't let up until the last enemy is down—and the very last enemy is death!"

In I Thessalonians 4:13-18, Peterson translates Paul's words like this: "*And regarding the question, friends, that has come up about what happens to those already dead and buried, we don't want you in the dark any longer. First off, you must not carry on over them like people who have nothing to look forward to, as if the grave were the last word. Since Jesus died and broke loose from the grave, God will most certainly bring back to life those who died in Jesus.*

And then this: We can tell you with complete confidence—we have the Master's word on it—that when the Master comes again to get us, those of us who are still alive will not get a jump on the dead and leave them behind. In actual fact, they'll be ahead of us. The Master himself will give the command. Archangel thunder! God's trumpet blast! He'll come down from heaven and the dead in Christ will rise—they'll go first. Then the rest of us who are still alive at the time will be caught up with them into the clouds to meet the Master. Oh, we'll be walking on air! And then there will be one huge family reunion with the Master. So reassure one another with these words."

The angel sitting on the stone is God's proclamation to death, and what God says is, "Gotcha!"

The first and most obvious message conveyed by the angel sitting on the stone that he rolled away from the empty tomb of Jesus is that death has been defeated; we no longer need to fear death.

A second message conveyed by that triumphant grinning angel is that sin has been forgiven. "*We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*" We have often heard this message and we know it to be true. It is also true that the memory of our sins can be quite painful and a great paralyzing force in our lives. It separates us from God, causes us to be afraid, undermines our ability to move forward, compromises the confidence we need to live for God.

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But once we grasp the connection between the empty tomb and our on-going forgiveness, we can live in freedom. Speaking of the Old Testament priests, who offered daily sacrifices for the forgiveness of the people's sins, Hebrews 7:23-27 say:

"Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest meets our need--one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself."

Notice especially verse 25: "*Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.*" Had He ended at the cross, we could have had our past forgiven, but the first slip up and we would have been right back where we started with no hope for the future. But because of Easter we know He always lives to intercede. The angel sitting upon that tombstone is smiling because Jesus has taken us beyond the devil's reach. "***There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,***" **Romans 8:1.**

The angel on the tombstone reminds us that death has been defeated and sin has been forgiven. A third thing that triumphant angel tells us today is that our spirits have been fortified. Or, maybe I should say "floatified." The image which comes to mind here is that of a cork in a bucket of water. You can push it down under the water, but it won't stay there. It will pop right back to the surface the moment you let it go.

Listen to the words of Paul in II Corinthians 4:5-11. Paul says, "*For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given*

over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body."

"*Jars of clay*" is an interesting and very powerful image, earth with a hole in it; a hard shell with an empty cavity inside, not unlike a tomb. Paul says we "*carry around in our body the death of Jesus.*" Can you hear another "gotcha" coming? "*We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.*"

Yes, we in ourselves are weak. Yes, we have many struggles. Yes, we are often hard pressed, perplexed, persecuted, struck down. But, we are not crushed, not despairing, not abandoned, and not destroyed. Life may push us under, but we pop right back up again. We are resilient. We are real corkers. Why? Because He who has conquered death and sin is alive forever and He lives right here in me, and in everyone of you who has believed that God has raised Him from the dead and confesses Jesus Christ as your Lord. **Alleluia!**

Because the tomb of Jesus is empty, death has been conquered, sin forgiven, and the spirits of believers have been "floatified." There's one more thing I want to share with you this morning, and that is this: our sufferings have been "sanctified." I don't want to mislead you into thinking that believing in the resurrection of Jesus and having Jesus living for us and in us will take away all our pain. As long as we live on this earth and in these earthly bodies there will be pain. We will encounter physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering. But, our sufferings have been sanctified; that means they have a holy purpose.

Paul says in Romans 5:1-5: (again from the Message) "*By entering through faith into what God has always wanted to do for us—set us right with him, make us fit for him—we have it all together with God because of our Master Jesus. And that's not all: We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that he has already thrown open his door to us. We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand—out in the wide open spaces of God's grace and glory, standing tall and shouting our praise. And . . . We continue to shout our praise even when we're hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. In alert expectancy such as this, we're never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary—we can't round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit!*"

In the Natural Church Development approach to healthy churches, the principle identified by Paul in Romans 5 is known as "energy transformation." This principle is seen throughout Holy Week and Easter. The negative energy coming from the Evil One is taken captive and turned for good by Jesus. The crowds yell, "*crucify him!*" and Jesus prays, "*Father forgive them for they know not what they do,*" and God says "gotcha!" The Devil orchestrates the crucifixion of Jesus, and God uses the sufferings and death of the cross as a sacrifice for sin; God says "gotcha!" again. Jesus is sealed in a stone cold tomb with hardened soldiers standing guard. God raises Him from the dead and says "gotcha!"

And, when we allow the risen Christ to live and reign inside our hearts it is the same with us. Every hardship and every suffering is transformed by resurrection power. We are made stronger--not weaker, more patient--not bitter, more loving--not harder. Each hill we are caused to climb conditions us to conquer the next one on the horizon. Each temptation gives us an opportunity to become more holy. Everything the Devil throws at us is transformed as we draw upon the power of the Holy Spirit, and we find ourselves sitting with that angel on the stone and saying to the Evil One: **We gotcha again!**

Because the tomb of Jesus is empty, death has been conquered, sin has been forgiven, the spirits of believers have been "floatified," and our sufferings have been sanctified.

I was at King's restaurant one day last week with Roger Templeton, and after we had eaten, the waitress discreetly left a dessert menu on the table to tempt us to pig out a little further. The menu showed 8 or maybe 12 different choices of Ice cream sundaes, all looking delicious and all brightly punctuated with a cherry on top. They all looked good, but do you know what I thought of? I'm still not kidding. I thought of the angel sitting on that stone, the crowning decoration and exclamation point of Resurrection Morning. Just when the Devil thought he had won, God said, "gotcha!"

I don't know where you stand with all of this this morning, but if you will consider what Jesus Christ as done for you in His death on the cross and Resurrection from the grave, and if you will believe and ask the risen Christ to come into your life as Savior and Lord, you too can have God's peace and power at work in your life. Then God can point at you and say to the evil one: **"I gotcha again."**

The Fourth Street Church of God

2001 Fourth Street
Altoona, PA 16601

942-1007/ 946-4110

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Matthew 28:1-10

Jon R. Neely, Pastor