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Easter Vigil, Year A
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In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

For those of you who may not know me, my name is Bryan Dougan. It is a real honor and privilege to be in this pulpit today since both churches represented here have been my homes since arriving in New Haven to begin seminary in fall 2024. Last year, St Thomas's was my spiritual home, and this year, I have had the privilege to serve as the seminarian intern at St Peter's just up the road in Cheshire.

The Resurrection narratives across the Gospel have some recurring characters: Mary Magdalene and sometimes with companions, at least one angelic messenger, and Simon Peter all make at least one appearance. But in the story we just heard from Matthew's Gospel, we get characters unique to Matthew's Resurrection narrative: the guards.

The guards arrive at the tomb in the verses preceding the resurrection. We heard this at the end of the passion narrative on Sunday. Pilate orders them to stand watch at the tomb at the request of religious leaders, who are concerned the disciples will snatch the body and proclaim the resurrection. They are at the tomb when the Mary Magdelene and the other Mary arrive. They witness the Angel of the Lord's descent to roll away the stone, proclaim the resurrection, and tell the women to share the news with the other disciples. In the passage following our story today, the religious leaders bribe the guards to lie about what happened, a story Matthew tells us remains a dominant story at the time of writing.

When we encounter the guards at the tomb, they are the embodiment of dominant political power. As agents of the Empire, they are charged with enforcing its rule. Keeping watch over the

tomb of an executed political dissident, the guards engage in state surveillance, watching to make sure nothing bad happens.

And then the women arrive at the tomb and any sense of control the guards might have over the situation becomes zero. Another earthquake occurs, the Angel of the Lord then descends, rolls the stone away, sits down on it, and reveals an empty tomb. As the guards look on in shock, the Angel proclaims the good news to the women and instructs them to tell the other disciples. The women leave, where they encounter Jesus, who after being worshipped, reiterates the Angel's instructions. Power belongs to God, not the forces of violence.

The story of the guards in the broader story tells us something about how we encounter the Resurrection. Like Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, and yes, even the guards, we, too, live under Empire. We live in a place that seeks to expand its power globally through military action – both at home as the government snatches up and disappears people and abroad starting new wars. Our public murder also occur on the sides of the road as internet videos of death both here at home and abroad are used to show the public what happens when we challenge state power. And the stories and lies that are told to enforce this narrative are powerful and have ripple effects long after their events.

But Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, the Angel, JESUS – all show us that the empire does not have the last word. The story of the Resurrection is that any Empire will crumble and fall because its stories, its goals – they bring death through sin and injustice. Just like the guards, Empire looks on as we proclaim the Good News of a life and world redeemed by Jesus. After all, the Angel spoke to two Jewish women, two people of a very low status, while the high status and powerful guards looked on. While the guards stood prepared, ready to act violently in the name of Rome, the Angel stunned them, shaking them to their core, as he spoke to two non-Roman women to proclaim the Resurrection.

And with the good news in hand, the Angel's instructions to Mary Magdaelene and the other Mary invite them into a new kind of relationship with God: go and tell the others what has happened and that Jesus will meet them in Galilee. This imperative is about creating and being in relationship with one another and with God. It is not an act of deception, of telling a story to maintain power, but one that offers salvation.

As we continue to navigate the intricacies of living under an Empire that longs for more power and to enact more violence, the Resurrection shows us that being in relationship with God and with others is the ultimate counter to Empire. Even when religion colludes with Empire, and its messages get co-opted, it is imperative to work against things in our lives.

In Easter, we worship a God who knows everything about us, even the number of hairs on our head, as the Empire wants to use its knowledge about us for violence. In the presence of God, Empire has been and will be paralyzed, just like the guards. We remember the story the women told the disciples, not the bribed lies. We tell the world that death no longer has dominion, even as violence rages. We must build our relationships with God and our neighbor, even as Empire wants us to remain isolated. Salvation and life are offered to all, not just a select powerful few.

May we know this Easter season that it is Jesus, not Empire, who has redeemed the world. And in this knowledge, may we, like the women, encounter the Risen Lord. Amen.