

## “No Playing Dead Here!”—Matthew 28:2-4

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “No Playing Dead Here!”, is Matthew 28:2-4 → *Behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men.* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

**P** Christ is risen!

**C** He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

How do you react when you find yourself in a life-threatening situation where there appears to be no escape? Interesting question in light of our presence crisis. The natural human response is to protect your life in some way, even at all costs. The cliché, “fight or flight,” has been used to describe two types of reaction in an effort to save your life. Whether fear of losing your life produces either rational and irrational behavior, the desire for living doesn’t change.

One way of reacting in the midst of a life-threatening situation is to “play possum,” that is, play dead. The concept is rather simple: You remain completely still in hopes that the danger will pass and you can

continue living your life as usual . . . at least that's the hope. What happens if the life-threatening experience has been extremely traumatic, even to the point of rearranging the rest of your life? You can only play dead for so long. At some point you have to face that which you are trying to ignore in fear.

Our text records a life-threatening experience. Maybe you've never interpreted the events connected with Jesus' resurrection from death as being life-threatening but rather life-giving. However, that didn't appear to be the case for the soldiers whom the religious leaders responsible for Jesus' death placed by His tomb to make sure His disciples wouldn't take His body and claim that He rose from the dead (cf. Matthew 27:62-66).

Verse 4 of our text says: *the guards trembled and became like dead men*. What does *became like dead men* mean? Did they faint? Were they paralyzed by fear? Or . . . is it possible they became totally quiet, like "playing dead," because of their fear of dying in the midst of their experience?

At dawn on this particular Sunday morning our text says *there was a great earthquake*. At the very least, a **great** earthquake would certainly get one's attention, if not arouse fear in him. However, the text also reveals something much greater than an earthquake as the source of their fear. Verse 2-3 speak about *an angel of the Lord who descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone which covered the*

entrance to the tomb, *and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow.* It was **for fear of him** that *the guards trembled and became like dead men.*

The sight of heavenly glory brought the fear of death upon all who experienced it. Remember how Jesus' birth was announced by *an angel of the Lord* who *appeared to some shepherds?* Accompanying that angel's appearance was *the glory of the Lord* which *shone around them, and they were filled with great fear* (cf. Luke 2:9). Those who experienced the glory of God also experienced a heightened awareness of their sinfulness (cf. Isaiah 6:1-5) and/or a fear of dying in God's presence (cf. Judges 6:22-23; 13:21-22).

However, there was no playing dead in connection with Jesus' resurrection. While striving to make sure no one could get into the tomb of this dead Man, God miraculously made sure everyone could get into the empty tomb of this **living** Man. The purpose for rolling away the stone by the angel was not so that Jesus could get out. Being true God and true Man, Jesus was not bound by an enclosure of any type (cf. John 20:19,26). It was to reveal an empty tomb so that everyone could get in and know that He was not there, but had risen as He promised (cf. Matthew 28:6).

While these soldiers were present to guard the tomb against the disciples of Jesus stealing His body, they could not guard the tomb

against Jesus Himself. They were helpless against the power of new life given by He Who is the Giver of all life. They must have witnessed this revealing of life because Matthew tells us that later some of them went and reported to the Jewish religious leaders *all that had taken place* that morning (cf. Matthew 28:11). Playing like dead men through it all would have put them in the position of witnessing everything, including the angel rolling the stone from the entrance to the tomb to reveal an **empty tomb** where a dead body once lay. Ultimately those guards could not ignore what was taking place in their lives.

Jesus' resurrection from death reassures everyone that it's all about life, not death. When Jesus spoke to some religious leaders about the bodily resurrection on the Last Day, He told them in Luke 20:38 that *Yahweh is not God of the dead, but of the living, for **all live to Him***. It's all about life, not death. God created human life to live physically perfect in His presence for eternity (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:5). Physical death came as a result of spiritual death when Adam & Eve sinned by disobeying God's command (cf. Genesis 3:1-19). Even Jesus' death on the cross was because of sin for the purpose of giving you life—a new life under the forgiveness of your sins through faith in Him. In the context of speaking about the bodily resurrection on the Last Day, 1 Corinthians 15:21 says: *For as by a man (i.e. Adam) came death, by a man (i.e. Jesus) has come also the resurrection of the dead.*

You yourself know that it's all about life, not death. Your body was built to live and will fight to heal itself, clinging to life. This is why people can recover from surgeries, viruses, diseases, and so forth. From the moment you enter this world it's all about living as you feed and care for your body (cf. Ephesians 5:26) as well as fill your life with activities and relationships. When you encounter a life-threatening situation you naturally want to secure your life by doing everything necessary to either escape the danger or to control it. It's all about life, not death.

But what happens to your living if you cannot control the dangers to your life? What happens to your living if you cannot stop an impending death? Where do you find your confidence for life in the midst of death? There's no playing dead here in an effort to ignore it. At some point you will have to face that which you are trying to ignore in fear. 1 Corinthians 15:22 says: *As in Adam **all** die, so also in Christ shall **all be made alive**.* As a human being it's not over at death.

Since everyone will be resurrected with new glorified bodies, longing to live, where will you spent your life in eternity? Wouldn't it be sad to be raised from death with a new glorified, perfect body only to live in the eternal suffering of hell, rather than live in the perfection of heaven? Even though your sins qualify you for a life of eternity in hell, Jesus' death on the cross assures you of the forgiveness of your sins and His resurrection from death assures you of the gift of eternal life in the *new*

*heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells* (cf. 2 Peter 3:13).

By repentance and faith in His death you die to your sins and are given eternal life as God intended you live it in the first place. Jesus promises in John 5:24 → *Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears My word and believes Him Who sent Me **has eternal life**. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.* There is no playing dead here because it's all about life, now and eternally in the resurrection Jesus Christ!

**P** Christ is risen!

**C** He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

The peace of God, which passes all understanding,  
keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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