

Texts: Romans 8:35-39, Matthew 28:11-15

The resurrection marks a fork in the road, for those who came there, and those, like us, who may imagine being there. The Roman soldiers were the original ones, stationed there at the tomb. By orders from Pontius Pilate, at the request of the Jewish power base, to secure the burial site of Jesus. To seal the tomb tightly so his disciples couldn't sneak in, steal the body, and begin to circulate a rumor that Jesus was indeed raised from the dead.

The guards were the only ones there, at the site. They'd sealed the tomb so no one could infiltrate or abscond with the body without detection. Vigilantly watching. They were there when Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look on Sunday morning. There was an earthquake, Matthew writes. An angel came down from heaven, rolled away the stone, and sat on it; face of lightning, clothes like snow. The guards were so terrorized that they first shook with fear and then "became like dead men". The soldiers were present, in that condition, when the angel spoke to the Marys: "He isn't here, because he's been raised from the dead." "Believe it or not?", is the question, posted at that place, the fork in the road. Posted at many forks along our roads, is the question: believe or not.

When I was in 5th grade, while playing football with some buddies, the football, delivered from a friend's foot, came to me; it was spinning, rapidly, end-over-end. I stepped up for the catch, with both hands. The extreme torque on the ball made it a challenging catch, and I dropped it. One finger on my left hand hurt more than usual. I looked at it; it was crooked, at the joint. Explaining the extra pain. I pushed it back together with my other hand, and tried to keep playing. But it hurt a lot. So much so, that a couple days later, I decided to tell my mom. I didn't yet believe the bone was broken; x-rays proved I was wrong.

I had never experienced a broken bone before. I could have handled the situation much better if I'd known. Maybe if I wasn't shocked, caught off-guard. The guards had never witnessed a resurrection before. They may have handled the situation better if they'd known. If they hadn't been so shocked. The road splits into two distinct directions; believe or not.

Some of the guards went to the chief priests; told them what happened. They knew quite well how to do this, that's what guards are trained to do: go to your superiors, give a full report. They met with their chiefs, were given a bundle of money. "Here's the deal; here's what you'll tell people. You guys blew it; let down your guard. His friends snuck in and snatched the body while you were asleep. And if the governor, Pontius Pilate, catches wind of this, we'll handle it. You've got nothing to worry about." That'll work. They took the money, bought into the alternate facts, and went down that road.

“Who will separate us from Christ’s love? Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?” Down this road, in response to the question posed at the fork; it makes all the difference. All the difference in the world. The women chose that road. Believe.

There will be no separation from God’s love, Paul writes. Constant connection. Nothing beyond its reach. Stretchable. Elastic. At birth, during infancy, through the terrible twos, starting school, into the teenage years, onto adulthood, all the different phases, the different persons we become, the discarded persons we’ve left behind. The never completely finished works in progress we all are. Believe. The whole journey through.

Robin and I visited her aunt, under 24-hour hospice care, the day before her husband’s memorial service, seven days after her husband’s death. She was in her home, her four children and their families, her nieces and nephew, filling her home. She told Robin and I how much she missed her husband, Hugh, but her joy was being surrounded by her family. She knows the way ahead; she will soon be with Hugh. Love here, love there. Even in death, no separation; endless stretching power, proven to reach even life’s most tense and vulnerable points. In life and in death, we belong to God. “In all these things we win an overwhelming victory through the one who loves us.”

The Roman guards had been well-trained, understood their role, knew how to follow commands. It was the track of their lives. While the women had been spending time with Jesus. Saw things, experienced a different way, soaked it all up. Had their imaginations re-worked and stretched wider, being with Jesus. They came by a different route to the tomb, walked away from the tomb in a distinctly different way. Believe.

On this Sunday after Easter, gathering in a church, we’ve walked that “I believe” side at the fork; we’ve been on that road for a while. We encounter the tense and vulnerable points of life differently. When things get rocky, when visibility is blinded, when danger threatens, we trust the love of God will stretch to meet us. We believe. As Easter season cycles around again, or whenever death draws near and shouts its incessant claims of ultimate power, we remember how God’s love always steps up. Nothing can separate us. The Sunday after Easter, here we in worship, at that church on Ajo Way, way out there. The Holy Way. Yes. Mary and Mary stayed on route to and past the tomb, and look now where God’s love in Jesus Christ has carried us: the same holy way. Up from the grave he arose. We believe in the resurrection and the life.

Hebrews 10:39 says: “But we aren’t the sort of people who timidly draw back and end up being destroyed. We’re the sort of people who have faith so that our whole beings are preserved.” Inseparable.

Paul does not say, in Romans 8, that the love of God in Jesus Christ will prevent hardships or fix problems or clean up our messes. It’s so much more profound and boldly truthful. Paul lists major stress points: trouble, distress, harassment, famine, nakedness, danger, sword, and then adds, by the way, we’re put out to death every day, like sheep awaiting slaughter. But, in all these, the love of God will stay with us.

Will not abandon; there's no quit. The stretchable, elastic connection; flexible, unbreakable, bonded for life, extending beyond death. Overwhelming victory will be ours. "So shall our song of triumph ever be: praise to the Crucified for victory. Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim till all the world adore his sacred name."