

The Gospel According to Linus

The Easter Sunday Sermon presented by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers presented April 16th, 2017
at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to Matthew 27:62 – 28:10

Did you recognize that picture of Linus, that beloved little cartoon character in Peanuts? Linus and his security blanket was first introduced in the Peanuts comic strip on [June 1, 1954](#), and was featured throughout the remainder of the strip's run. In *Peanuts*, Linus can be seen carrying the blanket around and sucking his thumb. Storylines involve archrival [Lucy](#) trying to do away with the blanket: disapproval of it from Lucy's unseen [grandmother](#) and also [Snoopy](#), the dog who frequently is trying to take it for himself. Toward the end of the strip's run the security blanket appeared less and less, usually only when a crucial plot point in the strip required it, and it seems that Linus was starting to outgrow it.

In Linus's famous Scripture recitation in [A Charlie Brown Christmas](#), Linus drops the blanket as he says "Fear not!" He then picks it up and carries it offstage after he finishes his recitation, leaving you wondering: has Linus finally conquered his need for security. Clearly Pontius Pilot never did!

"Go," Pilate says to the chief priests. "You have a guard of soldiers. Make the tomb as secure as you can." Security is everyone's concern in the last chapters of the Gospel: Those who arrest Jesus do so with the enhanced security of swords and clubs; in response to the arrest, the disciples flee the garden and desert Jesus, finding their security in the cover of darkness and the swiftness of a runner's pace; Peter swears by an oath that he does not even know Jesus-three denials, all meant to get him out of harm's way; Pilate's wife tries to keep her husband safe by sending Pilate word to "have nothing to do with that righteous man" (27:19). Then, even after Jesus is safely dead, the chief priests know that "you can't be too careful." They need a guard at the tomb, for security. Pilate sends the guards on their way. "Knock yourselves out, boys. Make us all as secure as you can."

If the people who try to sell us things are any indication, security sells and is able to captivate our imagination just as it captivated Pilate's, Peter's and the chief priests'. Everything from tire treads to investment advice is marketed with a thirty-second story line that features a threat to our security and then answers the threat with the product offered for sale. The tire tread commercials are generally set on a dark and stormy night, and generally feature a woman driving a toddler somewhere. It is all too cliché, but what – you want poetry in thirty seconds in a TV ad? What you get instead is all about what kind of tires your loved ones need to get home safe and secure. Everyone is interested in keeping us safe. Cell phones, security systems, taking our shoes off in the airport security line, getting the right medical tests after the age of 50; almost everything can be sold as a way to keep us secure and free from threat.

The trouble is it doesn't always work. Peter decided to distance himself from Jesus for a simple reason: he sought his own safety. It doesn't work for Pilate to wash his hands and declare himself innocent. It doesn't work for the chief priests to secure Jesus in a sealed tomb. All this dabbling with security runs right up against an earthquake. But when you feel the tectonic plates within the earth are shifting beneath your feet, a sturdy tire tread is not much help. Neither is a guard of soldiers, or a playfully imaginative construal of the biblical text.

In response to the earthquake, and to the appearance of an angel who looks like lightning, everyone in the security detail faints dead away from fright. (Apparently nobody said anything about lightning-complexioned angels in boot camp of the security guards at the tomb.) Mary Magdalene and the other Mary do manage to maintain consciousness. To them, the angel says, "Don't you be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you."

It seems that the women take to heart everything that the angel says, except for that part about not being afraid. Matthew says they leave the tomb with fear and great joy. They are joyful, but it does not appear that they feel exactly safe. They are living in a world where the ground is not staying put under their feet and where at least one of the dead has not stayed dead. Neither of these realities would inspire a feeling of security. Both frightened and joyful, the women run to tell the disciples. On the way, they run into Jesus. Jesus, like the angel before him, says to the women, "Do not be afraid". God had not abandoned them.

As the first Christians came to recognize the risen Christ, they experienced boldness and freedom of speech that surprises those of us who read their stories. It is as if their security came from the inside out. They were not afraid of people who scoffed at their claims; not afraid of authorities who ordered them to stop speaking of Jesus; free from what the neighbours thought about them and free from what the established power structure could do to them.

What might this freedom mean for you? How might it change the way you listen to the nightly news? How might it change the way you pass a stranger on the street? How might it change the way you imagine who is against you and who is for you? I'm not saying that no one ever means us harm. Certainly, the first disciples were often in harm's way after their experience of Christ's resurrection. I'm only saying that even when they were threatened, the threat did not own them. It did not define them. They also knew that even after all their mistakes, after all their displays of cowardice and foolishness and fear, Jesus had come back to them. He had gone ahead of them to Galilee, and he had promised to be with them till the close of the age.

Do not be afraid. In Christ, God is not an enemy you need to keep closer than your friends. Do not be afraid. The earth may be shifting beneath your feet, yes, but it is because God is creating a new heaven and a new earth. Do not be afraid for Linus says "fear not!" and he will tell you: "Your life and your security are where they have always been - enfolded in the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Brothers and sisters, Christ is risen! And so are you!"

Let us pray: *Risen Lord Jesus, victorious over death, in compassion for your troubled friends, you appeared in many places that they might dare again to trust. In a world full of so much fear, strengthen us also with signs of your presence. Meet us on the way so that we might be no longer afraid. Free us from everything that would lead us to doubt your love for us and for the world and inspire our witness to the joy and the hope of your resurrection. Amen.*