

Preachers: Audrey & Tim Hollenberg Duffey

Scripture: Matthew 14:14-21

Audrey - The women make their way to the tomb in the morning to anoint the body of Jesus. The last time they saw Jesus, his lifeless body had been removed from the cross and laid in a new tomb. The stone had been rolled in front of the entrance of the tomb sealing the fate of this failed prophet. The Sabbath, arriving before the women could properly attend to Jesus' body, meant they would need to return later.

When they arrive on Easter morning, they not only find the stone rolled away from the entrance of the tomb, but the tomb itself is empty. The only thing to be seen is Jesus' grave cloths lying without their previous inhabitant. Two men in dazzling white clothes proclaim to them that Jesus is not there—he is risen just like he said he would be. He is on the loose. I can almost hear the headlines of the Jerusalem newspapers that morning... Jesus—armed and dangerous.

How else would you explain the disappearance of a man who had just died and is now apparently alive and at large? Someone with this kind of power is to be feared. Especially someone that many believed was the Messianic King they had been waiting for. This new king would overthrow the Roman conquerors in order to reestablish the kingdom of David. But this man is a threat in a different way.

Tim - Jesus is this Messiah but not in order to overthrow the Romans. Jesus is armed and dangerous, but not in the way people expected. Jesus is equipped with the armor of God and a danger to the powers of evil, not some earthly kingdom. This armor of God that Paul speaks about in Ephesians was worn by Christ before Christians were called to take it up. The armor includes the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, shoes that prepare the wearer to proclaim the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit which is the word of God. This is a different kind of armor, an armor for a spiritual battle.

This armor is not what the Roman centurions would have worn to guard the tomb of Jesus. This armor isn't a physical armor meant to protect against flesh and blood. Because if it were, then it would have failed. Flesh and blood succeeded in destroying the physical body of Christ. No, these are spiritual clothes.

Audrey - Christ wore what his Father wore, but in a different way. The prophet Isaiah talks about God girding himself to protect and avenge those in need of justice. He wrote that God “put on righteousness like a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing and wrapped himself in fury as in a mantle” (Isaiah 59:17). When God put on his armor, it was for vengeance against the physical enemies of Israel. Christ puts on his armor, like his heavenly Father, but it is for divine power. It is to go on the offense for truth, justice, righteousness, peace, salvation, and faithfulness using the very word of God. This is the armor of a warrior for peace.

This wearer of God's armor, Jesus, went to a cross. He died. In Revelation, Jesus is called the “Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David”; an image of power and authority. But in the next verse, he is depicted as the lamb that has been slaughtered. The armor Jesus wore did not save his life, but it did put him on the offensive against the powers of evil, and in the end, it did raise him and save us.

Despite all that holy armor, Jesus dies, and they lay him to rest in nothing more than linen cloths for burial. It wasn't the clothing of a warrior but the clothing of death and decay. How

significant then is it when Peter rushes to look inside the tomb and all he sees is linen cloth lying there? Even the clothes of death could not hold this warrior of peace. Yet, it's never been about the physical clothes. The power of Christ comes from nothing he could put on in this world, but a spiritual armor that has been placed on him by God the Father.

Tim - We are always looking for spiritual power amidst physical things. Armor, clothing, physical things which we can see, and make, and buy. We even build large cathedrals to show the grandeur of God's glory here on earth. Many of us watched in horror this last week as the magnificent Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris burned. This historic cathedral filled with beauty and meaning was ravaged by fire. In the aftermath, pictures of the damage showed the interior of the cathedral. While mostly intact, the sanctuary was covered in fallen, charred wood. However, if you look closely at the pictures, at front of the cathedral the cross remained intact. In Notre Dame's burning, we are reminded that even this beautiful earthly display of God's glory is still only a physical symbol; something we make with human hands. Even this structure meant to draw our attention to heavenly things should not be confused with the power of the cross. The power of the cross endures beyond the death of every physical thing. And the power of the Lord's resurrection is beyond our sight. This is a spiritual power over the very forces of death itself.

Jesus' power is not so much in what can be seen as in what is beyond our sight. While we are used to seeing power in clothing from a badge to a fine suit—Jesus' power isn't seen like this. This simple man claims a power in death that is the power of reconciliation. In dying, Jesus restores and reconciles the relationship between God and humankind. This ultimate spiritual power connects humanity to God by removing the barrier of human sin. This power cannot be defeated by worldly means—money, nice clothes, weapons, intelligence, or even friendliness. In putting on the spiritual armor of God, Jesus goes to the cross, and he dies; and yet the spiritual enemy, sin, is defeated. Through his apparent earthly weakness, he defeats a spiritual enemy.

Audrey - The Believers Church Bible Commentary reminds us that we are not fighting a battle against flesh and blood, even though Christians have been confused by that for millennia. This call to take up spiritual armor has been too regularly confused with the call to take up some physical armor for Christ. For some reason, we think that the ultimate enemy is human, followers of some other religion or some other philosophy or people of another color. When we put on the armor of God to go to battle, we are not fighting flesh and blood—rather we are fighting **for** flesh and blood. When we put on the armor of God, we are not fighting people, but fighting for people. Like Jesus, we are not seeking to destroy life but instead to defeat sin and death. We are not seeking to end life. We want people to live into the fullness of life in Christ. This is why we suit up.¹

We are to take on the armor of God so that we can proclaim the gospel of peace. It is a gospel of reconciliation—humanity with God, and humanity to itself. So yes, the armor metaphor might confuse some. We are not responding to a call to do battle against non-believers. Rather, like those who prepare for battle, we are to be offensive in our aggressive pursuit of friends and enemies alike, in order that the reconciling God might restore us all to right relationship.

¹ Believers Church Bible Commentary: Ephesians by Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld

Tim - During the Colombian civil war in the early 2000s, violence erupted that nearly tore the country apart. After noticing one day that guitarists hold their instruments similarly to the way soldiers hold their rifles, musician and composer Cesar Lopez created the *escopetarra*—an electric guitar fashioned from decommissioned weapons. The word *escopetarra* combines the Spanish word for shotgun (*escopeta*) and the word for guitar (*guitarra*). Lopez donates the newly repurposed guitars-from-weapons to other pop stars, so they can promote non-violence in their music. “There is a commitment that comes with owning one,” he explains. “This is not just an exercise in design.”²

Similarly, the armor of God is not just an exercise in design. To put on the whole armor of God, we are committing to the gospel of peace and reconciliation. We do not wear this armor expecting some worldly power. Instead, we wear this armor as a way of saying to the world that we know a power greater than sin and death. We wear this armor into the fray of evil declaring to humanity an opportunity for reconciliation with God and with one another.

Audrey - So today, we send you out into the world bearing the whole armor of God, not in violence or anger or hatred. No, we send you out with the gospel of peace on your lips, for this world knows sin and death all too well. They need to hear a word of peace and love. Christ has defeated sin and death on the cross. We are separated from our loving God no more.

Tim - So, put on the whole armor of God and ready yourself for the proclamation of this truth. Amen.

²--*USA Today*, April 20, 2006. Retrieved from homileticsonline.com