

## **The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier**

### **A Different Way to Walk**

Good morning! I hope everyone is doing well. Tomorrow, is Memorial Day, and while this usually means gathering with family and friends for picnics and parades or a day off from work; it is also common to think of the past and of those who have gone from this world. I suppose that every culture and country has its memorials. The best memorials lift our sights above the mundane affairs of the moment in order to focus our attention upon the highest aspirations and accomplishments of those who have preceded us. When we visit the Lincoln or Jefferson Memorials, it is natural to begin meditating upon the impressive deeds and high values of these forebears. Visits to such places can help stimulate us to embrace more noble and exalted goals.

With varying degrees of pomp and ceremony, countries all over the world observe the ancient tradition known as the changing of the guard. Often it is done simply for tourists, but sometimes it is done to mark something very important to the heart of that nation and people.

Consider one of our traditions. You've probably seen pictures, of the unflinching guard, the sentinel, who guards the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, VA. The Cemetery was opened as a military cemetery in 1864; and the duty to guard the Tomb is performed by dedicated men and women of the 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment, called the Old Guard, it is the oldest active-duty unit in the Army, serving since 1784. This unit annually participates in more than 6,000 ceremonies, an average of 16 per day. **On 2 July, 2020**, the "Old Guard" will have continually served, guarding the site of the Tomb of the Unknowns; 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for 83 years. Day or night, rain or shine – even when the cemetery is closed to visitors.

When the job is done well, it is nearly impossible to discern any movement of the young soldier's head, or weapon. With an average age of only 22, these young, enlisted men and women prepare for months to take a walk at the tomb.

If you want to join this group, you'll have to learn a new way to walk. You pledge to live a different kind of life; one that will not allow drinking, cursing, or conduct that defames the Tomb, the Cemetery or the Army FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE. To walk in the same way as the rest of the humans in Arlington National Cemetery is to give up the privilege of walking with the Old Guard.

When a sentinel comes on duty he walks exactly 21 steps down the black mat behind the Tomb, turns, faces east for 21 seconds, turns and faces north for 21 seconds, then takes 21 steps down the mat and repeats the process. The number 21 symbolizes the highest military honor that can be bestowed, a 21-gun salute.

Strict training ensures that the guard will be unflinching and unwavering in duty, no matter the heat of summer, no matter the driving rains of December, or the freezing snow of February. Their training is incredible and prepares them for the challenges of their mission.

But most importantly, the guard will remain posted, and the steps will remain perfect, even when there is not another soul in sight, when no one is watching to see if the sentinel remains diligent at midnight.

The Sentinel's volunteers for the duty, about 97% of the trainees fail the selection process or opt out of the rigorous training program. Sentinels who successfully complete their training are described as men and women who are dedicated and devoted to their duty, humble and selfless in service, the ultimate perfectionist. The Tomb Guards are considered the elite of the elite.

To miss a single step when it's your turn to guard the tomb is to miss the opportunity to stand with those who've stood before you. To misunderstand the motivation behind your duty is to miss the point entirely. **For this is the point:** inside the Tomb of the Unknowns are men who gave their lives for the freedom we know. Surrounding the Tomb of the Unknowns there are more than a quarter of a million graves of others who gave their lives in service to this country. And around that single cemetery are thousands upon thousands of cemeteries in the United States ... and around the world ... where the bodies are reminders that our freedom isn't free at all. Instead, it came with a fierce and terrible price tag, and such sacrifice is worthy of a 24-hour guard, seven days a week, 12 months out of the year.

The Sentinels do not go through the difficult training for status or reward or promotion. One Sentinel said he considers this duty “an extremely demanding and humbling experience, done out of love and appreciation for what the fallen have done for me,” and; another sentinel states “it is an honor to guard the unknown soldiers who gave everything – they left their families and friends to go into battle, they took up the gauntlet to protect the freedoms of a grateful nation - their loved ones never got to bury them – as the engraving on the Tomb says: “HERE RESTS IN HONORED GLORY AN AMERICAN SOLDIER KNOWN BUT TO GOD,” we stand guard so that our brothers will always be protected and remembered by someone – in their final resting place nothing will harm them – not on [MY] watch.”

The Tomb Guards dedicate themselves to a higher cause representing THE BEST of our nation with TOTAL commitment. Their training is hard, not everyone will step up to the challenge. Their 100% focus and attention could not be sustained by their own strength. They were given all the tools, support and training they needed to succeed.

After His resurrection, Jesus spent his final days preparing his disciples for the work they would be expected to do when He returned to His father. As we heard in the Gospel reading from John 15, Jesus commands us to love one another; to follow His example, to remember that we are chosen by Jesus to accomplish His work; and that He expects us to take up the gauntlet and complete the mission.

To put it simply, the Bible's message is that we're expected to walk in a different way, once we follow Christ. It doesn't matter if a crowd is watching or if no one is watching. It doesn't matter if the watch is pleasant, or difficult. It doesn't matter about the circumstances, the physical, emotional, or even spiritual strain. Walking as a follower of Jesus requires a different step than the rest of the world ... and sometimes, I'm afraid, it requires just as much work as if we were members of the select force that guards the Tomb in Arlington.

Today, is the seventh and final Sunday of Easter and we remember that in Jerusalem, an empty tomb stands unguarded. This tomb represents something greater than our physical freedom. It represents the freedom Jesus Christ won for all mankind through His death on the Cross at Calvary.

The Tomb of the Unknowns represents the men and women who have given their all. These soldiers gave the ultimate sacrifice so others could experience freedom. As we remember the brave men and women who gave their lives so we might live in physical freedom, let's also remember the spiritual freedom we have been given through Jesus' sacrifice.

Memorial Day is a day of remembrance for the nation. We as Christians have been given the Lord's Supper as an opportunity for remembrance. When we partake of the bread and cup, we remember the broken body and blood of the Lord.

In our scripture reading from John 15, verse 13 we are given the ultimate example of Love. Jesus says: There is no greater love than this, to lay down one's life for his friends. Jesus will never command what He does not demonstrate. He calls us to love one another, and He does so, on the basis of the great love He showed for us on the cross.

**The way we walk is seen in how we treat others.** Paul gives us instructions that reflects how we should to walk in a way that's worthy of our calling. We need to walk humbly, with gentleness and patience, bearing each other up, loving people and working hard to keep the unity among believers.

It's pretty simple. When you make an effort to live in a Christ-honoring manner, it immediately affects the people around you.

It's like the foot washing in the upper room.

It's a way of living that goes against the grain.

It shocks people ... all the humility and gentleness.

It's a lifestyle that says you will be the servant, and they will be the served.

A fan once asked Leonard Bernstein, the celebrated orchestra conductor, what was the hardest instrument to play. Without hesitation, Bernstein replied: "Second fiddle. I can always get plenty of first violinists, but to find one who plays second violin with as much enthusiasm or second French horn or second flute, now that's a problem. And yet if no one plays second, we have no harmony." (Source: James S. Hewett, Illustrations Unlimited, Tyndale, 1988, p. 450, Brett Blair, Sermon Illustrations, 1999.)

When a church as the body of Christ is filled with servants who are willing to play second fiddle and put the needs of others before their own, miracles happen and we are walking in the way that Christ expects. **Ephesians 3:20-21** tells us, "Now to Him

who is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think -according to the power that works in you- to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

Jesus has set the standard. Jesus has raised the bar. Jesus has demonstrated a sacrificial love. It is on this basis and in this context that we are called to love.

As a favorite hymn states: “they will know we are Christians by our love ...” be the example.

Choose your steps and the “way you walk” carefully. What an incredible impact you will make.

When a person makes a choice to walk in a Christ-like way; they are honoring Christ.

When we strive to complete His work on earth; in remembrance of Him, we are honoring Christ.

In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus gave us a final command, a new commission: to “Go out, or walk out, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” I looked up the word ‘commission’ and it is ‘the act of entrusting or giving authority to perform a task’. So Jesus is entrusting us with His Good News; with a message that is literally— life or death information.” This is why Paul desperately urges us to obey Jesus’ final orders. It is too important not to.

This reminds me of the many times I have visited Arlington, because my father and grandfather are both buried there. I have observed the changing of the Guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier several times. When I was 15 as a Girl Scout First Class Award recipient, I was honored to lay a wreath, at the Tomb with the color guard. At that time, I was close enough to hear what the soldiers say to each other; with great seriousness, the retiring Sentinel says to the relieving Sentinel coming on-duty, “Post

and orders, remain as directed.” In response, the relieving sentinel says, “Orders acknowledged.”

“Two-thousand years ago on a hillside in Galilee, Jesus gave His orders: ‘Go and tell the world about me.’

His disciples said, ‘Orders acknowledged.’ And for 20 centuries, one generation has said to the next, ‘Orders remain as directed.’ The job of our generation and the next generations is to say, ‘Orders acknowledged’ and to carry them out.

As we go forth, let me encourage you to remember those who have served and made the sacrifice for the freedoms we enjoy today. At the same time, give thanks to God, also, for Jesus Christ, and HIS willingness to serve, His commitment to our spiritual freedom and our eternal salvation. And then, be confident in your daily “faith battles,” knowing that you are equipped by God to be that faithful warrior that makes a difference in the world around you.

"The Battle Hymn of the Republic," 717 verses 3-4-5