

Sermon outline and notes:

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Matthew 28:11-15 “The Day They Tried to Fool Everyone”

Intro. For the first time in my life Easter Sunday is on April 1, commonly known as April Fools’ Day (1956 was the last time). Has someone already played an April Fools’ joke on you today? How about this one. You put a couple of fake bugs on the inside of a lampshade, and when they turn on the light, they see these “bugs.” Most April Fools’ jokes are innocent pranks, but on the first Easter Sunday the same men who plotted to put Jesus to death plotted a hoax to explain away the empty tomb of Jesus. It was far worse than a prank. On closer examination I will show how foolish and gullible people were to believe this hoax.

Even the enemies of Jesus acknowledged that His tomb was empty on that first Easter morning. This means that either Jesus rose from the dead or someone moved His body. At one point Mary Magdalene believed that the gardener may have moved his body (John 20:15). The Jewish Sanhedrin claimed that the disciples had moved His body. What do you believe? The bad thing is people tend to believe whatever fits their preconceived ideas. Those who had already rejected Jesus readily accepted the explanation given by the Sanhedrin, as we see in v.15.

Let’s examine this explanation of the empty tomb to see whether it is a credible explanation for what happened that first Easter morning. If not, we must look for a better explanation. Now I shall begin with:

I. THE REPORT OF THE SOLDIERS

Notice that it says in v.11, “... some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened.” While perhaps most of the guard scattered after this terrifying event that we will talk about, “some” of them came to the chief priests¹ and reported, “all the things that had happened.” We have to look at the context to arrive at what happened that morning according to their own eyewitness testimony. First of all:

A. There Was a Great Earthquake – It says in v.2, “And behold, there was a great earthquake...” At times an earthquake is a manifestation of the presence of God, as when God came down to Mt. Sanai (Ex. 19:18; Ps. 68:8; cf. Isa. 64:1). So when the Son of God rose from the dead, It was a signal that God was present among them and the earth quaked.

B. The Stone Was Rolled Away - We read in the last of v.2, “for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it.” It was a great, round stone that was rolled away from the entrance of the tomb. It was probably rolled in a groove cut for that purpose. As a result, the Roman seal (27:66) was broken by a higher authority. This was not done to let Jesus out (cf. John 20:19) but to let witnesses in to see that the tomb was empty. This enabled the soldiers to report that the body was indeed gone.

¹ That they reported to the chief priests, in charge of the temple, and not directly to Pilate, is not strange; for by saying, "Take a guard," Pilate had temporarily placed these men under the authority and supervision of the chief priests (Hendrikson; see 27:62-66).

C. An Angel Appeared at the Tomb - We read in v.3 regarding this angel of the Lord, “His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow.” Though angels typically would appear in the form of a man, the bright white countenance and clothing clearly indicated this was an angel, a heavenly being.

Now as we compare the other gospel accounts, we must conclude that this took place before the women had arrived at the tomb. It is very likely that the soldiers had left the scene by the time they arrived. Only the soldiers witnessed what is described in vv.2-3, for by the time the women arrived the stone had already been rolled away and the angel was no longer sitting on the stone. Instead, two angels were inside the tomb, who announced that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Notice the immediate response to these events. We read in v.4, “And the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead *men*.” It seems they became unconscious, at least for a while.

You would think that when the soldiers felt the earthquake, saw the stone supernaturally move from the doorway to the tomb, saw the angel, and when they realized that the tomb was empty, surely they would have acknowledged that God was at work. You would think that the soldiers would seek out the disciples of Jesus, and ask how to become a follower of the risen Christ. Instead, notice it says in v.11, “... some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened.” Now that leads to the second scene in our story:

II. THE RESPONSE OF THE RULING COUNCIL

When the chief priest heard what the soldiers had reported, they must have become worried and troubled. They did not want the people to believe what the soldiers had just now reported. Yet when they were confronted with strong evidence that Jesus had in fact risen from the dead, they didn’t even investigate the soldiers’ story. There was no point in it because their minds were made up. They were not about to admit that they had made a terrible mistake, and that Jesus must be the Messiah after all. Instead, they began to plot a cover-up what had just happened.

Now granted, this situation created a big problem for them. They were aware that Jesus had predicted He would rise from the dead. That is why they asked for the guard to be placed at the tomb. Look back at chapter 27, vv. 63-64, “Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise.’ Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night and steal Him away, and say to the people, ‘He has risen from the dead.’ So the last deception will be worse than the first.” So the Jewish leaders and the Roman government had joined forces to help prevent the resurrection story. Instead, they provided more proof that the resurrection of Jesus really had taken place! The sovereign God was really in control of the whole situation. Yet instead of acknowledging their grave error and repenting of their terrible deed, notice what they did:

A. They Agreed on an Alternate Explanation - We read in v.12, “When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together....” They hastily called for another meeting of the ruling council of Israel.² They agreed to do whatever it took to get the guards to report a lie.

² However, plumbers says, “There probably was no formal assembly of the Sanhedrin, any more than 12:14 or 22:15, where the same expression of ‘taking counsel’ is used.... the summoning of the whole body would have

Then they decided in v.13, “Tell them, ‘His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.’”³ To deny the resurrection, they had no other choice but to claim that someone took Christ’s body. The best alternative explanation they could come up with was the disciples had stolen the body. It is not so strange that men who had committed murder now also resort to lying in order to cover up their blunder. Yet, the lie involved the fatal admission that the tomb had been found empty.

Now there was a big problem with this false report. If a soldier slept while on duty as a guard, it typically resulted in punishment by death (see Acts 12:19; 16:27-28). They were being asked to admit a grave failure in their duty. So to succeed in their cover-up of what happened, notice what else they had to do:

B. They Bribed the Guards - We read in the last of v.12, “they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers.” They had to secure the silence and cooperation of the guard. Recently they had offered money to Judas to get him to hand Jesus over to them. That tactic worked then, and so they assumed it would work again. Yet this time they were not dealing with just one man, but with perhaps a dozen guards, who all had to be bribed. They were also asking them to tell a lie that could incriminate them. So it would indeed take “a large sum of money” to buy their silence about the truth, and to get them to report a lie. Yet they were so determined to protect their own position in society, they were willing to pay almost any price. They did not want the people to lose confidence in them as leaders.

This is just a sample of how much corruption there is among ruling authorities. The lust for power, fame and wealth will drive men to do just about anything.

Yet what good is money if you don’t live long enough to spend it? So they not only offered them a lot of money, but also:

C. They Gave Assurances of Protection – They said in v.14, “And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will appease him and make you secure.” Recent events had shown how much control they had over the governor. They were quite confident that they could ensure the protection of the soldiers. The original Greek indicates that their influence over the governor should cause them to be free from anxiety (*amerimnos*).

So here we see that the leaders of Israel simply refused to believe. They even seem incapable of belief. This is called “judicial blindness.” Blindness to the truth is in itself a judgment from God.

We have seen the response of the leaders to the report of the guards. Now, after making their offer, notice with me:

III. THE RESPONSE OF THE SOLDIERS

Now because of the money and the assurances of protection, we read in v.15, “So they took the money and did as they were instructed....” They say, “Every man has his price.” Well,

taken too much time.” Yet MacArthur says the phrase "Had taken counsel" (used in Matt. 12:14; 22:15; 27:1, 7) refers to making a formal resolution.

³ In the Gospel of Nicodemus, there is another twist to the story that is given. Annas and Caiaphas say that the disciples had bribed the soldiers to allow them to take the Body from the tomb (reported by Plummer). Yet MacArthur points out that the disciples couldn't have bribed the soldiers. They didn't have enough money. Judas was the treasurer and he was dead. It is highly unlikely that he turned over the money before he died.

those men certainly did, and their price was high. They decided to accept the bribe rather than seek the truth about Jesus, and accept Him as Savior.

Now what does this show us?

A. The Love of Money Is a Root of Evil - Indeed, 1 Tim. 6:10 says, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil..." They perpetrated a lie for the love of money. They sold their soul to the devil for the love of money.

While we all need money to live, we should be content with what we have, and trust God to provide for our needs. The love of money can lead to other sins like stealing, extortion, dishonest business deals, stinginess, overworking to the neglect of your family, and so forth.

B. Even a Miracle Will Not Produce Believers - The soldiers were confronted with clear evidence of the presence of God. No doubt they had heard reports about the claims of Jesus Christ. Now they had seen an angel, a stone miraculously rolled away, and an empty tomb with no better explanation than that the same man who had been crucified was now alive from the dead! How can you explain their unbelief? Jesus said in Luke 16:31, "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead." That statement was fulfilled in the lives of these soldiers, and in the lives of the leaders of Israel.

Friend, I believe that this story shows that if you persist in unbelief, then you are left with unbelief that will blind you. When we reject the truth, we open ourselves up to believing foolish ideas. How could the soldiers and the leaders of Israel remain in unbelief and spite of the overwhelming evidence that was confronting them? That's because we also tend to become hardened in unbelief. Many of us in this room probably know of someone who seems hardened in unbelief. That's a tragic condition to be in.

IV. THE RESPONSES TO THIS STORY

A. Many Jewish People Believed the Story - We read in the last of v.15, "and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day." Matthew wrote his gospel probably around A.D. 63. So thirty years later the theory that the disciples stole Christ's body was continuing to circulate among the Jewish people. It was a lie which could deceive none but those who were willing to be deceived. Because Jesus was not the kind of Messiah they wanted, many in Israel willingly swallowed the story of the soldiers. The Sadducees among the people did not believe in a resurrection, so they would have easily believed the story. People tend to be gullible. It has been said, "If a lie is repeated often enough, people will believe it." Well, this lie was told repeatedly, and many of the Jewish people were willing to believe it. Even today this false rumor is still being spread in certain circles.

Let's be honest regarding the real reason for unbelief. It is not lack of evidence. It is not due to finding a better alternative to explaining the evidence. This story shows that people tend to believe what they *want* to believe. Belief and unbelief has more to do with the will of a person rather than the intellect in many cases. I believe the real reason for unbelief is an unwillingness to turn from sin. You see, if Jesus did indeed rise from the dead, then He is Lord! Peter said in Acts 2:36, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." If He is Lord, He is to be obeyed. Have you surrendered your life to the risen Lord? True faith involves yielding to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

B. We Should Reject This Story - I want to share with you why this alternative explanation for the empty tomb is not even credible.

Let me first do so by telling you a story that could have happened after the soldiers were bribed. Suppose one of them were working in Jerusalem a few days later and a citizen came up to him and asked if he was on guard at the tomb of Jesus. He admitted that he was. Then the citizen asked if he would tell him what happened, because he had heard that the body of Jesus was missing. The soldier proceeded to give the explanation that was given to him, that the disciples came by night while they were sleeping and stole the body. That Jewish citizen seemed satisfied with the explanation.

Then suppose another citizen asked the same question. He was given the same answer, but this citizen was more inquisitive and less gullible. He asked, "Isn't it true that the Roman guard is never to sleep while on duty, and to do so could mean certain death? I understand that Roman soldiers take turns standing guard during the night watch. You mean at least three of the 12 guards fell asleep at the same time? Not one stayed awake for a three-hour shift? Some sleepers you must be! And even if you did fall asleep, how could you remain asleep while someone broke the seal and moved the heavy stone? And if indeed you remained asleep through all that, how do you know what happened to the body of Jesus? Since you just admitted you were asleep, you could not know what happened, could you? Your explanation for what happened is incredible! No lawyer in a court of law would present a witness to testify of what happened while they were asleep!"⁴

Furthermore, if the disciples stole the body, why did not the Sanhedrin or the Roman governor arrest the disciples, bring them to trial, cross examine them as to the whereabouts of the body, and convict them of grand larceny, tampering with the governor's seal, and grave-robbing? Nothing would have put a swifter end to the report of the resurrection than a body identified as Jesus of Nazareth. There was of course no body to produce.

There's another reason why this story is not credible. From the time of the arrest of Jesus the disciples had shown how fearful they were of the authorities. They fled when Jesus was arrested (26:56). Peter denied even knowing Jesus (26:69-75). The gospel accounts indicated that they hid away behind locked doors the first few days after the death of Jesus. They were in no condition to risk their lives by going to the tomb, slipping past the guards, rolling the stone away as quietly as they could, and somehow steal the body of Jesus before they were detected. Just the sight of the guard would have foiled their plan. Furthermore, John's account indicates that though the body was missing, the grave clothes were still in the tomb (John 20:5-7). If they had stolen the body no doubt they would have taken the linen grave clothes in which the body was wrapped.

Finally, the record shows that the disciples didn't even anticipate a resurrection. Even when the women reported the news of the resurrection, Lk. 24:11 indicates that the news from the women "seemed to them like idle tales." So why would they fake a resurrection they didn't even believe in or anticipate? And why would they be willing to die for what they knew to be a hoax?

So this story, given by the leaders of Israel, was not credible. Don't you believe it for a moment. Since even the enemies of Jesus admitted that the tomb was empty, the best alternative left is this:

⁴ The idea for this approach came from Hendrikson.

C. We Should Embrace the Resurrection of Jesus - The only credible explanation for the empty tomb is the fact that Jesus rose from the dead. It is a far more reasonable explanation. A Roman proverb says, "Great is the truth and it will prevail." In spite of the plot to cover up the truth, the truth of the resurrection of Jesus did prevail. The devoted women believed it. The apostles believed, and most died for their faith. Thousands in Jerusalem believe it (Acts 2:41; 4:4). Down through the centuries millions have believed. I believe that Jesus arose triumphantly. He is my Savior and my Lord. On this very day as many as 1 billion are gathering in churches to confess faith in the risen Christ.

I believe that at least one of the guards or leaders of Israel ended up believing. Why do I say that? How did Matthew know what happened behind the scenes when the soldiers made their report to the ruling authorities? Though this could have been revealed directly by the Holy Spirit, I believe that one of the soldiers or a member of the Sanhedrin did repent and believe in Christ. They could have become Matthew's informant.

Conclusion: What will your response be? Will you join those who prefer to believe a lie? Or will you be one of us who believe that God raised Jesus from the dead as King of kings and Lord of lords. Romans 10:9 says, "if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." Will you trust in Him for salvation, and give your life over to Him as Lord? Isn't that what you want to do deep inside your heart? I can think of no better day to make that decision than on Easter Sunday. Why not do it today! Surrender to His Lordship in trust and faith, and confess Him as Savior.

Sources: William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: Matthew, Vol. 1* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958); Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973); John MacArthur, Jr., *The Resurrection of Jesus Christ: Matthew 27:57-28:15* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1989); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); John Phillips, *Exploring The Gospel of Matthew: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 4:10] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2011); Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew*, reprint, Christian Publishing Co. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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