

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Matthew 28:11-15

INTRODUCTION

Matthew 28:1-11

Let's begin at Matthew 28:1 to pick up the context.

1 Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave.

2 And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it.

3 And his appearance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow.

4 And the guards quaked from fear of him and became like dead men.

5 And the angel answered and said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified.

6 He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying.

7 And go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going ahead of you into Galilee, there you will see Him; behold, I have told you."

8 And they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples.

9 And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him.

10 Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and report to My brothers to leave for Galilee, and there they will see Me."
(Matthew 28:1–10, 2022 LSB)

The tomb in which Jesus was laid was new; it had never been used before (Matthew 27:60, John 19:41). Jesus occupied it for no more than 36 hours, and He did not experience any decay or decomposition (Psalm 16:10). So His tomb was truly an empty hole in the ground, no more spectacular or wondrous than any other hole in the ground. **Come, see the place where He was lying**, the angel said. Come and see that there is nothing to see.

The women then saw the risen Jesus, who gave them a message for His disciples, His brothers: Jesus is risen, and you are to go to Galilee, where you will see Him (Matthew 28:10).

11 Now while they were on their way **[to deliver Jesus' message to His disciples]**, behold, some of the guard came into the city

and reported to the chief priests all that had happened.

(Matthew 28:11, 2022 LSB)

Matthew tells us that the chief priests called the council, the Sanhedrin, together and told them what had happened, and they collectively arrived at a solution.

THE SOLUTION

Matthew 28:12-14

12 And when they had assembled with the elders and took counsel together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers,

13 and said, “You are to say,

‘His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.’

14 “And if this is heard before the governor,

we will win him over and keep you out of trouble.”

(Matthew 28:12–14, 2022 LSB)

The solution, to put it simply, was bribery. They bribed the soldiers to repeat this silly story. This was the first, but not the last, conspiracy theory regarding the empty tomb. We’ll talk about the others in a few minutes.

So, just to review, the Jews had a major problem with Jesus while He was alive. They thought that arranging for His execution at the hands of the Romans would solve their problem. It didn’t solve their problem because they remembered, after He was dead and buried, that He had frequently spoken of rising from the dead on the third day.

So they decided that having Pilate post a guard at the tomb would solve that problem. It didn’t solve that problem because Jesus actually did rise again. The angel didn’t roll away the stone to let Jesus out; anyone who can raise themselves from the dead after crucifixion (John 10:17-18) can manage to open a door. No, the angel rolled away the stone to let the world in so that all could see that Jesus had risen from the dead.

So they decided that bribing the guards to say that the disciples stole Jesus’ body while they were asleep would solve their problem. It didn’t solve their problem because it makes no sense. If they were asleep, how did they know it was the disciples? Did they find a note? “Dear Roman soldiers, dropped by to steal Jesus’ body; you were asleep, didn’t want to wake you.” Dereliction of duty was a serious matter for a Roman soldier. The *minimum* punishment was being beaten. They could have been discharged from the army or even put to death. Whatever bribe they received from the Jews must have made it worth the risk.

Of course, prophecy said that the Messiah would rise from the dead (Psalm 16:10); Jesus frequently

spoke of His own resurrection and even said He would raise Himself (John 10:17-18). The Sanhedrin was fighting the Word of God, which is always a losing proposition.

Matthew writes at the end of the passage that even when he wrote his Gospel, the rumor that the disciples had stolen Jesus' body was still in circulation. Broadly speaking, that would have been between 50 and 70 A.D. A hundred years later, Justin Martyr wrote his book *Dialogue With Trypho*, and he indicates that the rumor was still going around then. It's fascinating that Scripture records the birth of this lie, dates it to the day Jesus rose again, and tells us who came up with it: the leadership of Israel.

In case you didn't know, the empty tomb is only mentioned in the Gospels. The apostles didn't go around preaching that the tomb was empty but that Jesus was raised in power and glory. When Paul wrote First Corinthians, he devoted an entire chapter, First Corinthians 15, to the resurrection of the dead and told his readers that Jesus had appeared to hundreds of people at one time. Some had died by the time Paul wrote that letter, but most were still alive. The resurrection, not the empty tomb, is the heart of the Gospel.

So there is the birth of the **theft theory**: Jesus was not raised from the dead. Instead, His disciples stole His body and lied. The theft theory was in circulation one hundred years later; it's still suggested today. It was the first theory to explain the empty tomb, but not the last.

How do we answer the theft theory? We point out that if the disciples knowingly lied about Jesus' resurrection, then it means they went on to suffer persecution for decades, most of them ultimately dying as martyrs for what they knew was a lie. It also means that none of them let the cat out of the bag and told the truth. You know, church history tells us that Thomas may have ended up preaching Christ in India, Matthew and Simon the Zealot in Ethiopia and then Persia, and Bartholomew in Armenia and Mesopotamia. Are we really to think that these men all suffered and died for what they knew to be a lie?

There are other theories of the empty tomb.

THEORIES OF THE EMPTY TOMB

The swoon theory says that Jesus did not die on the cross but merely fainted or swooned. They *thought* He was dead when they took His body down, but He was just unconscious.

How do we answer the swoon theory? We look to Scripture. John 19:31-33 says that the Jews asked that the three executed men have their legs broken so that they would be dead before the Sabbath. Jesus was already dead, so they didn't break His legs, but a soldier pierced His side with a spear, **and immediately blood and water came out**, indicating that He had already been dead a while. Mark 15:42-45 says that Pilate was surprised when Joseph asked for Jesus' body and called a centurion who verified that Jesus was dead. Beyond this, Roman soldiers fought wars and executed criminals. They were experts in death. They wouldn't have gotten it wrong.

The wrong tomb theory says that the followers of Jesus went to the wrong tomb, leading them to conclude that He had risen. The women were blinded by grief and so rattled and confused that they went to the wrong tomb.

How do we answer the wrong tomb theory? For one thing, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary observed the tomb when Joseph buried Jesus (Matthew 27:61). For another thing, it would mean that the disciples also went to the wrong tomb, probably repeatedly (John 20:1-9). Practically speaking, that's not really how grief works. In my years of pastoral ministry, I've only known two people to be so utterly shattered by grief that they were virtually paralyzed for days. One was a young bride whose husband of a few months died in his sleep. The other was a mother whose toddler got into prescription medication and died. These women loved Jesus as their teacher and master but just didn't have the kind of relationship with Him that would have paralyzed them with grief. And, of course, practically speaking, if the women went to the wrong tomb, the Jews and Romans would have quickly gone to the right tomb and dragged out Jesus' corpse, and Christianity would have been dead before it started.

The hallucination theory says that everyone who *thought* they saw Jesus in a glorified, resurrected state merely hallucinated it.

How do we answer the hallucination theory?

First, from a biblical point of view, we know that none of the disciples were eager to believe that He had been raised. The women were coming to finish preparing Him for burial, not to greet Him after He rose (Mark 16:1). Peter and John ran to see the empty tomb, and while John believed, Peter evidently remained unsure (John 20:3-9). Even when they saw Him in the upper room later that evening, they thought they were seeing a ghost – a hallucination, as it were (Luke 24:36-39). Thomas was not present the first time Jesus appeared to them, and he refused to believe them unless he could touch Jesus' wounds (John 20:24-28).

Second, also from a biblical point of view, Jesus was observed having physical interactions with the world. The women fell and clung to His feet (Matthew 28:9). Thomas had the opportunity to touch Jesus' wounds (John 20:24-28). Jesus walked and talked and broke bread with two disciples (Luke 24:15-30). He ate a piece of broiled fish (Luke 24:41-43). He built a fire and cooked breakfast for His disciples (John 21:9-10).

From a practical point of view, mass hysteria involves common psychological and emotional experiences which may be dramatic, but not common physical encounters as we see with Jesus. The testimony of the Gospels is not that hundreds of people became convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead, but that hundreds of people saw and interacted with the resurrected Jesus.

The spiritual resurrection theory says that Jesus was not raised physically but spiritually.

How do we answer the spiritual resurrection theory? Simply enough, we point out all the physical things Jesus did following His resurrection. We also point out that the very word *resurrection* is meaningless if it does not involve the body that was crucified. The definition of *anastasis* is “the change of state from being dead to being alive.”

And, of course, some say it’s all mythology, that the church invented these stories for various nefarious purposes.

How do we answer the “the Gospel was invented by The Church”? As a matter of practice, whenever someone implies that the early church was “The Church,” feel free to roll your eyes. “The Church” as a religious-political entity didn’t exist for almost 1,000 years. Early Christianity was decidedly primitive, organic, and relational. The idea that the Gospels and the story of Jesus are a massive conspiracy is itself a conspiracy, but not a very bright one. The church described in the books of Acts is not a massive, organized hierarchy but a simple family. The preaching of the apostles was not designed to bring devotees into an elaborate system, but rather, “Here is the story of Jesus Christ – believe in Him, repent of your sins, be saved, and join us in fellowship.”

BRINGING IT HOME

Beloved, our Lord Jesus Christ was crucified, buried, and raised from the dead in victory and glory on the third day. These are historical facts. Most people deny them, but that doesn’t make them any less true. Faith in Jesus Christ, including faith in His crucifixion and resurrection, is based solely on *Scripture*.

That being said, since God is the One True God and He works in all of His creation, human history bears out the *testimony* of Scripture. This is why every conspiracy theory about the empty tomb fails for one reason or another.

