

The Lie that Proves the Resurrection

Scripture: Matthew 28:11–15

Code: 2403

INTRODUCTION

Matthew 28:11-15 says, "Behold, some of the watch [Roman guard] came into the city, and showed unto the chief priests all the things that were done. And when they were assembled with the elders, and had taken counsel, they gave much money unto the soldiers, saying, Say ye, His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept. And if this come to the governor's ears, we will persuade him, and secure you. So they took the money, and did as they were taught; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day." That narrative describes bribery and the perpetration of a lie about the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

G. B. Hardy wrote a book about destiny (Countdown: A Time to Choose [Chicago: Moody, 1971]). In it he asked two important questions: "1. Has anyone cheated death and proved it? 2. Is it available to me?" (p. 32). He found the answers to his questions in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

A. Rejecting the Resurrection

Jesus Christ defeated death, and He made a way for you and me to defeat it as well. There is no hope of heaven, of eternal blessing and joy, without the resurrection of Christ. But in spite of that, most people reject it. To do so, for whatever reason, is to commit spiritual suicide. Such people forfeit all hope of a future in heaven. Their souls are damned to an eternal hell without God. Not only do they lose future blessing, but also the meaning and value of the present. If the future holds no meaning, how can the present have any meaning?

To deny the hope of eternal life is to oppose humanity's innate desire for immortality. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says that God has set eternity in the heart of every man and woman. Something inside man reaches out for immortality--he is not satisfied with life on a temporal level only. The myriad religions and philosophies throughout history reflect that desire. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the key to that desire. Jesus said, "Because I live, ye shall live also" (John 14:19). He also said, "I am the resurrection, and the life; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die" (John 11:25-26). The Bible tells us that if Christ did not rise, no one has any hope. But He did, so we have hope for eternal life (1 Cor. 15:17-20). Yet men continue to reject that hope.

B. Explaining the Resurrection

Throughout the years many theories have been proposed to explain away the truth of the resurrection. Let me relate some of them.

1. The swoon theory

a) Discussed

Those who hold to this theory believe that Christ never died. They claim He went into a coma because of shock from a great loss of blood, plus the trauma His body endured on the cross. When He was removed from the cross and laid in the tomb, the aroma of the spices and the coolness of the tomb supposedly revived Him. It is then asserted that He somehow came out of the grave, and the disciples assumed He had been resurrected.

b) Disproved

(1) The testimony of the witnesses

(a) The preparers

All the early records are emphatic that Jesus was dead. The women, Joseph of Arimathea, and Nicodemus must have known whether He was dead when they carefully wrapped His body in linen and anointed Him. They certainly would have noticed any sign of life considering the care with which they handled His body.

(b) The soldiers

The Romans were expert executioners--they knew when someone was dead. They didn't break Jesus' legs because it was obvious that He was already dead. When they rammed a spear into His side, and blood and water came out, they knew for sure He was dead.

(2) The severity of the injuries

If the swoon theory is to be believed, Jesus would have had to survive a severe beating and a loss of blood, a crucifixion with a further loss of blood, and a mortal spear wound in His side. He would have had to survive entombment with over seventy pounds of spices on His already weakened body. He would have had to survive three days with no food or water. Then He would have had to wake up in the dark tomb without any medical assistance, move the stone, and walk out of the tomb. Once He was outside, He would have had to overpower the entire Roman guard, and then walk seven miles to Emmaus on feet that had been pierced with nails!

2. The no-burial theory

a) Discussed

Those who believe this theory claim that Christ was never put in the tomb, so obviously He wasn't there on Sunday. His followers thought He would be in the tomb. When He wasn't there, they thought He had been raised. This theory suggests that Christ's body was thrown into a pit with the bodies of other criminals.

b) Disproved

There is no evidence to support that any of those events took place. Why would the Jewish leaders seal the tomb and post a Roman guard if Christ's body had been thrown in a pit? They could have disproved the resurrection simply by retrieving His body from the pit and producing it as evidence.

3. The hallucination theory

a) Discussed

Those who support this theory say Christ's followers only thought they saw Jesus, because they wanted to see Him so badly. They argue that the disciples were so excited in their anticipation of the resurrection, they experienced a hallucination.

b) Disproved

But how could 500 people (1 Cor. 15:6) have had the same hallucination at the same time? Since Christ's closest followers didn't expect a resurrection, where did they acquire the strong desire that caused them to hallucinate? And the question still remains: Even if they did hallucinate, what happened to Christ's body?

4. The telepathy theory

a) Discussed

Some have suggested that there was no physical resurrection, but that God sent mental images into the minds of Christ's followers.

b) Disproved

That theory makes God a deceiver and the apostles liars. If it were true, the two disciples going from Jerusalem to Emmaus walked seven miles, carrying on a conversation with an image. Later they ate with that same image. However, Christianity is not founded on deception.

5. The séance theory

a) Discussed

This theory states that some medium conjured up the spirit of the dead Jesus through occultic power.

b) Disproved

How could Christ's followers have touched Him and held His feet if He were just a spirit? In Luke 24:39 Jesus says, "Handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have." How could Jesus have eaten if he were just a spirit? (cf. Luke 24:40-43). And once again, where is the body? Why was the tomb empty if Jesus' appearances were nothing more than some projection by a medium?

6. The mistaken-identity theory

a) Discussed

Some claim that someone impersonated Jesus to fake the resurrection.

b) Disproved

If we assume that, the impostor must have crucified himself to produce the wounds in his hands and feet, and stabbed himself to produce his punctured side. However, that's an unreasonably high price to pay for faking something. How can you explain the post-resurrection miracles if He were an impostor? How can you explain His walking through walls, routing the fish in the Sea of Galilee to the disciples' net, appearing and vanishing at will, and ascending into heaven in full view of the apostles? No impersonator can do that. Besides, the disciples knew Jesus too well to be fooled. And then again we ask, where was the body?

7. The deluded-woman theory

The nineteenth century French scholar Ernest Renan attempted to debunk the resurrection of Jesus Christ by claiming it was based on the testimony of an eccentric, delirious, frightened woman named Mary Magdalene. He implied said that since she had been possessed by seven demons (Luke 8:2), she merely imagined that she saw the resurrected Christ (The Life of Jesus [N.Y.: Carleton, 1886], p. 357).

But he must have forgotten there were over 500 witnesses. He forgot the ten separate appearances of Christ recorded in the gospels. And he doesn't explain what happened to the body of Christ. If the Jewish leaders had produced His body, they would have stopped all apostolic preaching of the resurrection. Any theory that denies the resurrection must explain what happened to the body.

8. The theft theory

The theory that the disciples stole Christ's body was adopted by the Jewish leaders (Matt. 28:11-15). This is the only theory that makes any sense because it's the only one that attempts to deal with the absence of Christ's body. The Jewish leaders wouldn't have taken Christ's body because they had

no reason to fake a resurrection. The Romans wouldn't have taken it because they weren't interested. Only the friends of Jesus had a reason for stealing Christ's body.

Matthew concluded his narrative on the resurrection of Christ with the lie perpetrated by the Jewish leaders. But why did Matthew decide to end on a negative note? Why didn't he conclude his account like John did, giving us testimony of the witnesses affirming the resurrection? I see two things: First, he wanted to demonstrate that the apostasy of the Jewish leaders was final. They denied the resurrection just as they did everything about Jesus Christ. Second, the testimony of Christ's enemies is the best testimony to the reality of His resurrection. We would expect His followers to attest to His resurrection, but not His enemies. And this unexpected incident involving His enemies is a marked and significant proof of the resurrection. The narrative itself is a compelling apologetic.

I. THE PLOT (vv. 11-15a)

As we approach the text, we need to remember the context (see pp. xx- xx; xx-xx). It was now Sunday morning--the third day since Jesus was placed in the tomb. As a group of women approached the tomb, an earthquake occurred. When they arrived, they discovered that the stone covering the entrance of the tomb had been rolled away. Sitting on the stone was an angel in white garments sent from God. His descent from heaven was the cause of the earthquake. The angel announced to the women that Christ was no longer in the grave--that He was alive. They looked in the tomb and discovered he was right. Then they left to inform the disciples. While they were walking along the road, the risen Christ met them and spoke to them.

Matthew 28:4 tells us what happened to the Roman soldiers when they saw the angel: "For fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men." They felt the earthquake and saw the stone moved away. Then they saw the angel, and their fear of him caused them to faint.

A. The Report of the Soldiers (v. 11)

"Now when they [the women] were going, behold, some of the watch came into the city, and showed unto the chief priests all the things that were done."

1. Their decision

In verse 10 the risen Christ says to the women, "Be not afraid; go tell my brethren that they go into Galilee, and there shall they see me." As the women were going to find the disciples, some of the guard came into the city. We don't know precisely when the guard came out of their coma and went into the city, but it was around the time the women went to fulfill Christ's command.

Matthew said that some--not all--of the guard went into the city to report what happened to the chief priests. Perhaps as many as a dozen went, while some remained by the grave. It might be that some of them were too frightened to admit they had lost the body they were supposed to be guarding. They were aware of the Roman law stating that if a soldier fails in his duty, he pays with his life.

2. Their duty

The soldiers had a duty to report back to the chief priests. They didn't report to Pilate because he had given the chief priests authority over them. Matthew 27:62-66 reminds us that "the chief priests and Pharisees came together unto Pilate, saying, Sir, we remember that that deceiver said, while he was yet alive, After three days I will rise again. Command, therefore, that the sepulcher be made sure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night, and steal him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead; so the last error shall be worse than the first. Pilate said unto them, Ye have a watch; go your way, make it as sure as ye can. So they went, and made the sepulcher sure, sealing the stone, and setting a watch." At that time the Jewish leaders took charge of the soldiers and set the guard. They would have warned the guard that the disciples might try to steal the body because Christ claimed He would rise on the third day. So the guard would have been alert, anticipating an appearance by the disciples.

3. Their description

Matthew 28:11 says that the guard "showed unto the chief priests all the things that were done." That means they told them about the earthquake, about the stone being rolled away, and the arrival of the angel.

I believe the Jewish leaders were the first to hear second-hand about the resurrection--even before the disciples. But they didn't believe. Two days previous they mockingly said, "Let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him" (Matt. 27:42). And here was something greater--He came out of the grave. But they didn't believe; they didn't even investigate the soldiers' story. They were so resistant, so blind, so sinful, and so locked into their own religious system that they would not investigate the report. They refused to believe. Second Corinthians 4:4 tells us why: "The god of this world [Satan] hath blinded the minds of them who believe not." The news brought shock and fear, but it did not bring repentance and faith. The religious leaders were without excuse. They were informed about the resurrection, yet they didn't bother to investigate its validity. They did do one thing--determine a way to prevent others from hearing about it.

B. The Reaction of the Leaders (vv. 12-14)

1. Convening the Sanhedrin (v. 12a)

"When they were assembled with the elders."

That phrase is used frequently in Matthew to refer to an official meeting of the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of elders in Israel. They convened immediately to deal with the supernatural events that occurred at the grave of Christ. If the leaders allowed the people to believe Jesus was alive, they would have had a worse situation on their hands than ever before (Matt. 27:64). They feared the whole nation would follow Christ. So they decided to lie about the resurrection.

2. Passing a resolution (vv. 12b-14)

a) Its purpose (v. 12b)

"Had taken counsel."

That phrase (used in Matt. 12:14; 22:15; 27:1, 7) refers to making a formal resolution. At this official convening of the Sanhedrin, the elders passed a formal resolution regarding how they would handle the disappearance of Jesus' body from the tomb.

b) Its essence (vv. 12c-14)

(1) Bribery (v. 12c)

"They gave much money [Gk., arguria, "silver money"] unto the soldiers."

The rulers bought off Judas Iscariot for thirty pieces of silver, but they had to pay much more to the soldiers. After all, there may have been a dozen of them. And they might have given more than just thirty pieces per soldier. But it didn't matter--the leaders were willing to pay any price to perpetrate their lie about the resurrection. What they could not afford was letting the people think Jesus had risen from the dead.

(2) Deception (v. 13)

"Say ye, His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept."

The soldiers knew that wasn't the truth--that's not what they reported. But the Jewish leaders bribed them to lie about the resurrection. Since the grave was empty, the only theory that made sense was the disciples stole the body.

(3) Protection (v. 14)

"If this [the story that the soldiers were sleeping when the disciples stole the body] come to the governor's [Pilate's] ears, we will persuade him, and secure you."

The Greek phrase translated "persuade him, and secure you" literally means, "satisfy him and make you without anxiety." The soldiers were afraid that if Pilate heard that the body was stolen while they slept, they would be court-martialed and executed. So the Sanhedrin assured that they would take care of things if Pilate found out. By now they were experts at coercing the cowardly governor. So that was the resolution voted on and passed in the Sanhedrin. Therein lies Matthew's final testimony to the apostasy of Israel's leaders. The greatest miracle Jesus ever performed was His own resurrection from the dead, yet the rulers were interested only in denying it.

C. The Response of the Soldiers (v. 15a)

"So they took the money, and did as they were taught."

The soldiers did as they had been instructed: they proclaimed the lie. Even to this day the prevalent theory against the resurrection is this "theft theory."

II. THE PROPAGATION (v. 15b)

"This saying [Gk., logos] 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. The soldiers knew the truth. They had been at the tomb and experienced the phenomena of the resurrection to some degree, yet they were not believers. To the contrary they become preachers of an anti-gospel. And their lie still exists today.

The narrative regarding the lie concludes in Matthew 28:15. But if we stop there we will miss Matthew's reason for including it. The lie perpetrated by the Jewish leaders supplies convincing proof of the reality of the resurrection. It accomplishes the opposite of what it was intended to accomplish. Most importantly, it is evidence given not by Jesus' friends, but by His enemies.

A. Proof of the Resurrection from Christ's Friends

1. Their unanimity

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all tell us about the physical resurrection of Christ. Their testimony includes the following facts: the stone was moved, Christ's grave clothes remained in perfect order, there was an earthquake, holy angels gave testimony about the reality of the resurrection, and there were ten separate appearances of Jesus after His resurrection. He appeared (1) to Mary Magdalene (John 20:14); (2) to the other women (Matt. 28:9); (3) to Peter (Luke 24:34; 1 Cor. 15:5); (4) to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-32); (5) to ten of the disciples in the upper room (John 20:19-24); (6) to the eleven disciples, including Thomas, eight days later (John 20:26-29); (7) to seven disciples in Galilee (John 21); (8) to the five hundred (1 Cor. 15:6); (9) to James (1 Cor. 15:7); and (10) to the eleven on the Mount of Olives as He ascended into heaven (Acts 1:1-9). Now that's convincing testimony--so much so that Acts 1:3 says, "He showed himself alive after his passion by many infallible truths." It is even more convincing when we realize that at one time, the disciples didn't expect there would be a resurrection. However, they were soon convinced, and were unanimous and unwavering in their testimony.

2. Their transformation

Luke 24:11 says that when the women reported to the disciples that Jesus was alive, "their words seemed to them as idle tales." John 20:9 says, "As yet they knew not the Scripture, that he must rise again from the dead." They weren't anticipating a resurrection. What transformed the disciples, who didn't expect a resurrection, from being the cowardly, spiritually dull pessimists that they were into heroes who fully believed in it? How could this group of men, who ran in fear from the Jewish leaders when Jesus was taken captive, run in courage to the same leaders and proclaim the resurrection? When the religious leaders told them to stop, Peter said, "We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). On another occasion he said, "We must obey God rather than men!" (Acts 5:29, NIV). So what changed them? Prior to the resurrection Peter ran in fear denying his association with Jesus. Then on the Day of Pentecost he preached the gospel before thousands of people, indicting them for crucifying and killing their Lord (Acts 2:23; 3:14-15).

By what power were they transformed? It wasn't the power of their speech. They were not trained orators and masters of eloquence and logic. What made the difference in their lives? The reality of the resurrection (Acts 4:13). They believed it because of the evidence. They had a compelling, powerful faith that caused them to die for the truth of the resurrection.

B. Proof of the Resurrection from Christ's Enemies

1. The importance of their explanation

It was impossible for the Jewish leaders and Roman soldiers to deny that Christ left the grave by supernatural means. They saw the evidence. If His body were still in the grave, they would have produced it and proven that the resurrection was a hoax. But the tomb was empty. The earthquake and the angel proved something supernatural had occurred. To deny the resurrection, they had no other choice but to claim that someone took Christ's body.

2. The impossibility of their explanation

a) The cowardice of the disciples

Before the resurrection, the disciples acted like cowards. Shortly before Christ was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, He predicted that all the disciples would forsake Him and flee (Matt. 26:31). The Old Testament prophets predicted it as well (Zech. 13:7). When the entourage of chief priests, religious dignitaries, and Roman soldiers went into the garden, they found Christ with His disciples with Christ (John 18:2-4). As the Lord spoke His name, everyone in the mob was knocked flat on his back (v. 6). At that point the disciples felt invincible. Peter took out his sword--he was prepared to fight (v. 10). He felt secure after what the Lord had just done to the mob. After Peter cut off the ear of the high priest's slave, Christ commanded him to put his sword away (v. 11). He then healed the slave's ear (Luke 22:51), and allowed Himself to be taken captive (John 18:12). As soon as Christ was taken, the disciples panicked and ran (Matt. 26:56). They were afraid. They didn't want to confront the mob--they knew they could lose their lives. Later, while in the courtyard of the high priest, Peter was confronted about his association with Christ. He denied following Him and even knowing Him (Matt. 26:69-75).

If the disciples stole the body, how did they acquire the courage to pursue their plan once they saw the Roman guard at the tomb? These same men did not remain alongside the living Christ when He was taken captive, even after seeing His power on display. How can we believe they would take a stand apart from the comforting presence of Christ against the same people they ran from earlier? We can't! They were hiding out in fear. Peter, the boldest, strongest, and most courageous of the disciples, denied Jesus Christ verbally before even a slave girl! (Matt. 26:69).

(1) They didn't have the means to bribe the soldiers

The disciples couldn't have bribed the soldiers--they didn't have enough money. Matthew 28:12 says the Jewish leaders had to give them much money.

(2) They couldn't sneak past the soldiers

Some believe that a few of the disciples distracted the soldiers while the others went in the tomb and took the body. That means they would have had to be extremely fast. If that were true, then why would they take the time to unwrap all the grave clothes and lay them out carefully in the grave? If speed were an issue, they would have picked up Christ's body and ran out of the tomb as fast as they could. And how could they have rolled the stone from the entrance without the soldiers noticing?

(3) They didn't anticipate a resurrection

The disciples didn't anticipate the need for a resurrection, so why would they fake one? Why would they be willing to die for what they knew to be a hoax?

b) The commitment of the soldiers

It is hard to believe that all the Roman soldiers would have been asleep--they knew better. When Roman soldiers stood guard at night, they divided their time into four watches. A watch would last no more than three hours and no less than two. That's not a long period of time for anyone to stay awake, let alone a trained Roman soldier. After he stood his watch, another soldier would take his place while the others slept. Since they rotated the watch, it's highly unlikely that they all fell asleep at the same time. Furthermore, if a Roman soldier fell asleep while on guard and not fulfill his duty, he would pay with his life. The price was too high for them to risk falling asleep.

c) The bribery from the leaders

Another factor that makes the explanation of the Jewish leaders impossible to believe is that they would not have bribed the soldiers to tell the truth. They gave them a lot of money to lie. People don't bribe people to tell the truth; they bribe them to lie.

d) The lie of the soldiers

In Matthew 28:13 we read that the Sanhedrin told the soldiers to say, "His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept." But how could they know what happened while they were asleep? Could they see the disciples steal the body while they were sleeping? Of course not. If they were asleep, they wouldn't know what happened.

Such explanations are an offense to logic and reason.

By recording the lie perpetrated by the Jewish leaders, Matthew showed us that any explanation other than the resurrection is absurd. The testimony of Scripture is that Jesus rose from the dead. Both the testimony of Christ's friends and enemies support that conclusion.

CONCLUSION

Simon Greenleaf, the famous Harvard professor of law, wrote, "All that Christianity asks of men ... is, that they would be consistent with themselves; that they would treat its evidences as they treat the evidence of other things; and that they would try and judge its actors and witnesses, as they deal with their fellow men, when testifying to human affairs and actions, in human tribunals.... The result, it is confidently believed, will be an undoubting conviction of their integrity, ability, and truth"

(Testimony of the Evangelists, Examined by the Rules of Evidence Administered in Courts of Justice [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965 reprint], p. 46). The assessment of those who have extensively studied the resurrection is that no other historical event is as thoroughly attested to as the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The folly of alternate explanations is merely another demonstration of its reality.

Because He lives, He gives life to all who believe in Him. Romans 10:9-10 says, "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." And salvation is equal to eternal life, deliverance from sin, and hope. Our salvation secures our eternal destiny in the presence of God in the glories of heaven. But it belongs only to those who believe in the resurrection and confess Jesus as Lord, thereby identifying themselves with Him.

How do you respond to the resurrection? There are many who try to explain it away, and in so doing commit spiritual suicide. They kill their hope for the future and the meaning of life in the present. But there are many who believe because the facts are so clear and the evidence is so strong. May you stand in that company.

Focusing on the Facts

1. In a sense, what are people doing when they reject the truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ? Explain.
2. What is the only thing that will fulfill man's innate desire for immortality?
3. Name the different theories that have been proposed to explain away the resurrection. Explain each one.
4. What must any theory that denies the resurrection explain?
5. Why did Matthew conclude his treatment of the resurrection with the lie perpetrated by the Jewish leaders?

6. How many soldiers left Christ's tomb and went into the city?
7. To whom did the guard report? Why (Matt. 27:62-66)?
8. How did the Jewish leaders respond when confronted with the report of the soldiers?
9. What did the Sanhedrin decide to do about the soldiers' report? Explain (Matt. 28:12-14).
10. How did the soldiers respond to the decision of the Sanhedrin (Matt. 28:15)?
11. Cite the ten separate appearances of the resurrected Christ as recorded in Scripture.
12. Describe the changes in Peter following the resurrection and ascension of Christ.
13. Describe the behavior of the disciples at the time Jesus was taken captive in the Garden of Gethsemane?
14. Why couldn't the disciples have stolen Christ's body?
15. How can we be confident that not all of the Roman soldiers would have fallen asleep?
16. How do we know that what the leaders told the soldiers to say was an obvious lie?

Pondering the Principles

1. Read 1 Corinthians 15:12-57. List all the basic truths of the resurrection that the apostle Paul discusses. Which ones have you been familiar with, and which ones had you forgotten? Meditate on the passages that are most meaningful to you. Then thank the Lord for His plan of salvation, which includes your own bodily resurrection.
2. Use this study to formulate your own apologetic on the resurrection. Record the pertinent details from this chapter to answer the question, How do we know that Jesus rose from the dead? Share your work with your pastor and fellow believers. You'll find their comments and suggestions helpful in fine-tuning your apologetic. When you feel prepared, ask God to bring people into your path who need to know the evidence of the resurrection.

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