

## MONEY AND TRUTH

### Matthew 28:11-15

After Jesus' resurrection the Jewish authorities were left with the difficult task of explaining what had happened without admitting the reality of his resurrection and our reading today shows how they attempted to do that. So as we look at this together you can find the main text on page [\*\*\*] of the church bibles or all the relevant verses will be displayed on the screen.

Our reading really rounds off the story of the posting of a guard over Jesus' tomb, which is only recorded in Matthew's gospel. This guard had been set up at the insistence of the Jewish authorities – look at chapter 27 verses 62-66:

“The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. "Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise again.’ So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first." "Take a guard," Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.”  
(Matthew 27:62-66 NIV)

The authorities had set up this guard precisely to prevent any possible theft of Jesus' body. A little bit later, in chapter 28, Matthew tells us that this guard had been nothing more than passive spectators when an angel appeared and Jesus' tomb was opened – look at Matthew 28:2-4: “There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.” (Matthew 28:2-4 NIV).

The guards were paralysed by fear and didn't dare to intervene.

Of course the guards have to own up to what has happened – look at verse 11 of our reading:

“While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened.” (verse 11)

In fact Matthew shows us two groups going to report. The women are going to bring a message of hope and victory for the disciples whilst the guards have a message of failure and confusion for the Jewish elders. The fact that the guards report back to the Jewish elders rather than the governor strongly suggests that they were Jewish guards rather than Roman troops, although, of course, we can't be certain.

In any event, the guards now have to account for the failure of their watch; the very thing they were posted to prevent has happened – Jesus' body has disappeared. The guards are helped in their failure by the Jewish elders need to invent a cover up story – look at verses 12-14:

“When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, "You are to say, ‘His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.”” (verses 12-14)

The Jewish elders who had been in triumph at the crucifixion are now in total disarray. Now that their plan to thwart Jesus' disciples has failed due to God's intervention, the Jewish authorities have concluded it's better to admit that they were outwitted by the disciples rather than to concede the reality of Jesus' resurrection. Their hearts were so stubborn that they still weren't prepared to accept the truth about Jesus – and many people are equally stubborn right up to this very day.

Of course, the guard had been set up with the governor's knowledge and approval, so that if he heard about it he might be expected to treat such failure, even by Jewish guards, as a matter for discipline. Since they were not Pilate's troops, the priests hoped that it might be possible for him to be kept in the dark, but they know their man well enough to be confident that if necessary he can be kept happy with a

further bribe. If these had been his own soldiers it is not likely that he could have been bribed to ignore a capital offense – which falling asleep on guard duty was – but a failure by local troops not directly under Pilate's command wouldn't have concerned him too much.

This cover up story concocted by the Jewish elders enables Matthew to explain what, by the time he was writing his gospel, was the current and widespread charge of grave-robbing by the disciples. This is the probable reason for Matthew including these stories about the guard over Jesus' tomb in his account at all. Look at verse 15:

“So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.” (verse 15)

Justin Martyr (*Dial.* 108), whose comments clearly reflect that he knew of this material in Matthew's gospel, tells us that this story was still being actively promulgated in the middle of the second century AD. In fact this story is still current in Jewish circles, as a counter-measure to Christian preaching of Jesus' resurrection, so it is very important for we Christians to put the record straight. It's incredible that the disciples could actually have stolen Jesus' body. Apart from the guard posted at the tomb, the disciples were all frightened men who ran away at Jesus' arrest and mostly didn't even dare to attend the crucifixion. Only one of them dared to attend the crucifixion. On Easter morning they were all hiding away. It's completely incredible that they could have found the courage to steal Jesus' body. In any event, why should they do such a thing? If their leader were dead their movement would have been finished and I wouldn't be standing here today.

At the same time, the fact that the Jewish authorities had to resort to a lie and invented the fabrication we've been looking at, underlines the fact that the tomb really was empty; even the Jewish authorities couldn't deny that fact. If the Jewish elders had been in possession of Jesus' body, or had known where it was, they would simply have produced it and ended all their problems.

Other explanations for the empty tomb, apart from the theft of Jesus' body by the disciples, have been put forward and I'm just going to mention one or two of these this morning. Firstly, it's been theorised that the women went to the wrong tomb, secondly it's been suggested that Joseph of Arimathea took the body, and thirdly it's been proposed that Jesus never died on the cross he merely swooned. None of these explanations makes sense when we look at them closely.

As regards the first, not much time had passed between the burial and the discovery of the empty tomb, so it's unlikely that the women would have forgotten so quickly. Much more convincingly, as I've already said, the Jewish authorities could simply have produced the body if it still lay in a tomb, and they would have loved to do so.

As regards the second explanation, why would Joseph of Arimathea steal the body and how would he have got past the guard over the tomb. This makes no more sense than supposing that Pontius Pilate stole the body.

The third explanation is totally incredible. To suppose that the detachment of Roman soldiers presiding at the crucifixion would not have been aware whether or not Jesus was dead is unlikely in the extreme. These soldiers would have been well acquainted with death and indeed death by crucifixion (which was a very frequent punishment at the time). Additionally, it is unlikely in the extreme that even a fit man, let alone one who was almost dead, could have rolled away the stone sealing the tomb's entrance from inside that tomb. There would have been very little purchase on the stone from inside the tomb, you wouldn't be able to push against the edges of the stone. Finally, such a half-dead Jesus, no doubt in need of medical care, would never have been able to convince his disciples that he had indeed risen from the dead. Such a Jesus could never have inspired the post-resurrection faith of the disciples.

**BUT** the early church never relied on the empty tomb as the evidence for the resurrection. Their proclamation was that Jesus died for our sins, was raised and appeared to .... [various groups of people] (Acts

2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39-41; 1 Corinthians 15:3-8). The Christian church has never preached the resurrection of Jesus as a spiritual event or a philosophical abstraction, but rather as a physical fact that occurred on a particular day in history nearly 2,000 years ago. Jesus in fact made a large number of appearances that are recorded in the Gospels and other New Testament scriptures:

- To Mary Magdalene (John 20:11, 18)
- To the women (Matthew 28:9-10)
- To Peter (Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5)
- To the disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35)
- To the ten disciples (John 20:19-23)
- To the eleven disciples (John 20:24-29; Luke 24:33-40; Matthew 28:16-20)
- To the eleven disciples in Galilee (John 21:1-23)
- To five hundred followers (1 Corinthians 15:6)
- To James (1 Corinthians 15:7)
- And to the disciples at the Ascension (Luke 24:50-52; Acts 1:3-9)

Even given Jesus' physical appearances, the disciples were often reluctant to accept the resurrection (see Luke 24:11, 25, 38). Take, for example, the reaction of Thomas, commonly called “the doubter” (John 20:24-28). Also, these experiences were not visionary – all the disciples and other witnesses appear to have experienced exactly the same thing!

When we look at it carefully the evidence for the resurrection is completely overwhelming. At Jesus' arrest the disciples ran away like a frightened rabble and hid in Jerusalem. Yet after the resurrection we read of them fearlessly preaching the gospel, braving beatings (2 Corinthians 11:25), floggings (Acts 5:40), arrest (Acts 5:18) and even death (Acts 7:58-60) – and we know that they did actually preach the gospel because within 20 years after the crucifixion Christianity had spread all over the Roman Empire. We also know that they did indeed brave death for their faith, almost all the disciples apart from John died violent deaths on account of their Christian faith. Further when we look at Jesus' family, they were not followers of Jesus before the resurrection (John 7:5), but after the resurrection they became

followers (Acts 1:14) – and indeed James the brother of Jesus became head of the Jerusalem church and was killed as a result.

I submit that nothing could have caused this amazing change in both the disciples and Jesus' family other than a really spectacular happening which gave them a sudden faith in Christ – and what could that happening have been but the resurrection. If they knew that Jesus had suffered death on a Roman cross and had not been raised to new life their confidence in Jesus and their will to follow him and preach in his name would have been totally destroyed.

Christianity is based on faith in Christ and what he has done for us, but this faith is not a blind faith. Our faith is based on the real historical events of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus on particular days in history nearly 2,000 years ago. We have solid evidence for those events. Almost no serious historians doubt that Jesus really lived in the first century AD and that he met his death by crucifixion. Non-Christian writers such as Josephus, Cornelius Tacitus, Julius Africanus and a number of others all testify to this. There is more evidence for the life and death of Jesus than for most contemporary historical figures like Pontius Pilate. Not all historians accept the resurrection, but as we've see there is good solid evidence for its reality.

So the resurrection was real and it was good and life changing news for Jesus' disciples and his family. It's good and life changing news for all of us here today as well. The resurrection means that Christ's power and presence are available to all believers – they're available to us. Christ has all authority and power and he has promised that he will be with us *even to the end of the age*. Isn't that amazing, isn't that wonderful. The heart of our Christian faith, the gospel message, is nothing more than the fact that Jesus willingly sacrificed himself for our sins and that he isn't lying rotting in a cold tomb, but is gloriously risen to new life. That's what we celebrated on Easter Day last week. Yes, Christ's death on the cross is the means by which our sins are forgiven through God's grace, but without the resurrection there is no good news of the gospel. This Eastertide let's worship the Father for

his amazing grace, let's worship Christ for his amazing love and sacrifice for us, let's look forward to a celebration of the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and let us do all these things with a new found confidence in the historical reality of the events which underpin our faith – especially Christ's death and resurrection. It's historical fact, it's real – Christ *is* risen from the dead.