

Easter (April 12, 2020)
O.T. Lesson: Jonah 2:2-9
Epistle: Colossians 3:1-4
Gospel: Matthew 28:1-10
Text: Matthew 28:11-15

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The Common Service: p.15

Theme: "His Disciples Came And Stole Him Away."

Psalm 118

- I. This lie required some unlikely villains.
- II. This lie contradicted some unalterable evidence.
- III. This lie has enjoyed an unsuccessful history.

This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it!

Matthew 28:11-15 After Jesus rose from the dead, an angel of the Lord came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. He didn't roll back the stone to let Jesus out. Jesus was already gone. He rolled back the stone so that the women and everyone else could see that the tomb was empty. Jesus had risen. We are told that the guards stationed there at the tomb were so afraid that they shook and became like dead men. Then we read:

Some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. 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." 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.

Lord God, Heavenly Father, sanctify us by your truth; your word is truth! Amen.

Dear believers in our Savior, who was raised again for our justification;

Modern-day technology has made it an everyday event for TV news reports to be transmitted live from the scene. We've all had our favorite TV shows interrupted by special news reports, live from the scene. We've grown accustomed to seeing a man or a woman reporting where a fatal fire has occurred; or from the scene of an earthquake or hurricane; or in front of the White House, or especially recently from within a crowded hospital.

If twenty-first-century technology had been available in first-century Palestine, the special news reports one spring Sunday morning would have come live from the scene of a graveyard. The single-most important news story in the history of the world happened in that cemetery. Cemeteries are usually pretty quiet places, you say? Not that cemetery, not that Sunday morning, not that grave. Reporters and cameramen would have been jammed around Joseph's garden grave, because the lifeless body buried there late the previous Friday afternoon was gone.

There is, of course, more than one way to account for an empty grave. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John offer an amazing explanation--the true explanation. Matthew also tells how Jesus' enemies tried to explain it, how they tried to explain away the empty grave. Their solution was a lie, and they knew it was a lie when they told it. Still, even their lie preaches a sermon, because it actually reinforces the truth for us. "His Disciples Came And Stole Him Away." That's the lie the leaders bribed the soldiers to tell, the

most believable lie they could come up with. But it's not very believable at that, because: This lie required some unlikely villains. This lie contradicted some unalterable evidence. This lie has enjoyed an unsuccessful history.

Jesus' disciples have been characterized in this way: "The even dozen who followed Jesus from his earliest public ministry in Galilee seemed to have one thing in common despite their varied backgrounds: a reliable dullness that hardly ever failed to misinterpret Jesus' message, and that usually asked him the naive question at the wrong time." That's a terribly unflattering way to describe the disciples, yet it does contain an element of truth. The disciples demonstrated time and again that they didn't understand Jesus' real mission. In spite of the many times Jesus had spoken to them about it, they didn't understand what was going to happen to him on Maundy Thursday, and on Good Friday, and especially on Easter. That is precisely where we find a critical difficulty with the lie the chief priests and the elders devised. To insist that the disciples came during the night and stole Jesus' body requires some highly unlikely villains.

Even though the disciples may not have been very clever, they were basically honest men. The only thief in the group was now dead -- Judas. The farthest thing from their minds was how they could perpetrate a hoax. Nor had the disciples shown themselves to be very brave. On the night before Jesus died, they all agreed with Peter's reckless vow, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." [Matthew 26:35] "See, Lord, here are two swords," they piped up [Luke 22:38], as if prepared to use them. But you know how it turned out. They all ran and hid. Peter, who for a moment had demonstrated some misguided bravery, cutting off the ear of the high priest's servant, soon after was scared off by a servant girl who insisted that he had been with Jesus. Only John was fearless enough to return to watch Jesus die. Yet these disciples were supposed to have come to that grave surrounded by Roman soldiers to try to steal Jesus' body? What nonsense!

Besides that, it is clear that the disciples weren't expecting Jesus to rise from the dead. Whatever hopes they had for the Messiah and his kingdom were crushed when he died. When Jesus had predicted that he would rise on the third day, "They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what 'rising from the dead' meant." [Mark 9:10] When the women hurried away from the empty grave to tell the good news, we are told, "(The disciples) did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense." [Luke 24:11] Remember the pathetic comment of the Emmaus disciples? "We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel." [Luke 24:21] Mark even tells us the embarrassing truth, "Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe." [Mark 16:14] The disciples hadn't wanted Jesus to die. They weren't expecting him to rise. They were unlikely candidates to steal Jesus' body to try to fool people into thinking he had risen. What would those disciples have had to gain by stealing Jesus' body?

It took a true resurrection of Jesus to turn these timid followers into courageous spokesmen who would later testify before councils and kings and who, in most cases, would surrender their lives for what they testified. A man doesn't willingly die for something he knows is a hoax. If you were peddling a lie, if you knew it was a lie, and you knew you were going to die for that lie, you'd give it up, wouldn't you? Myths don't make martyrs. The true resurrection of Jesus Christ alone would make those disciples courageous Christians. The true resurrection of Jesus Christ alone makes us courageous

Christians.

The chief priests' lie simply couldn't hold up under careful scrutiny. Anybody smart enough and persistent enough to check out the evidence would have found that out. Their lie, that "The disciples came during the night and stole him away," contradicted some unalterable evidence.

Even if the disciples had wanted to steal the body of Jesus, they wouldn't have been able to. The chief priests and the Pharisees had asked Pilate to put a watch on the grave, and Pilate told them: "Take a guard....Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." [Matthew 27:65] And they did. A "guard" consisted of at least sixteen soldiers, on three-hour shifts, four at a time through the night. Roman soldiers were literally dressed to kill. They carried with them a six foot spear, a three foot sword, and a large shield. It would have been impossible to catch them all asleep at the same time. Roman soldiers could be executed for sleeping on duty. Besides that there was a huge stone blocking the entrance to the tomb.

But most of all, there was eyewitness testimony, the testimony of the guards themselves. They saw the angel come out of the sky, roll back the stone and sit on it. The angel rolled the stone aside--not to let anybody into the grave or to let anybody out of the grave, but to demonstrate that there was no body there, showing that Jesus had risen. The soldiers knew that there was a body there when they came on duty, but now obviously the body was gone! "The guards were so afraid of (the angel)," Matthew tells us, "That they shook and became like dead men." But after they came to their senses, they "went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened." [Matthew 28:4,11]

Isn't it something? Jesus' enemies were the first to hear the news of the resurrection, and they heard it from reliable witnesses. The chief priests and the elders made no attempt to discredit the guards' testimony. They knew that Roman soldiers didn't sleep on duty, and they knew that soldiers would never make up such a story. They knew what the soldiers said was true. Still the chief priests would not say, "Jesus rose on the third day exactly as he had said he would." On the previous Friday they had said, "Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him." Jesus had now done something far more magnificent and rose from the dead, but still they wouldn't believe in him.

Instead they "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.'"" Did you catch the contradiction in their lie? How could the soldiers testify that the disciples stole the body if they were asleep and didn't see it? If Jesus' enemies wanted to disprove the resurrection, why didn't they simply produce his body? Surely it shouldn't have been that hard to find. The disciples didn't have a car. They didn't even have a horse. They couldn't have gone very far with the body. But Jesus' enemies didn't produce his body. They couldn't. It was gone.

Jesus' enemies are still telling lies which contradict the unalterable evidence of Easter Sunday. Sadly, just as it was twenty centuries ago, those enemies are often inside the visible church. Theologians who call themselves Christians are saying such things as: "The story of the resurrection of Jesus is a myth." "The Easter story cannot be called historical." "A literal resurrection could not have happened." Or try this one: "(The Resurrection) presents a very serious pastoral and teaching problem....We are not

committed to conceive of it as a physical event...(Christian faith) doesn't rest on an assertion that (Jesus) rose physically from the dead."

Jesus' enemies still tell the old lie that he didn't rise physically but that he "rose" in the minds and hearts of his followers. They still tell the old lie that Jesus' preaching and his ministry had such an awesome effect on people that it's as though he still lives through his followers who carry on his work. They still tell the old lie that Jesus "lives" everywhere people truly love each other and try to live as he lived.

Think what those so-called "Christian" theologians are threatening to steal from you and me when they tell their two-thousand-year-old lies! "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins." [I Corinthians 15:17]

Matthew's Gospel says, "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." Yet this lie--that the disciples came and stole away Jesus' dead body--has enjoyed an unsuccessful history. Millions of people don't believe that lie. Why not?

When Christians say they believe in the resurrection of Christ, they aren't basing that claim only upon the empty tomb. They are referring primarily to the fact that Jesus appeared again alive. He appeared to the women leaving the grave. He appeared to Mary Magdalene outside the grave. He appeared to two of the disciples on the way to Emmaus. He appeared to Peter. He appeared to the disciples behind locked doors without Thomas present, and then again a week later with Thomas present. He appeared to seven by the seashore. He appeared to James. He appeared to 500 people at once. He appeared to the Eleven in Galilee. "After his suffering," the book of Acts says, "He showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days." [Acts 1:3] Jesus' first disciples believed because they saw him. John tells us, "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us." [I John 1:3]

What they saw they proclaimed. They didn't say, "we found the tomb empty." They said, "He's alive." Seven weeks after Easter, Peter preached, "God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact." [Acts 2:32] Peter also wrote: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." [I Peter 1:3]

Jesus' enemies tried their hardest to disprove his resurrection, but everything they did--placing a seal on the stone in front of the tomb, placing a guard around the tomb, telling that lie about the disciples--really served only to reinforce the truth--the truth we have in the testimony of those many eye-witnesses--the truth we have in the testimony of God himself--in his holy word which cannot lie. "Christ has indeed been raised from the dead!"

Amen.

May the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will! Amen.