

maintain his position and power by keeping the peace in Jerusalem. Pilate condemned Jesus to die in order to placate the religious leaders and to win favor with his Roman overlords.

After Jesus' death on the cross and his hasty burial in a borrowed tomb, the chief priests convinced Pilate to post a guard at the tomb, saying: *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* (27:63-64). Seeing the logic of their argument, Pilate sealed the tomb and posted guards.

Which brings us to Easter morning. At dawn a violent earthquake shook the ground, breaking the seal. Then an angel of the Lord rolled the stone away. The guards, who witnessed this, *were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men* (28:4). The angel announced to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary that Jesus had risen, just as he said he would and just as the chief priests feared. As the women joyfully made their way to tell the disciples the good news of Christ's Resurrection, the guards fearfully made their way to tell the chief priests the troubling news of Christ's Resurrection.

Matthew records that the guards *went into the city and reported to the chief priest everything that had happened* (28:11). The chief priests and the elders then devised a cover up which involved bribing the guards with a *large sum of money* (28:12) and concocting a crazy story about the disciples stealing the body of Jesus during the night. The guards, facing certain punishment and possibly death for dereliction of duty, eagerly agreed to the chief priests' new plan and accepted their promise of protection. The chief priests, exerting their influence over Pilate, coerced him to back up the ridiculous claim of theft.

It's a crazy cover up, but desperate men do desperate things. Scottish novelist Sir Walter Scott put it best when he said: "O, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive!" The Resurrection conspiracy was overly complicated and involved too many people, but as Matthew reminds us, the co-conspirators still achieved a significant level of success with their cover up: *And this story [the story concocted by the chief priests] has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day* (28:15).

Astonishingly, the idea of the disciples stealing Jesus' body wasn't the only Resurrection cover circulating at the time:

- The Missing Body Theory claimed that someone other than the disciples – perhaps grave robbers – removed Christ's body. This would explain the empty tomb on Easter morning.

- The Swoon Theory claimed that Jesus was not completely dead when he was buried, that he revived sometime over the weekend and that he walked out under his own power. There are documented cases of crucifixion victims fainting from pain, only to revive later. This would explain the bodily Resurrection of Jesus.
- The Drugged-Body Theory claimed that Jesus received a coma-inducing drug in the wine offered to him: when the drug wore off, Jesus revived, and left the tomb. The effects of crucifixion – slowed heartbeat and shallow respiration – can mimic death. This, too, could explain the bodily Resurrection of Jesus.
- The Twin Theory claimed that Jesus had a twin brother or a look-alike who died in his place on the cross. This would explain how someone who physically resembled Jesus died on the cross and how Jesus could then appear alive three days later.
- The Vision Theory claimed that Jesus appeared to his disciples and friends in visions, like dreams, in order to communicate with them. This would explain how Jesus could appear to 500 people, as Paul claims (1 Cor. 15:6).
- The Hypnosis Theory claimed that the disciples hypnotized the crowds into believing that Jesus had risen. This would explain how scores of people claimed to see Jesus after the crucifixion.
- The Spiritual Resurrection Theory claimed that the post-crucifixion appearances of Jesus were spiritual in nature, not physical. This would explain how Jesus appeared in a locked room before the disciples.

Our calling is not only to resist such theories, but to make our witness and testimony to the reality of the Resurrection clear and courageous. If a "cover up" is an attempt to prevent people from discovering the truth, then any of these theories might explain parts of the Resurrection story; but none of them can adequately explain everything that happened on that first Easter morning or in the days that followed.

Scripture presents conclusive evidence that Jesus Christ was in fact resurrected from the dead, that he lived and breathed and ate like any other human being. He was not a ghost, but a flesh and blood man, as attested by those who touched him. Those who buried Jesus attested to his lifelessness on Friday; he was not acting or in a coma or drugged, but truly dead. Nor did Jesus have a stunt double die in his place, because he showed his wounds to the disciples and many others after the Resurrection. Only the truth that Jesus died and rose again can account for all that happened.

Christ's Resurrection is recorded in all four Gospels and the Book of Acts, and from these passages we can gain several additional "proofs" of Christ's Resurrection. First is the dramatic change in the disciples. They went from being a group of frightened and hiding men to being strong and

courageous witnesses sharing the gospel of Jesus throughout the world. The only explanation for this change is that they had seen something they could never have imagined, and which, in spite of their amazement and the mockery they knew they would endure, they felt duty bound to share.

Second is the life of the apostle Paul, who changed from being a persecutor of the church into an apostle for the church when the risen Christ appeared to him on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-6).

A third convincing proof is the empty tomb itself. If Christ were not raised, then where is his body? The disciples and others saw him buried in the tomb and when they returned, his body was not there. Angels declared that he had been raised from the dead as he had promised (28:5-7), and no convincing, rival claim to Christ's whereabouts has stood the test of time.

Fourth, evidence of Christ's Resurrection comes from the many people to whom he appeared (Mt. 28; Mk. 16; Lk. 24; Jn. 20, 21; Acts 1; 1 Cor. 15). Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, the disciples, Paul, and more than 500 others saw the resurrected Jesus; and the more witnesses to an event, the more likely it is to be true.

So why the cover up? Simply stated, guards, the chief priests, and Pilate had much to lose if the Resurrection of Jesus proved true. The lives of the guards were at stake: they could be killed for failing to successfully guard the tomb. The influence of the chief priests was at stake: a resurrected Jesus would discredit them in a hurry, resulting in lost reputations and power. Pilate's position as governor was at stake: if Pilate couldn't keep order in a small province like Palestine, his prospects for career advancement were slim.

But there is more: the very credibility of the Christian gospel is at stake. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul explains in detail the importance of the Resurrection of Christ. Paul explains that it is crucial to understand and believe in Christ's Resurrection because if Christ was not raised from the dead, believers will not be either (12-15); and if Christ was not raised from the dead, His sacrifice for sin was not sufficient (16-19). Jesus' Resurrection proved that His death was accepted by God as the atonement for our sins. If Jesus had simply died and stayed dead, that would indicate His sacrifice was not sufficient. As a result, believers would not be forgiven for their sins, and they would remain dead after they die (16-19) and there would be no such thing as eternal life. But now, asserts Paul, Christ has risen from the dead and *has become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep* (v. 20), assuring that we will follow Him into Resurrection Life.

The chief priests, the guards, and Pilate tried to cover up the truth of Christ's Resurrection because it did not serve their best interests; but the truth of God cannot be hidden for long or coerced for anyone's personal gain. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is most definitely true. Our sins are forgiven. We are redeemed. Eternal life is ours. Praise be to God! Amen.

# The Colossal Easter Cover Up

Easter Sunday, April 5, 2015

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

## ***Matthew 28:11-15***

Forty-three years ago, employees at The Watergate hotel in Washington, D.C. noticed an access door taped open. Three police officers responded and discovered five unauthorized individuals inside the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee. No one ever offered a plausible explanation for why the men were in the DNC office. Whatever their intent, if there had been an honest confession the whole incident might have been treated as a minor crime of political intrigue and quickly forgotten. As it turned out, the attempt to cover up the Watergate break-in led to massive repercussions, leading to the resignation of President Richard Nixon amid talk of impeachment and the indictment, conviction, and sentencing of a number of the President's closest aides.

Throughout history there have been many attempts to cover up human incompetence, immorality, and even crimes. Even the Bible has its share of cover ups. Adam and Eve tried to cover up their disobedience after eating the forbidden fruit. King David tried to cover up the murder of Uriah. Judas Iscariot tried to cover up his duplicity in the arrest and trial of Jesus. But perhaps the biggest biblical cover up surrounds the Resurrection of Jesus.

Easter has the greatest and most powerful message in the world. The Resurrection of Jesus changed lives and the entire course of history. As we might expect, therefore, efforts to discredit the reality of the Resurrection, to cover it up, surfaced immediately after the first Easter. According to Matthew's Gospel, the chief priests, the guards, and Pontius Pilate all conspired together to contain the news of the Resurrection from spreading. Their plan for damage control involved a report (28:11), a hastily devised plot (28:12-13), a bribe (28:12), and a promise of amnesty (28:14).

But let's back up for just a second. Prior to his arrest, Jesus often sparred with the religious leaders, and as his reputation and impact grew, the reputation and impact of the religious authorities declined. This made the religious authorities angry and scared: they risked the loss of livelihood and social standing if this uneducated peasant from Galilee continued to upstage and outwit them. So, they vowed to get rid of Jesus.

Unable to undermine or remove Jesus on their own, they solicited the help of the Romans. Using a trumped up charge of treason, the chief priests convinced the Governor, Pontius Pilate, to question Jesus. Although believing Jesus to be innocent, Pilate was a political animal: he knew he could only