

LUKE 24:1-12

NOT HERE

It's Easter Morning and some women went to Jesus' tomb to finish anointing His body after His crucifixion and burial. It all seems normal, but events are about to unravel with a lot of stuff that's questionable and not explained. I've titled the sermon, "Not Here", because in addition to Jesus' body not being in the tomb there are many other things and explanations that are not in our reading.

When the women get to the tomb the stone has been rolled away with no explanation as to how that happened, which is a discussion for another time. Jesus' body is not here. We'll come back to Him later. Two men in dazzling apparel are here, and they're supposedly angels. They frighten the women and say to the women, "He is not here, but has risen. Remember how He told you, while He was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise" (v's 6-7).

The women had forgotten, or maybe they didn't believe or understand what Jesus had said about rising from the grave after three days. However, others didn't forget. Others who wanted to get rid of Jesus. The chief priests said to Pilate, "We remember how that imposter said, 'After three days I will rise'". So Pilate gave them a guard of soldiers to make the tomb secure (Matthew 27:62-66).

However, the guard of soldiers are not here. Where are they? They had run away. The Gospel of Matthew tells us that "some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers and said, 'Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.'" So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews" (28:11-15).

You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour. God forbids us to tell lies about our neighbours in a court of law or elsewhere, that is to lie about, lie to, or withhold the truth from our neighbour. Here we have the breaking of the Eighth Commandment in a big way. The guards tell the chief priests about all that we have read, the stone being rolled away and the body of Jesus is missing, but the chief priest pay them, bribe them, to spread a lie among the people that the disciples stole the body of Jesus.

The positive side of the Eighth Commandment about not lying tells us to defend our neighbour, to speak up for them and protect them from false accusations, to put the best meaning on everything, that is we should explain

our neighbour's actions in the best possible way. So let's look at this accusation against the disciples, that they stole the body of Jesus, and see what we can say about it in a positive manner.

Paul Maier was a church historian who explained many of the theories as to what happened to Jesus' body. With the help of Paul Maier and others we'll examine a few of those ideas, including the stolen body theory. So, did the disciples steal Jesus' body to maybe protect it from desecration, or to promote the myth that Jesus rose from the dead? Maybe Joseph of Arimathea moved Jesus out of his tomb and gave Jesus a tomb of his own. Or did Pontius Pilate have the guards move the body so that people wouldn't set up a place of worship at that tomb? Those are just some of the ideas out there as to who could've possibly stolen Jesus' body.

Other ideas include that Jesus didn't even really die on the cross. Maybe the wine vinegar that He was given to drink was like an anesthetic and after lying in the tomb for three days wrapped in healing spices He revived. Then Jesus stole the gardener's cloths and crawled off somewhere to try to get better, but then He really died forty days later, and the disciples then told people that He had ascended into heaven.

Others believe it was all an hallucination. They say it was profound wish fulfilment by the masses. Others call it a contagious experience. One person thinks they saw Jesus, and then others were thinking they saw Jesus. Jesus had said that He would rise from the dead, and so they were primed to believe it. These are all various ideas that Paul Maier has collected together that people have come up with to explain the missing body of Jesus.

Now, since we started off by looking at lying, and that we shouldn't tell lies about our neighbours in court or anywhere else, let's turn to a lawyer by the name of Craig Parton and hear how he would try this case of Jesus and His missing body, and supposed resurrection.

Craig says that the eyewitness accounts of Jesus' resurrection had the benefit of circulating amongst hostile witnesses who had every means, motive and opportunity to refute the claim, and they didn't.

Craig says, "the fact is that the evidence for the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is as complete and sound as any fact of the ancient world. A team of experts (including a medical doctor) writing in the American Medical Association Journal, rigorously examined the evidence for the death of Jesus as described in eyewitness accounts. Their conclusion? The crucifixion of Jesus lines up precisely with what we know of first-century Roman practices. Centurions knew their business. The man was dead on the cross and any "defense" that he faked his death on the cross [such as the swoon theory] and then miraculously revived in the tomb" are absurd.

Parton also says that the mass hypnosis theory is utterly untenable and the mass delusion idea is something that occurs only over highly unstable and short periods of time. Jesus' appearances occur to a variety of personalities, over widely varying geographical and physical conditions lasting over a month. Parton then concludes by listing nine other lawyers who investigated the eyewitness testimony of the death and resurrection of Jesus who say it's impressive.

However, let's go back to the stolen body theory, not from a lawyer's point of view, but from that of Paul Maier the church historian. Maier says that "To plan a tricky grave robbery of a closely guarded tomb would have required an incredibly strong incentive by a daring and extremely skilled group of men." He explains that this wouldn't have been done by the disciples who were hiding in fear of the Temple authorities. Maier asks, 'If they did get up the courage how could they have hoped to achieve such a theft and deception?'

Remember, Pilate gave the Pharisees a guard of soldiers. When Peter was arrested, he was guarded by four squads of four men. That's sixteen soldiers outside of a prison to guard one man inside. Sixteen to one, so that they could sleep in shifts. So at least eight would've been awake. The noise and commotion of breaking the seal and rolling the stone away and getting Jesus out would've woken the other eight. Jesus was down to eleven fearful disciples at this point and it doesn't seem reasonable that those eleven men were able to sneak past sixteen soldiers who all fell asleep on the job.

So, the conclusion for today, based on the words of lawyers, and church historians, and the chief priest is that it's a lie that Jesus' body was stolen, and it's truth that Jesus really did die on the cross, and really was resurrected after three days in the tomb.

With the truth of Jesus' resurrection we realize that we have a God who can change the world. He raises the dead! This Jesus of truth has risen and He's here for us now. There's hope for a transformation of our lives. Something new and wonderful is coming for us because we know that God keeps His promises.

Think of all of this along the lines of truth. Jesus said, "If you abide in My word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32). Pontius Pilate asked Jesus "What is truth?" (John 18:38). Jesus' answer earlier was. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). Through the truth of Jesus' death and resurrection to pay for all of your sins, and win for you eternal life, you have salvation and can come to God your Father. Amen.