

Exalting Jesus Christ

"The Resurrection – Part 3"

INTRODUCTION:

- I. Last week in our studies "Exalting Jesus Christ" we played the role of Crime Scene Investigators as we began investigating the empty tomb, and the story of the Lord's resurrection from the dead.
 - A. Today, we want continue our investigation by looking at "Part Three of the Resurrection."
 1. If you recall, last week we did what every Crime Scene Investigator does when they arrive on the scene of a crime. We document the scene by taking notes of everything we saw – paying close attention to every detail.
 2. To do this we examined the record of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, because they detail all the physical evidence discovered at the tomb of Jesus on the morning of His resurrection.
 3. And, here's what we found:
 - a. First, we saw that the detachment of guards Pilate sent to the tomb was now missing.

- (1). If you recall Pilate sent guards to secure and seal the tomb, and to prevent anyone from stealing the body of Jesus.
 - (2). Now, those same men that had been sent to guard the tomb are nowhere to be found.
- b. Second, we saw that the 1½ to 2 ton wheel-like stone door had been moved some distance away from the tomb – not just away from entrance of the tomb, but from the tomb itself – and the place where it was found gave the appearance that someone had lifted the stone door and carried it away from the tomb – according to the Greek reading of John's account.
- (1). We also noticed that whoever moved the stone door also broke the Roman seal that had been placed on the door when the guards "sealed" the tomb.
- c. Third, and perhaps most significant, we saw that the body of Jesus was missing.
- (1). Just an hour or so after Jesus had been crucified, His body was taken by Joseph of Arimathea, who along with Nicodemus, hastily prepared the body for burial before sunset – the beginning of the Sabbath – and then they closed the tomb with the huge stone door.

d. Fourth, we took note of the fact that the tomb was cut or hewn out of solid rock, and that there was only one entrance.

(1). There was no other visible way of getting in or out of the tomb.

e. And finally, inside the tomb we saw the grave cloths were still wrapped in the cocoon-like shape of a body, but the body was missing from inside – almost as if it had somehow evaporated.

(1). We also saw the napkin or handkerchief that had covered the face of the body before burial was now outside this cocoon-like shell of grave cloths, and was folded or rolled up neatly off to the side.

B. And so, with all this in mind, let's begin our investigation to see where all this evidence leads us.

1. To do this we want to answer the following questions:

a. Who guarded the tomb of Jesus?

b. Were they negligent and allowed the body of Jesus to be stolen – perhaps while they slept – or is there some other compelling reason why they desert their post at the tomb?

c. And finally, is there some natural way to explain the disappearance of the body of Jesus, or is the only explanation for the disappearance of His body supernatural?

2. Even though we've been studying the gospel of John during this series of lessons, we're going to take a detour this morning and focus more on what Matthew has to tell us about the empty tomb.
3. So, let's begin our investigation by examining the evidence Matthew provides.

BODY:

- I. To begin, we want to ask some questions about the men that had been assigned to guard the tomb of Jesus.
 - A. More specifically who were they, and what do we know about them?
 1. So to answer those questions let's turn to Matthew's record and see what information he can give us about these men.
 - a. **Matthew 27:62-66** – *On the next day, which followed the Day of Preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees gathered together to Pilate, 63 saying, "Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise.' 64 Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night and steal Him away, and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead.' So the last deception will be worse than the first."*

65 Pilate said to them, "You have a guard; go your way, make it as secure as you know how." 66 So they went and made the tomb secure, sealing the stone and setting the guard.

B. Over the years there's been a lot of debate about Pilate's statement:

"You have a guard; go your way, make it as secure as you know how."

1. The issue is whether those guarding the tomb of Jesus were Jewish Temple police or a detachment of Roman soldiers?
 - a. Actually, it really doesn't matter.
 - b. The training, professionalism, and dedication to duty of Jewish temple police were quite similar to that of career Roman soldiers.
 - c. You can be sure that Jewish temple police would have guarded the tomb of Jesus with the same dedication to duty as a detachment of Roman soldiers.
 - d. Why? Because the last thing the Jewish religious leaders wanted was for someone to steal the body of Jesus and claim He had been resurrected.
2. However, the evidence provided in Matthew's account actually suggests the guard was a detachment of Roman soldiers – perhaps as many as 16 professional, fully armed, combat ready Roman soldiers.

3. Here's why we say this:
 - a. When asked for a guard, Pilate told the Jewish leaders, "*You have a guard; go your way, make it as secure as you know how.*" **(Matthew 27:65)**
 - b. In the Greek, this statement of Pilate is actually in the form of the "present imperative" – which is more accurately translated as, "*Have a guard!*" In other words, Pilate was essentially saying, "have what you want!"
 - (1). In fact, a marginal note in the 1885 *English Revised Version* suggests the phrase could be translated with the imperative, "*take a guard.*"
 - c. Plus, we learned that the Greek word for "guard" is "koustoodian," which, according to the Greek lexicons we read, means "a guard of Roman soldiers."
4. So, it's pretty clear that the men posted to guard the tomb would have been anywhere from 4 to 16 highly trained, fully armed, combat ready, Roman soldiers.

II. Still not convinced that these were Roman guards?

- A. Then let's take a closer look Matthew's record where he gives us a clue to help identify who these men were.

1. Every law enforcement officer is familiar with something known as the "Chain of Custody."
 - a. The "Chain of Custody" is record of every authorized person who takes possession of physical evidence at any given time, and who is therefore responsible for maintaining the security and the integrity of that physical evidence.
 2. So, let's follow the "Chain of Custody" concerning the body of Jesus.
 3. I think this will help explain why the guard was so worried about Pilate hearing of the disappearance of the body of Jesus.
- B. Since the Roman governor Pilate had ordered the crucifixion of Jesus, and Roman soldiers carried out that order, this tells us the body of Jesus was initially under the custody of Rome.
1. However, that changes:
 - a. **Matthew 27:57-58** – *As evening approached, Joseph, a rich man from Arimathea who was one of Jesus' followers, went to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. And Pilate issued an order to release it to him.*
 2. When Pilate issued an order to give the body of Jesus to Joseph of Arimathea, Pilate transferred custody of the body from Rome to Joseph.

- a. **Matthew 27:59-61** – *Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a long linen cloth. He placed it in his own new tomb, which had been carved out of the rock. Then he rolled a great stone across the entrance as he left. Both Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting nearby watching.*
3. However, it seems the Jewish authorities were concerned about Pilate transferring custody of the body of Jesus to Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple of Jesus.
 - a. **Matthew 27:63-64** – *They told him, "Sir, we remember what that deceiver once said while he was still alive: 'After three days I will be raised from the dead.' 64 So we request that you seal the tomb until the third day. This will prevent his disciples from coming and stealing his body and then telling everyone he came back to life! If that happens, we'll be worse off than we were at first."*
 - b. These religious leaders wanted Pilate to retake custody of the body of Jesus, and place it under the protective custody of Rome until three days had passed.
 - c. In three days, they could open the tomb, produce the body, and prove beyond any doubt Jesus had not been resurrected from the dead and was, therefore, a false Messiah.

4. So, Pilate regained custody of the body of Jesus by placing the tomb under the protection of soldiers, and by placing a seal on the tomb that signified the tomb and its contents were now the property of Rome.
 - a. **Matthew 27:65-66** – *Pilate replied, "Take guards and secure it the best you can." 66 So they sealed the tomb and posted guards to protect it.*
- C. However, before we assume the body of Jesus is now safely under the protective custody of Rome, we need to remember that, according to Matthew's record, the body of Jesus had lain in an unguarded tomb throughout the previous night – Passover.
1. If someone wanted to steal the body of Jesus that would have been the perfect time.
 - a. They could have slipped in under the cover of darkness, rolled back the stone door, and taken the body.
 - b. No one would have been there to stop them.
 2. But, don't you think Pilate would have been aware of that fact as well? The Jewish leaders were certainly aware the body had been unprotected overnight.

3. Therefore, when Pilate reassumed custody of the body of Jesus it meant he and his guards were taking full responsibility for the body.
 - a. If anything happened to the body of Jesus while it was under the protective custody of Rome, Pilate and his guards would be held responsible.
 - b. So, the guard was ordered to go to the tomb where Jesus was buried and "secure" and "seal" that tomb, and guard the tomb for the next three days to prevent anyone from stealing the body.
- D. Knowing all this, let me now ask you an important question.
 1. If you were the captain of the guard sent to secure and seal the tomb, and you knew the tomb had been left unguarded overnight, what's the first thing you would do after arriving at the tomb?
 - a. If you were in charge of the detachment ordered to secure the tomb and protect the body of Jesus from theft, and you also knew failure to do so would be punishable by death, what's the first thing you would do after arriving at the tomb?
 2. You would make absolutely certain that the body of Jesus was still there, wouldn't you?

- a. Before you "sealed" the tomb, you would open the tomb, go inside, and verify that the body was still there, neatly wrapped in its grave cloths.
 - b. And after you verified the body was still there, then – and only then –you would "secure" the tomb, and "seal" it.
3. And so, Matthew tells us: **Matthew 27:66** – *"So they went and made the tomb secure, sealing the stone and setting the guard."*
- a. By the way, *Strong's Expanded Greek-Hebrew Dictionary* says the word "seal" means, "to stamp (with a signet or private mark) for security or preservation..." like this clay seal from the Roman era.
 - b. So, to seal the tomb those guards would have stretched cords across the entrance of the tomb, embedding each end in sealing clay, and then "stamp" the clay with "a signet or private mark... for security or preservation."
4. In performing this act, those who sealed the tomb were signifying two things:
- a. First, this seal would have verified and authenticated the contents of the tomb. In other words, the seal verified that the body of Jesus was inside the tomb at the time they sealed the tomb and posted the guard.

4. So if you were Pilate, and you didn't want to give the Jewish leaders any possible chance to accuse you before Caesar for being derelict in your duty, who would you choose to guard the tomb?
 - a. The answer is rather obvious. You would choose your best men to guard the tomb.
- III. So, what do we know about the men who would have been chosen to guard the tomb of Jesus?
- A. To answer that, we need to consult Roman military historical documents.
 1. Roman military policies and procedures say a detachment of guards would have been no fewer than 4 and up to as many as 16 men.
 - a. And when we consider the importance of guarding the tomb of Jesus, it is likely this was a detachment of 16 Roman guards.
 2. If this were a detachment of 16 men, they would be divided into four watches of four men each, and each watch would have been six hours long.

- a. Guards on watch were never permitted to sleep, under penalty of death.
 - b. However, a detachment that would be guarding the tomb of Jesus over the period of several days would allow only some of the guards to take turns sleeping in 6 hour shifts
 - c. However, the only guards that would be permitted to sleep would be those who were not on watch – which also means the guards in this detachment would never be permitted to all sleep at the same time.
3. Of the 16 soldiers that would have made up this detachment:
- a. The first group of men was "on watch" and guarding the tomb for the next six-hours.
 - b. The second group would be the men who had just finished their watch, and who would be relaxing, making preparations to sleep.
 - c. A third group would be permitted to sleep. But according to regulations, they were allowed to sleep only six hours, and must sleep in a semi-circle around whatever they were guarding with their heads in and their feet out, and with their weapons at their side, ready to respond at the first sound of trouble.

- d. And the fourth group of four men would have just been awakened and would be preparing themselves to assume their watch in six hours.
 4. So, if this detachment was made up of 16 men, at any given time, 12 guards were awake and 4 would be sleeping – but even the 4 who were allowed to sleep were prepared to immediately spring into action if needed to defend their post.
- B. But how do we know those men who were actually on watch at that time didn't accidently fall asleep?
1. Roman regulations stated if even one man fell asleep while on watch, the entire detachment would be summarily executed for dereliction of duty.
 - a. They would be executed on the spot with no trial, no judge, no attorneys, and certainly no plea bargaining.
 2. You can be sure that those who were not on watch would make absolutely sure that those who were on watch stayed wide awake!
Everyone's lives depended on it!
- C. However, some still ask; "If these were Roman guards, why did they go to the chief priests with the story that Jesus had been resurrected – why not go to Pilate?"

1. To answer that question, let's take a look at the dialogue between some of the guard and the chief priests and elders after the resurrection of Jesus.
2. **Matthew 28:11-15** – ... *behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened. When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, saying, "Tell them, 'His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.' And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will appease him and make you secure." So they took the money and did as they were instructed; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day.*
3. First, notice that only "some of the guard" came to the chief priests to tell the story of the resurrection – not "all the guard."
 - a. Since these guards were facing execution for allowing the body of Jesus to go missing, "some of the guard" came to the chief priests hoping they could help.
 - b. I assume the rest of the guard was no doubt getting out of town as quickly as they could.

4. Also notice that the chief priests bribed these men to say the disciple had stolen the body, and then promised to "appease" Pilate and make them "secure."
 - a. Men who were facing death for failing to perform their duty as guards would do anything to get the chief priests to "appease" Pilate – even if it meant lying about the disciples stealing the body. These were desperate men!
5. And finally, if these were Temple police why would they fear Pilate?
 - a. Temple police served under the authority of the chief priests, not the Roman governor.
 - b. Besides, do you really think Pilate would have trusted this job to Temple police in the first place?
6. If nothing else, just plain commonsense tells us the guards who were posted to guard the tomb of Jesus were Roman guards.

IV. The last question we need to consider in our investigation of the empty tomb is this: What happened to the body of Jesus?

- A. The story that was already being circulated, according to Matthew, was the disciples stole the body of Jesus.

1. Could that be true, or could the body have been taken by someone else?
 2. And if the body was taken by someone else, who were they and what was their motive?
- B. So, to answer this question, let's do three things:
1. Let's identify who would be the most likely suspects who might want to steal the body?
 2. Then let's determine possible motives for stealing the body.
 3. And finally, let's find out how anyone could take the body of Jesus while the tomb was being guarded?
- C. The first group of possible suspects are the disciples of Jesus – in fact, they have been specifically accused of stealing the body.
1. But upon further examination, this seems highly unlikely – and there are at least three reasons why.
 - a. First, immediately after Jesus was arrested, the disciples all fled for their lives – perhaps fearing they would also be arrested. **(Matthew 26:56; Mark 14:50-52)**
 - (1). In fact, Peter even denied the Lord three times:
(Matthew 26:69-75; Mark 14:66-72; Luke 22:54-62; John 18:15-18, 25-27)

- b. Second, the disciples apparently weren't expecting Jesus to be resurrected from the dead, because when the women came to tell them that Jesus had appeared to them, the disciples didn't believe them. **(Mark 16:1-12; Luke 24:8-12)**
 - c. Third, after learning about the resurrection of Jesus, the disciples locked themselves behind closed doors because they feared the Jewish leaders! **(John 20:19-20)**
2. So, it's highly unlikely that a group of men who deserted Jesus, denied knowing Jesus, didn't initially believe He had been resurrected, and who were hiding behind closed doors would somehow have the courage or the motive to steal the body of Jesus.
3. Nor would they have the opportunity or the ability to steal the body away from a detachment of highly trained, fully armed, combat-ready Roman soldiers who were guarding the tomb with their lives.
- D. The second group of likely suspects is the Jewish religious authorities.
- 1. Perhaps they moved the body of Jesus to safeguard it and prevent it from being stolen.
 - 2. But that doesn't make any sense.
 - a. They were the ones who demanded that Pilate regain custody of the body and safeguard it so the disciples couldn't steal it,

and then claim Jesus had been resurrected. **(Matthew 27:62-66)**

- b. The religious authorities wanted the body of Jesus to stay right where it was, so that in three days they could open the tomb and produce the body of Jesus.
 - c. And, if the Jewish authorities actually had the body of Jesus, why didn't they produce it on the day of Pentecost when the apostles claimed Jesus had been resurrected from the dead?
- E. It's also highly unlikely that any of the other possible suspects would have stolen the body.
- 1. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus certainly had no motive to steal the body of Jesus.
 - a. They were the ones who prepared the body for burial and closed the tomb by rolling a large stone door in front of the entrance.
 - b. Besides, if they stole the body of Jesus, then whose body was in the tomb when the soldiers came to "secure" and "seal" the tomb?
 - 2. Pilate certainly had no motive to take the body of Jesus.

- a. He was just as concerned as the Jewish leaders that rumors of a resurrected Jesus would disrupt the peace and security of Jerusalem.
 - b. So, he ordered the body and the tomb of Jesus to be placed under the protective custody of Rome until three days had passed.
 - c. Furthermore, if he had taken the body of Jesus, why didn't he produce it when word that Jesus had been resurrected swept across the city of Jerusalem on that first Sunday?
- F. So... where does all this leave us?
1. It simply means we have no suspects and no motive. Nor was it even possible to steal the body out of a well-guarded tomb!
 2. And with no suspects, no motive, and no opportunity to steal the body of Jesus, we have no choice but to conclude there is no natural explanation for the empty tomb.
 3. And that leaves us with only one possible alternative – there must be a supernatural explanation for the empty tomb.
- G. And yet, even though there is no evidence to support the claim that the body of Jesus was stolen, skeptics have come up with some rather elaborate theories to explain the empty tomb.

1. And so, in our next lesson, we'll take a look at those theories, and see how each theory collapses under the weight of plain, simple logic and reason.

CONCLUSION:

- I. I realize most, if not all, of us believe Jesus was resurrected from the dead.
 - A. But at times, even the faith of those who have been Christians for years needs to be strengthened.
 1. I've always believed that those who drift away from the Lord have, somewhere along the way, lost confidence in the story of Jesus.
 2. And I've always believed that those who never obey the gospel of Christ have never had confidence in the story of Jesus.
 - B. Could that be you?
 1. Do you really believe the gospel – the good news about Jesus?
 - a. Could it be you've never had confidence in the gospel until now?
 - (1). And now you're beginning to see all the evidence that proves Jesus was the Son of God and realize you need to surrender your life to Christ?
 - b. And for the rest, could it be that some of you, over time, have lost some of the confidence you once had in the gospel?

- (1). But now the story of Jesus is beginning to rekindle that confidence, and you really want to come back to your first love?
2. If you can clearly see that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that He was raised from the dead, then act on that faith.
 - a. Either come to Him in obedience to the gospel and begin today to commit your life to Him....
 - b. Or come back to Him in repentance and begin today to recommit your life to Him.