

The Great Scandal

Matthew 28:11-15

Robert Gorham Davis, a retired Harvard professor of English, spends his energies writing letters to the *New York Times* protesting any mention of Christianity. In one letter Davis wrote, **"If there were such a God who really wished to reveal Himself to mankind, He could do so in a way that left no doubt"**.

Well, Mr. Davis, He did. He left no doubt of the revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ by raising Him from the dead. The facts are clear. The evidence is comprehensive.

But despite this clear evidence, history has been full with efforts to discredit and cover up the truth of the resurrection of Christ.

Throughout this Easter season, we've heard a number of the accounts of resurrection encounters - Jesus appearing to the disciples in a locked room, Jesus giving Thomas the opportunity to touch the wounds in his hands and feet, Jesus providing a miraculous catch of fish followed by breakfast with the disciples on the shores of Tiberias, Jesus forgiving Peter and calling him to live out his mission.

Today, we turn to Matthew's gospel account which doesn't tell us about any of these encounters with the disciples or any of the other 500 eyewitnesses of the resurrected Jesus. Instead, Matthew lets the enemies of Jesus provide proof of the resurrection.

Matthew begins with, *"While the women were on their way...."* The women had just been to the tomb, there was an earthquake that rolled the stone away, an angel tells them to not be afraid because Jesus had risen, they could go in to the tomb and see for themselves and then they were to go tell the disciples the news. As they hurried off, they ran into Jesus who repeats the message "don't be afraid! Go tell my brothers to go to Galilee and there they will see me."

While the women were on their way, “*some of the guard went into the city to report to the chief priests everything that had happened.*”

Back at the end of Matthew 27, after Jesus was crucified, died and buried, we were told that “A Roman guard of soldiers” had been given the task of securing the tomb with a seal and posting guard. Now this wasn’t just one singular guard - A Roman guard was made up of twelve to sixteen soldiers. These men were given the task of making sure that the disciples didn’t come to steal the body.

But then Easter happened.

At dawn of the first day of the week, a severe earthquake occurred, an angel bright and glorious, frightening and terrifying rolls the stone away. And those guards were traumatized into such terror that they fall over like dead men in a faint. When they came to, they found the tomb was empty and they had to go and report these events to the chief priests. (I don’t envy those guys – given one job to do and it appears they failed.)

So the guards go to give an account of what happened - it was not good news for the religious leaders. After hearing the report, they call a committee meeting of the whole Sanhedrin - about 70 of the elders of Israel who constitute the legal body that had the ability to make resolutions and laws with regard to the whole nation. These guys are the ones who stand to lose power and influence, should the real message get out there.

So, they devise a three-part plan to preserve their power and cover up the resurrection.

First, they bribe the soldiers to lie. Verse 12 states they were given a large sum of *argurios*, silver money. Judas, they had bought for 30 pieces of silver. Now they had to pay probably twelve to sixteen times that amount, but there was no price too high to lie about this. They had to save face, they couldn’t have these guards going around saying Jesus rose from the dead.

Then they decide the best way to cover this up is to spread a false story – tell everyone *‘His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep’*.

(Is this the first recorded incidence of fake news?)

Now if you happened to be a Roman soldier and you're given a position to guard something and you go to sleep on the job, this is pretty serious. You could lose your commission, but more than likely, you would lose your life. Sleeping is in violation of the Roman military law. The death penalty would be prescribed for such an activity.

But the leaders of Israel paid them to tell a lie. Why? Because they had to explain the absent body. The Jews knew they didn't take the body, they wanted it left in the tomb and that's why they had it sealed and assigned guards. The Romans didn't take it, they had no reason to. The leaders know there's only one possible theory they could use to cover this up - the disciples took it – even though they know from the guard's account (and we do too from Matthew's gospel) that's not what happened. So there's only one possibility left, Jesus rose from the dead. This is a brilliant way for Matthew to prove the resurrection is true.

Just picture these soldiers, going around saying, "Well, we were all asleep and...the disciples came and stole His body." The question I have is, "Oh really. If you were all asleep how do you know who stole His body?" You can't have both. You can't be asleep and also know who took Him. I mean, the whole thing is absurd and the implications for the soldiers are so serious that verse 14 goes on to tell us, *"If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble."*

From this statement and other interactions with the leaders and Pilate, it seems pretty clear that they had power over Pilate and could get him to do whatever they want – the crucifixion of Jesus is just one example.

Well, the soldiers, took the money. They didn't care about Jesus. They didn't care about any of this messianic talk. It was

of no interest to them. They just took the money and did what they were instructed. And I'm sure they were instructed well on all the details of the fake story – because all of the soldiers had to have the same story in order for it to have any credibility. Then they were told to spread the story around. The leaders knew the news of the resurrection was going to spread and so they created a counter story, the lie. And Matthew, writing his gospel some 30 years later, says the story was still being circulated.

You might think this is an unusual way for Matthew to end his account of the life of Jesus. But I actually think it is genius. He could have proved the resurrection by giving testimony of the disciples and others who encountered the risen Christ – those who saw him, touched him, talked with him, ate with him – and that would be very convincing.

But the world is always going to be full of critics who won't believe their friends. They would say it's an illusion. Or a hallucination. Maybe it was some mental telepathy. Or they were deceived by an imposter. Critics might claim of course they're going to lie about Him, they were His friends and they want to carry on the ruse because they loved Him and He was nice to them. So there would be people who would dismiss the testimony of His friends. But, it's pretty hard to dismiss the testimony of His enemies.

The last thing the Jewish leaders wanted was a resurrection but they got one and this whole cover-up is the strongest proof that it really happened. Just follow this thought, it was impossible for them to deny that Christ had by some supernatural means arisen. It was impossible to deny it. They couldn't. That left them with only one option. If you are going to deny what is impossible to deny, you have to come up with some explanation for the empty tomb. So they did.

It's absolutely absurd and it is impossible to believe their explanation.

I mean, how could or would cowardly disciples, the boldest of whom had denied Jesus three times, and all the rest had scattered when He was taken prisoner - how could all of them all of a sudden come together with great power, great resolution, great force, go in and overpower the Roman guard (12-16 men) and steal the body of Jesus, and then go on to live a life to carry out that deception that led even to martyrdom? It's absolutely idiotic.

The cover up is the greatest proof of the resurrection.

Matthew's gospel leaves us with only 2 choices. We can believe the enemies lie - be closed to the truth, denying the resurrection, ignoring it or trying to explain it away. Or we must believe Jesus rose from the dead. Those are the only 2 options.

Every way you look at it, Jesus rose from the dead. And He said, "*Because I live you shall live also.*" If you confess Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart God has raised Him from the dead, you'll be saved.

I believe in the resurrection. It's a historical fact. I believe Jesus died on a cross as a perfect atonement for sin, paid the price in full to provide forgiveness for penitent sinners and was raised from the dead conquering death, granting to all those who believe in Him eternal life in the glories of heaven. That's the message Matthew is giving through the testimony of the enemies and that's the message the world needs to hear.

But it leaves me wondering, what are the ways we participate in covering up the good news today? Do we ignore how powerful this news really is and therefore we don't think about sharing it? Are we afraid of how others will respond so we don't say anything? Do we struggle to believe ourselves? Or is it simply our silence?

As we leave today, I urge you to think about what you will do with the message? Will you cover it up? Or will you be like the disciples and eyewitnesses who share the good news?

Wright, N.T. *Matthew for Everyone, part 2*. Westminster John Knox Press. 2004
Wilkins, Michael J. *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew*. Zondervan.
2004

The Resurrection Cover Up <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/80-214/the-resurrection-coverup>

Fake News and the Power of the Resurrection
<https://derekhmillier.com/2017/04/25/sunday-sermon-matthew-2811-15-fake-news-and-the-power-of-the-resurrection/>

The Guards Had to Cover it Up <http://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/the-guards-had-to-cover-it-up-first-sunday-after-easter-matthew-28/>