

The Guards at the Tomb

Matthew 28

Today as we think about the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ I want to focus your attention especially on the Guards who were at the tomb. We are told in Matthew 27:62-66 that the day after the crucifixion the religious leaders, even though it was the Sabbath day, went to Pilate to request of him to have the tomb sealed and sentries posted at the tomb. They were afraid the disciples might come and steal the body and proclaim the resurrection promise of Christ. They did not know that their fears were groundless.

They succeeded in getting Pilate to grant permission to have the tomb sealed and to provide sentries to guard the tomb. The Roman soldiers sealed the tomb. Then, they stood guard for the next three days in four-hour shifts of four soldiers each.

How many Roman soldiers were involved we do not know, but it could have been as many as 50 or more and also a number of soldiers from the temple guard. The temple guard were Jewish soldiers who worked at the Temple.

It is likely that the soldiers had been selected from that "**whole band of soldiers**" that had stripped Jesus in Pilate's hall and scourged Him and mocked Him and then taken Him out to crucify Him. They had watched Him suffer and die, but then they had also experienced the great darkness and the great earthquake and had heard their centurion cry out: "**Truly this man was the Son of God**" ([Mark 15:39](#)).

They had no reason to fear the disciples, but they must have had some concern about what God might do to them, if indeed, Jesus was the Son of God, as their centurion had cried. In any case, they certainly would not be lethargic and careless about their assignment, or about to fall asleep while on duty. They had been set there by the authority of Rome and there were severe penalties for failing in their duty. These guards watched the tomb faithfully, but they did not see Christ rise.

They were hardly prepared for what did happen! We are told in Matthew 28 :2-3 **And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it. His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow:** They did not see the resurrection itself but what they did see was the angel and the opening of the tomb. The stone that closed the entrance was very big and was rolled in a channel. This channel was sloped so it was easy to close but hard to open. So they would have known that it would have taken some force to have moved that stone.

But I want you to see the Guards at the tomb because they are both witnesses to the truth of what happened but they are also representations of what happens to people when they come face to face

with the reality of the Resurrection of Christ. And I hope that in some way you will come face to face with that reality today. And so let us look at the Guards at the Tomb and there are a number of things I want you to see about them.

I The Reaction of the Guards

And the first thing that I want you to see is the reaction of the guards. Look at Matthew 28:2-4 **And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it. His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow: And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men.**

Matthew reports their reaction to the angel. It was an embarrassing reaction for Roman soldiers.

It was a **reaction of fear**. The text tells us that these men actually shook. They trembled with fear And this trembling was no small bit of trembling either. The word "shake" is from the same word as "earthquake." One authority says "The verb [shake] is related to the noun [earthquake]...It means that they were shaken, convulsed with terror. It is a word that would indicate a severe convulsion, as in an earthquake." The sentries, though hardened Roman soldiers, cowered when the angel came. They would have been dauntless amidst the shock of battle... but they were dumb before a being who was not flesh and blood."!. "Those hardy Roman soldiers, would have been used to dreadful sights, but what they saw here made them quail. Their courage melted at once at the appearance of one angel of God"

These "brave?" sentries had been told that they must expect to be assaulted by a company of feeble faint-hearted disciples, who for fear of them would soon shake and become as dead men, but are amazed to find themselves attacked by a mighty angel whom they dare not look in the face

These were soldiers, earthy men, and "thought of the spiritual world was probably not something that would have taken much of their time and so when the world of the spirit began to break in the shock they received would have brought about sheer physical terror.

These sentries are like Eliphaz, one of Job's vain comforters, who told Job about his mysterious experience in which "**Fear came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones to shake**" (Job 4:14). Of the wicked, the Psalmist says, "**Put them in fear, O Lord; that the nations may know themselves to be but men**" (Psalm 9:20). Fear is a painful product of sin.

And they had reason to fear because suddenly the reality of the supernatural has broken in upon their lives. The spiritual realities that they no doubt had thought little about were suddenly real. And men and women it is a frightening thing when the spiritual begins to be made known in our lives. Perhaps I am speaking to someone and spiritual realities have begun to be real to you. God has been speaking and you know it. And maybe there has been fear.

But this trembling in fear before the heavenly visitor forecasts the great trembling which will take place when unrepentant sinners stand before the judgment bar of the Almighty. In Revelation 6:15-16 we read what will happen to men on that day. It says **And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; And said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb:** And I want to say that while you may not fear God today that there is going to be a day when you will fear. And on that day there will be no remedy for your fear

But not only did the guards react with fear but they **reacted by fainting**. It says in verse 4 "**And became as dead men**" Note the text carefully. It does not say the sentries died; but they were like dead men; that is, they fainted on the spot. They fell down on the ground in front of the tomb and looked like dead men.. "The effect of the angel's coming to the foes of Christ was that of their absolute uneasiness. They became as dead men in the presence of the blinding glory of the angel visitor" "In their fright at the appearance of this celestial messenger, the hard, sturdy soldiers of the guard fainted away, unable to look upon his terrifying countenance" You think of what the prophet Malachi said in Malachi 3:2 **But who may abide the day of his coming?**

and who shall stand when he appeareth? for he is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap: In 1 Samuel 6:2 the men of Bethshemesh said **Who is able to stand before this holy LORD God?**

Men and women there are many people who are willing to take God for granted but you cannot take God for granted forever. You think of the Apostle John and when he saw the vision of the Lord as the Ancient of Days in Revelation 1 we are told that he fell at his feet as dead. When you behold Him in His holiness and righteousness we are told that every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Then I want you to see not only did the fear and faint but **they fled**. Later in Matthew (Matthew 28:11) we are told that some of the sentries went to the chief priests and told them what had happened. The rest of the sentries also left their post of duty, for when the women came no

sentries were around. So the sentries fled the scene. Some went to the religious leaders, and some went elsewhere. But here were men who came face to face with the power and the sovereignty of God and their reaction was to flee. And they did flee for a while but you know you cannot flee from God permanently. The Psalmist said in Psalm 139: & **Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?** The answer to that is nowhere because the Psalmist went on to say **If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.** Men and women you can flee from God for a while but God knows where you are. The Bible speaks of the eyes of the Lord running to and fro throughout the whole earth. And you know that is only a description to help us understand because God's eyes are everywhere at all times. He sees what you do and what you don't do and men and women you cannot flee from Him.

But I want you to see the reaction of the guards. I want you to see that this was real. I want you to see that these men reacted to something that was real and really got through to them. And men and women I want you to see the reality of the resurrection. I want you to see the reality of what the Bible says

II The Report By the Guards

But not only do I want you to see the reaction of the guards but I want you to see the report by the guards. After they recovered from their fainting-from-fear spell, some of the sentries headed to town to report to the religious leaders what had happened.

Matthew is the only one to report anything about these guards.

His account of the sentries was evidently made to counter the lie which had been circulated about the body of Christ being stolen from the grave. This lie was common knowledge even when Matthew wrote his Gospel some 30 years after the resurrection had occurred. People needed to know how the lie got started.

But I want you to see that with the tomb empty the soldiers evidently no longer needed to guard the tomb but what they needed to do was to make a report to the religious authorities as to why they had left their post of duty and were no longer needed to guard the tomb. And it is evident that not all the soldiers went to make this report. If you look at verse 11 it says "**some of the watch came into the city, and shewed unto the chief priests all the things that were done.**" Not all the watch went to town to make the report to the religious authorities. Only "some" made the report. The fact that only "some" went to town to make the

report to the religious authorities indicates that the other sentries must have fled and went wherever they felt the safest. The "some" would logically be the highest ranking of the sentries. These highest ranking sentries would be in charge of the guards and would be obligated to make a report.

And notice that they went to report to the religious authorities. Why did the sentries report to the chief priests instead of to Pilate? The answer is that the sentries were under the control of the religious authorities at this time. Pilate had assigned some soldiers to sentry duty for the religious authorities (Matthew 27:65), so the sentries had to answer to these men first and not to Pilate. Furthermore, reporting to Pilate first would have gotten them in a great deal of trouble. Pilate would not be so interested in the resurrection report as he would be in the fact that these soldiers had left their post of duty without being discharged by the religious authorities. Pilate did not want any trouble from the religious authorities, for they could cause him political trouble. So the sentries headed for the priests, not Pilate, to give the report on the happenings at the tomb. But look at the report that was given by these soldiers of the resurrection

And the first thing I want you to see is the **sincerity of the report**. The report of the sentries caused quite a traumatic response by the religious authorities. Matthew gives us some significant details about this response. But what I want you to see is that the priests and the religious authorities could say nothing when these men came to tell them about the resurrection. And the reason was that they could see that the men were absolutely sincere. What they said was true

You notice the fact that the chief priests are not recorded as arguing with the sentries about the report, nor did they mock the sentries or their story (which included the earthquake, angel's arrival and appearance, the rolling away of the stone, and the emptiness of the tomb). They did not dispute the report. They probably felt the earthquake themselves—it would be strange if they hadn't.

But as we have said one of the main reasons the chief priests were silent and did not argue with or mock the story of the soldiers is that the sentries were very reliable witnesses. The chief priests knew the Roman soldiers would not leave their posts and rush to the city to make such a report to the chief priests if it were not true. The chief priests also knew that the Roman soldiers were an unbiased group as far as the resurrection story was concerned. These sentries had no reason to fabricate such a story for the chief priests. And the fact that these sentries were hardened Roman soldiers would only enforce the viability of their report. Though hardened, they were visibly shaken. Only the phenomena that they saw at the tomb could produce that effect on these

tough and hardened men. So the chief priests did not dispute the report, they only sought how to counter it.

Unbelief cannot argue against the facts, but it does not stop unbelief from trying to oppose the facts.

The silence of the chief priests to the story was an unwitting confession that they did indeed believe that the resurrection had taken place. Furthermore, their belief that the resurrection had actually taken place is seen in the lie they wanted spread to counter this fact of the resurrection. If there had been no resurrection, they would not have had to invent a lie to counter it. It was obvious to them that the resurrection had taken place. Supernatural events had taken place at the tomb. The chief priests could see the alarm and shock in the sentries' face and appearance to know that something very unusual had happened. And the chief priests knew what this meant— it meant that the feared resurrection had indeed taken place. There was no other conclusion to the report of the sentries.

However, this belief of the resurrection was not saving faith. One can acknowledge the facts and still not be saved. "**Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well; the devils also believe, and tremble**" (James 2:19), but they are not saved. Oh, the great tragedy of knowing the facts and acknowledging the facts but not submitting in faith to the facts. You may acknowledge that there is a Great God in heaven; but if you do not worship Him, your knowledge will only condemn you. You may acknowledge that Jesus Christ died on Calvary for the sins of mankind and that He rose from the grave the third day; but if you do not receive Jesus Christ as your Saviour, your knowledge will only condemn you. This was the tragic situation of the religious authorities in Israel at this time. And men and women I would challenge you to examine the proofs of the resurrection. There have been many who have started out in the past to disprove the resurrection and as they have examined the proofs they have been brought to a belief in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the most verifiable fact in history.

Not only do I want you to see the sincerity of the report but I want you to see the **swiftness of the report**. I want you to notice when the report was made because the Bible is careful to point this out. Look at verse 11 again. It says **Now when they were going, behold, some of the watch came into the city, and shewed unto the chief priests all the things that were done.** The "they" in this verse refers to the women who had come to the grave and who were told by the angel, "**Go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead**" (Matthew 28:7). As they went to tell the disciples, the sentries went to tell the religious authorities. Thus both the followers of Christ and the enemies of Christ were notified quickly on that first Easter Sunday morning that Christ was risen from

the grave. God made sure that the message of the resurrection was proclaimed early. This is the habit of God. The prophet Jeremiah emphasizes this fact when he repeatedly states that **"I have spoken unto you, rising early and speaking, but ye have not hearkened... the Lord hath sent unto you all his servants the prophets, rising early and sending them; but ye have not hearkened, nor inclined your ear to hear"**

As Jeremiah says, God sends the message early. God made sure that the message of the risen Christ got out early. And He does that because He wants you to hear. He wants men and women to hear that there is life and there is salvation to be found in the Lord Jesus Christ. Men and women this is a message that needs to go out and it is a message that needs to go out swiftly and it needs to go out to all who will hear. You see the meaning of the resurrection is that God has accepted the offering of His Son on the cross. The atonement has been accepted. And that means that those who come to God can be saved. There is pardon and there is redemption. That is the real message of the resurrection and that is the report that you need to hear and you need to hear it urgently because it is the most important message you will ever hear.

But not only do I want you to see the sincerity of the report and the swiftness of the report but I want you to see the **stiffness at the report**. Those who heard the message did not respond well. They reacted with stiffness of heart. The disciples did not respond well because they reacted with unbelief and especially did the religious authorities not respond well to the truth about the resurrection which was given to them early. Look at verse 12 **"And when they were assembled with the elders"** (Matthew 28:12). It indicates that the elders were involved. That was the Sanhedrin council was convened concerning this report. The "chief priests" could not handle this report alone. The obvious fact that the resurrection had occurred stunned the chief priests. They needed to counsel with their cohorts about what to do with this resurrection report. "They deemed the matter of so much importance as to justify calling together of the great council [Sanhedrin] of the nation.

Notwithstanding all their caution, it was plain that the body of Jesus was gone" (Barnes). The resurrection had indeed occurred. These religious authorities were thus in trouble and needed to counter this news of the resurrection. The urgency of the meeting would be plain to the members of the Sanhedrin when the reason for the meeting was made known to them.

So they quickly gathered together to consult on what should be done. This meeting of the Sanhedrin, which was prompted by the chief priests,

shows that the chief priests and the other members of the Sanhedrin were adamant in their unbelief, aggressive in their unbelief, and artificial in their unbelief. They were **adamant in their unbelief**. The fact of this meeting of the Sanhedrin emphasized that these religious leaders were absolutely resolved not to believe no matter what. Facts only hardened their hearts.

The heart is very wicked that is further hardened by truth. It is like the heart of Pharaoh in Moses' time. Truth hardened his heart again and again. This adamant unbelief of the religious authorities shows that what Scripture said in another text is indeed true, namely, **"If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead"** (Luke 16:31). The adamant character of their unbelief reminds us that unbelief is not an intellectual problem but a problem of the will. Unbelief is not a problem of reason but a problem of rebellion. It is not a lack of facts but a lack of faith that sends people to hell.

And I want you to see that they were **aggressive in their unbelief**. This meeting was not for the purpose of giving sympathy to the chief priests or the sentries; but it was a meeting to decide what to do to counter the sentries' report, namely, to counter the fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The meeting of the Sanhedrin reminds us that unbelief is aggressive. They actively and ardently seek to keep people from believing the truth. Not only were they resolved not to believe, but they were equally resolved to keep others from believing. How to keep others from believing was the main topic of the meeting. They plotted and planned to propagate unbelief and counter faith.

And they will resort to whatever **action is necessary to promote unbelief**. They are not guided by high and holy principles but by wicked motives. "There are no depths of deceit and chicanery too low for religious bigots who are determined to pursue a chosen course to the bitter end, no matter what may be involved" (Ironsides). They will lie if they have to (which they did—we will see this later). And they will resort to physical injury, too; which they did after Pentecost in persecuting believers. They will impose their evil creed upon mankind as forcefully as they can—and often they will use the laws of a nation to fight against faith.

How pathetic that the great religious council of the land met to keep people from believing the truth, particularly the great truth of the resurrection. Yet, many religious councils, churches, and other religious groups are doing the same today. They meet together to propagate error and oppose truth. They meet together to deny the great truths about Jesus Christ such as His Deity, His resurrection, His virgin birth, His sinlessness, His redemptive work on Calvary, etc. It is sad but true that it

is the religious leaders of the land, not government officials, who do the most to propagate unbelief.

They were **artificial in their unbelief**. Unbelief is hypocritical. The artificialness of unbelievers (not their unbelief here, for that is real, but rather the character of the unbeliever's conduct) is evident in the chief priests' response to the resurrection in light of their comment at Calvary. Matthew records the chief priests and other members of the Sanhedrin (such as the elders and scribes) as saying at Calvary, "**If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him**" (Matthew 27:42). Coming down from the cross would have been a great miracle, but the resurrection was a greater miracle, yet they did not believe after the resurrection. So if they do not believe after the greater miracle, they would not have believed after the lesser miracle. Thus all their talk at Calvary was hypocritical. Unbelief is loaded with hypocrisy.

Some complain about the hypocrites in the church. There are plenty in the church, but there are multitudes more in the world!

Unbelief has no excuse, for the truth is sent out in plenty of time to save, and it has plenty of competent witnesses and evidences to substantiate the message.

III The Rumours Spread by the Guards

But not only do I want you to see the reaction of the guards and the report of the guards but I want you to see the rumours spread by the guards. I want you to see that these men had been witnesses of the two most astounding facts in history. They have been eyewitnesses of the cross and they had been eyewitnesses of the resurrection. What a mighty privilege they had been given. Of all people they were in a position to testify to the truth and the veracity of what had happened on the cross and what had happened at the empty tomb. And you would have thought that men who had been so privileged and who had witnessed all of these supernatural things would have at the very least investigated what was going on. You would have thought they would have said to themselves that there must be something in this and you would have thought that they would have repented and have become some of the first converts after the resurrection. You would have thought they would have joined their captain who had declared **Truly this was the Son of God**. But I want you to see what happened. They got into a conspiracy to reject the resurrection.

The meeting of the Sanhedrin resulted in a scheme to counter the resurrection report.

And I want you to see what that scheme was. Look at verses 12 and 13 **And when they were assembled with the elders, and had taken**

counsel, they gave large money unto the soldiers, Saying, Say ye, His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept.

And I want you to see what the soldiers were brought into this scheme. And notice that they **Took a Bribe**. Look at verse 12. It says "**They gave large money unto the soldiers**" Cleverly, the Sanhedrin used the Roman soldiers, who were the sentries at the tomb, to help them oppose the resurrection facts. The Sanhedrin knew they would not be wise to go it alone in opposing the resurrection. People would put more stock in the report of the unbiased sentries than in the lying arguments of the Sanhedrin, so the Sanhedrin got the sentries to counter the very report which they brought to the chief priests. And the way they got their services was to bribe them—give them "**large money**" They gave them much money. Roman soldiers and Roman politicians were easy to bribe. But if your cause requires bribery, you have a wicked cause that needs to be forsaken.

But I want you to notice that there was not one sentry that had come to the chief priests that had character enough to turn down the bribe in the interest of the truth. Rather, they were all a bunch of greedy and corrupt men who would gladly take a bribe. Here were men then who were willing to sell the truth for money. Look at verse 15 **So they took the money, and did as they were taught:**

They had seen the miracles and they had experienced things that they could not understand and were beyond their ability to fathom and yet they just dismissed it all because they could be paid much money. And I am afraid there are many who would do the same even today. There are many who are faced with the truth of the Bible and they dismiss it because it would mean. they would loose their job or it would mean that they would loose out in their business. Do you remember what the Lord Jesus said in Matthew 6:19-21 **Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.** Men and women all the wealth and all the money in the world will not be able to buy you one moment of peace in eternity. Do you remember what the Lord Jesus said **For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?**

Not only did these men take the bribe but they **told lies**. The Sanhedrin instructed these men to tell lies about what had happened with the resurrection. Look at what they were told by the Sanhedrin to say in verse 13 **Say ye, His disciples came by night, and stole**

him away while we slept. Now look at verse 15 and you will see what they did. **So they took the money, and did as they were taught: and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day.**

Taking the money said the soldiers did not mind lying. Of course the story they were to spread abroad was one that condemned them, for it said they slept on the watch and did not do a good job of guarding the tomb. But you know they obviously felt they were being paid enough money to withstand the embarrassment. Money persuades men to do a lot of foolish things. And so they junked their reputation in the interest of money in the pocket.

But I want you to notice how when the truth of the resurrection was starting to be proclaimed, error soon started on its way, too. When the Gospel message advances, do not be surprised that cults follow along in the steps of the Gospel, for error gets up and gets going when the truth starts to be proclaimed. Men and women the devil is a liar from the beginning and he is the father of lies and he wants to turn men and women from the truth. And men and women the devil is very careful in the spreading of his lies. Do you notice the way this is put. It says of these soldiers that they "**Did as they were taught.**" Do not miss this word "taught" in our text. It is translated from didasko the common Greek word for teach. One would have expected the text to say, "as they were told" instead of "as they were taught." But error made sure that the sentries were instructed regarding their message. They could not say just anything but were to speak a particular message.

The teaching in our text reminds us that error is earnest. It schools its ministers. Often rather than establishing a school, they infiltrate schools and eventually take over the school. What has happened to such schools as Yale (which was started by a prayer meeting) and Princeton (Jonathan Edwards was a former president of that school) is happening to many of our Christian schools today. Error has moved into the schools and is taking over the schools and the schools that are Christian schools will in the days and years to come become heathen schools teaching much error and embracing many lies.

Error has its professors and teachers who instruct in falsehoods to send out

And error spreads Do you notice what it says. "**This saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day.**" The sentries were earnest in their proclamation of the lie, for so many heard the lie that the lie was still well known when Matthew wrote the Gospel which was some twenty to thirty years after the crucifixion. This lie went on even farther, for Justin Martyr, the early church father of the second

century a.d., said that the lie was common in his day. In fact, this lie is still common today. It is one of the falsehoods which unbelief teaches in the apostate churches. These wicked churches teach many things to counter the resurrection truth; and while the lie that the body was stolen from the grave is so absurd, it does not stop them from teaching it. But men and women the devil has devised many lies to keep you from the gospel. There are lies being told in the religious community and lies in the scientific community and lies in the political community. Paul said **But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.**

And you would have thought that these men who were so privileged would have rejected the false message and they would have embraced Christ but that is not what they did. And men and women I want you to be careful not to follow their example. You have many privileges of hearing the gospel and hearing the truth of salvation and I urge you with all my heart not to reject it but to embrace Christ as He is offered in the gospel.