

The Sunday Before Sunrise

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – A discussion of the stolen-body theory and why it cannot possibly be accurate
2. aim – To cause us to consider the truthfulness of the resurrection as made known in history
3. passage – Matthew 28:11-15

b. outline

1. The Events of that Fateful Sunday Morning

c. opening

1. a gathering on a cold, damp Sunday morning at sunrise
 - a. a chance to “enter” the garden and consider what took place there, 2000 years ago
 - b. **i.e.** there is a *tomb* that held a *dead body* – and we are *forced to consider it* ...

I. The Events of that Fateful Sunday Morning

Content

a. previously: what the various “players” are doing on that fateful Saturday

1. the crowds – returning blissfully to their religious customs of Passover
2. the Romans – returning to their apathy and to their focus on socio-political matters
3. the Devil and his minions – celebrating the defeat of their most formidable enemy
4. the Eleven (and others) – they are “holed up”, trying to grasp what it all meant and where to go now
5. **(LY)** the religious leadership – nervously “happy” that Jesus is gone, but “worried” ...
 - a. **why:** because *they* remember something **no one else seems to remember**
“The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, ‘Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, ‘After three days I will rise.’” (Matthew 27:62f)
 - b. **why:** because *an alternative explanation is necessary* if you cannot accept that Jesus *is who he said he was*, with his resurrection being *proof of it* ...

b. the “stolen body” theory

1. the “most ancient” of *alternative explanations* – dating back to the religious leadership itself
2. the “most credible” of *alternative explanations* – all others being fundamentally preposterous
 - a. that Jesus *didn’t die* – even though *everyone was certain* he did (**i.e.** the soldiers; the spear wound)
 - b. that everyone went to the *wrong tomb* – even though *everyone knew* where it was (**i.e.** the soldiers)
 - c. that the risen Jesus was just an *hallucination* – even though he was seen by over *500 witnesses*
 - d. that the disciples *secretly stole* away the body – as even the *chief priests* suggested
“While [the disciples were going to Galilee], behold, 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 to this day.” (Matthew 28:11-15)
3. the *incredulity* of this explanation
 - a. the lack of understanding by the disciples (**Luke 9:45; 24:8**) – how could they *possibly* cook-up the idea of stealing the body to “fake” a resurrection *if they didn’t understand it in the first place?*
 1. **i.e.** although they *had* seen Jesus raise Lazarus, they had *no reason* to believe *he could do it to himself* while lying dead in a tomb!
 2. and ... the idea of a *bodily resurrection into a glorified state* is simply “beyond” them
 - b. the fear of the disciples (**John 20:19**) – Peter’s response in his denial *demonstrates* that these were men and women *assuming* that the religious leaders/Romans would come *for them next*
 1. **i.e.** even *if* they thought it up, their fear would *clearly* prevent them from attempting it
 - c. the posted guard before the tomb (**Matthew 27:62ff**) – a contingent of Roman soldiers *trained* in military tactics, not easily “overcome” by a rag-tag group of Jews
 1. **i.e.** the *whole point* of the religious leaders *in posting them there* ...
 - d. the burial wrapping left behind (**John 20:5**) – the *strange* sense of “leaving behind” Jesus’ burial garments to flee *only* with the body
 1. **i.e.** thieves would not take the time to do so
 - e. the bizarre excuse of the *bribed* guards (**Matthew 28:11-15**) – the guards *themselves* do not admit the body was stolen – they *only* relate what they saw *and the chief priests* come up with the idea
 1. in **Matthew 28:4**, the guards are stunned in terror at the vision of the angel that comes to roll away the stone – **i.e.** they *do not* relate this as a band of Jesus’ disciples

2. in **Matthew 28:11**, *some* of the guards reported to the chief priests – probably out of *fear* of what would happen to them *when* word got out that Jesus' body was gone
- f. the change in the lives of the disciples – stealing the body and “faking” a resurrection *cannot* account for the *radical* change in those around Jesus *before his death*
 1. the change in Peter (**Acts 2 cf. Luke 22:62**) – going from one *denying Jesus vehemently* to being the first to go out and preach on Pentecost
 2. the imprisonment and martyrdom of most of the original 12 – to assume that *every single one* would maintain the “illusion” even in face of persecution and death is *preposterous*
 3. the change in Saul (**Acts 9**) – how can a “faked” resurrection account for the *nearly instantaneous change* in someone *who hated the church*, and could not *possibly* have been “swayed” by Jesus' disciples into “becoming” a Christian
 - a. **i.e.** Paul's testimony includes him talking with Jesus *directly*
 - b. **i.e.** Paul's *summation* of the gospel includes the *centrality of the resurrection* (**1 Cor. 15**)
4. the importance of this story
 - a. **inadvertently**: the Jewish leadership provide *proof* that Jesus **actually walked out of the tomb**
 1. although they *later* justify the “missing” body as having been stolen, their actions *actually* confirm that that was not possible (**e.g.** the guards *know* the body could not have been stolen)
 2. they also confirm that *no other possible explanation* is possible – if the body is “still there” they simply have to go get it – but, if the body is missing, what other explanation can there be?
 - b. **IOW**: the *massive change* in the disciples can only be accounted for by an *actual* resurrection
 1. **principle: for the elect, an encounter with the risen Jesus is, by necessity, the only possible explanation for the massive change wrought within them, and seen by the world in stark contrast to themselves**
 2. genuine Christians have been *changed* by this event – we have “walked out” of a tomb of sin and death in resurrection **because we followed him who went out before us**
 3. **i.e.** we are not Christians just because we “believed some story” – we are followers of Christ **because we “followed” him out of the despair of death to a newness of life**
5. **while the world struggles to “explain” the resurrection, we who know Christ are living it out every day – our new life in him can only be explained by the new life he first knew, and then gave to us so that we might follow him (Romans 8:11)**

“If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.”