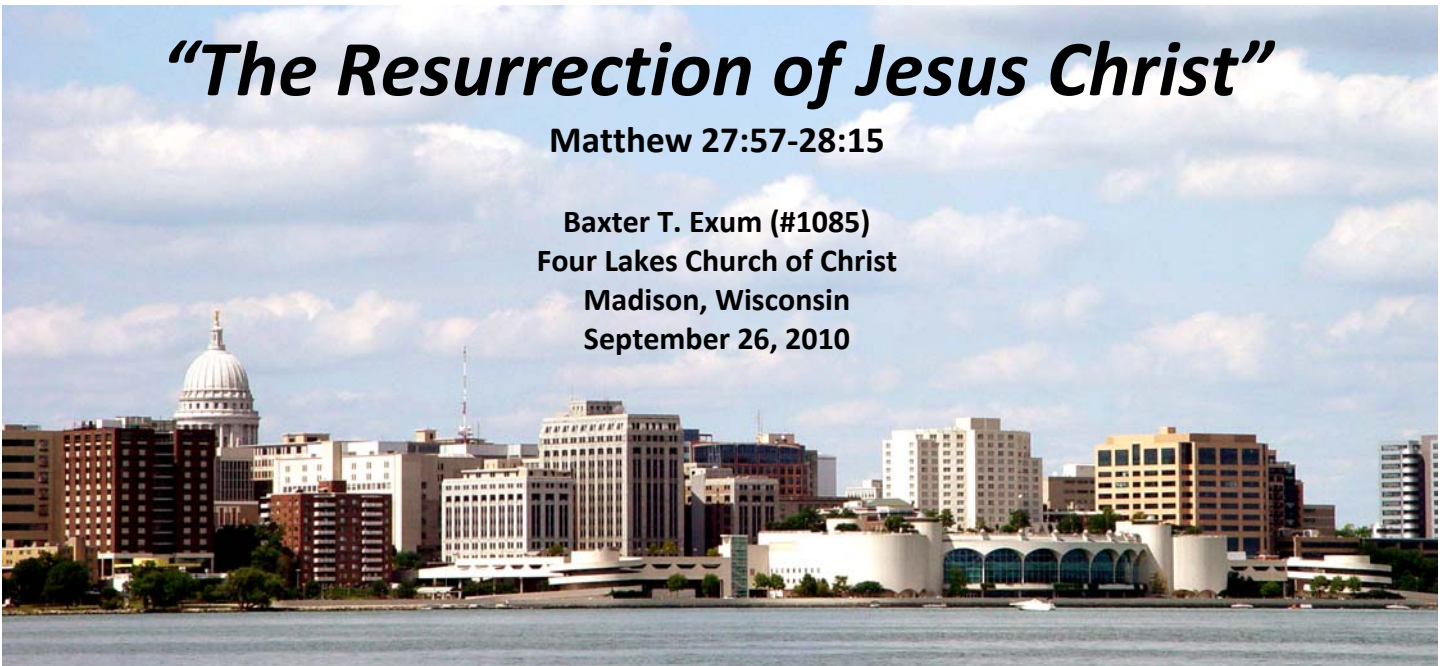


“The Resurrection of Jesus Christ”

Matthew 27:57-28:15

**Baxter T. Exum (#1085)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
September 26, 2010**



Introduction:

Most of us here this morning already believe that Jesus Christ lived on this earth for roughly 33 years, that He died under the rule of Pontius Pilate, that He was buried in a tomb owned by Joseph of Arimathea, and that He came back from the dead on a Sunday morning. However, it is also possible that some here this morning may have a few doubts concerning whether all of this is true. In fact, as all of us know, there are many people right here in the Madison area who have made up their minds that the resurrection did not happen. With these thoughts in mind, I would like for us to consider a request from one of our members. It really comes in the form of a statement as one of our members points out that he takes everything in the Bible by faith but that others have a problem with much of what is taught in the Bible; and specifically, he points out that many people have a problem with the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Some of you might already know that when Thomas Jefferson had stepped down from the office of president, he started a project that he had wanted to do for a long time. Jefferson had always been impressed with the moral teaching of Jesus, and yet at the same time, he was always a little uneasy with the supernatural parts of the New Testament. So, Thomas Jefferson decided to separate the “real” message of Jesus from the supernatural, and he published a new version of the Bible. We have several copies available for us here in Madison at various public libraries. I checked one out a few years ago, and I would like to read the very last verse of Thomas Jefferson’s version of the Bible. He gives all of the moral teaching of Jesus, and then we get to the very last verse. According to Thomas Jefferson, this is how the New Testament should end, “Now, in the place where he was crucified, there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulcher, wherein was never man yet laid. There they laid Jesus, and rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulcher, and departed.” And that’s it! That is the last line of the Jefferson Bible. Without the resurrection, Jesus is reduced to simply a good man with a few interesting things to say. And that is the way many people around us look at Jesus. They may be a little bit interested in what He said, and yet as one of our members has pointed out, they have a problem with the resurrection. And yet for those of us who are Christians, it would be difficult to overstate the importance of the resurrection. Certainly all of us are familiar with Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 15 (as Silas read for us earlier), where Paul said that if there is no resurrection, then our preaching is vain, our faith is vain and worthless, we are still in our sins, those who have passed away are gone forever, and we as Christians are of all people most to be pitied.

This morning, then (in light of what Paul said, and in response to a request from one of our members), I would like for us to consider from the Scriptures the very first example of those who had a problem with the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. I would invite you to turn with me to Matthew 27. In our pew Bibles, the passage starts at the very bottom of page 1555.

In our lesson this morning, I would invite you to look together with me at Matthew 27:57-28:15. We will consider the burial of Jesus, we will consider the impossible assignment that was given to a select group of highly-trained Roman soldiers, and as we study these things, we will consider the most widespread and most-repeated objection to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And as we study this morning, we will structure our study around several very basic problems with the story that was put out there by the religious leaders of the day. But if you will, please look with me at Matthew 27:57-28:15. We pick up the account late on Friday afternoon after the death of Jesus on the cross...

⁵⁷ When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸ This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. ⁵⁹ And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, ⁶⁰ and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the entrance of the tomb and went away. ⁶¹ And Mary Magdalene was there, and the other Mary, sitting opposite the grave. ⁶² Now on the next day, the day after the preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with Pilate, ⁶³ and said, "Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I am to rise again.' ⁶⁴ "Therefore, give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, otherwise His disciples may come and steal Him away and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last deception will be worse than the first." ⁶⁵ Pilate said to them, "You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how." ⁶⁶ And they went and made the grave secure, and along with the guard they set a seal on the stone.

¹ Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave. ² And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. ³ And his appearance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. ⁴ The guards shook for fear of him and became like dead men. ⁵ The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. ⁶ "He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying. ⁷ "Go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going ahead of you into Galilee, there you will see Him; behold, I have told you." ⁸ And they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to report it to His disciples. ⁹ And behold, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and take word to My brethren to leave for Galilee, and there they will see Me." ¹¹ Now while they were on their way, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all that had happened. ¹² And when they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, ¹³ and said, "You are to say, 'His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.' ¹⁴ "And if this should come to the governor's ears, we will win him over and keep you out of trouble." ¹⁵ And they took the money and did as they had been instructed; and this story was widely spread among the Jews, and is to this day.

Again, as we look back over this passage, I would like for us to consider several very basic problems with the story that was made up by the religious leaders.

I. And certainly the first and one of the most basic problems that I am sure they did not anticipate comes in the fact that their conspiracy theory actually just further confirms for all time that THE TOMB OF JESUS WAS IN FACT EMPTY.

And really, the idea that the disciples stole the body is just one of many theories out there concerning the resurrection. One theory says that Jesus did not really die on the cross, that he just passed out from the pain and then woke up when they put Him in the cold tomb, and then He fought His way out. Many of our Islamic friends hold to this idea. I heard an Islamic imam try to defend this position in a debate in Kenosha several years ago. Another theory says that the Jewish leaders stole the body. One theory says that the Romans stole the body. One theory says that wild dogs ate the Lord's body. One theory says that the gardener for some reason moved the Lord's body from one tomb to another without telling anyone. And there are some huge problems with all of these ideas, but one thing that all of these theories have in common is that the tomb was empty! I don't know if we realize just how important that fact is. In fact, it is pretty funny when we think about it, because by coming up with the story that the disciples stole the Lord's body, the Jewish leaders (the enemies of Christianity) established for all time the fact that the Lord's tomb was empty! And really, with nearly every weird theory out there, the one thing they all have in common is the empty tomb. There is no way around this.

And what I find interesting in this passage from Matthew is that the Jewish leaders do not argue with the soldiers. The Jewish leaders do not say, "Oh, well, you guys must have been guarding the wrong tomb by mistake, so why don't you go back and dig up the entire cemetery until you figure this thing out!" They do not say, "Oh, the Lord must have just passed out and then fought His way out of the tomb." They do not say, "You guys have shirked your duty by allowing wild dogs to eat the body." They do not say, "Ha, Ha, very funny, now show us where the body really is." The Jewish leaders do not go to examine the evidence themselves. They do not walk a few blocks to personally inspect the grave clothes that had been neatly folded. They do not go over there to examine the broken seal that had been placed on the tomb. But instead, they hear the truth from the soldiers (these first eye-witnesses), and the only way of dealing with the truth was for them to come up with this story about the disciples stealing the body. And even with this, if this is what really happened (if they really thought the disciples had stolen the body), you would think that they would have launched an investigation. They would have hauled in the disciples, they would have publicized this, they would have put out some "most wanted" posters for Peter and John and for the rest of the disciples, they would have called Pilate in on this. But as it is, the leaders are the ones who arranged the cover-up. And by keeping this quiet, the leaders established for all time the fact that the tomb was empty. There is no arguing with this. And even today, when people spread the lie that the disciples stole the body, when our Islamic friends tell us that Jesus just passed out on the cross and fought His way out later, they also spread very basic truth that the Lord's tomb was empty! If the Lord's tomb had not been empty, the Jewish leaders could have very easily squashed the Christian faith right there. When the apostles started preaching the resurrection, when Peter preached the first gospel sermon on the Day of Pentecost just a few weeks later, the Jewish leaders could have very easily put an end to all of it by hauling out the Lord's dead body, they could have dragged that body through the streets of Jerusalem, they could have squashed the Christian faith right there, but they did not, because even the Lord's enemies could not argue with the fact that the tomb was empty.

And what is especially hilarious to me is that the Jewish leaders (by demanding this Roman guard) were ultimately responsible for some of the most stunning testimony that the tomb was empty. If the guards had

not been posted, then perhaps someone could have made the argument. But as it was, the guards guaranteed that the body would NOT be stolen. And then on top of that, the fact that the guards were there gave us the first third-party unbiased eye-witnesses—professional soldiers who had the job of making sure that the Lord’s body stayed right there in the tomb! These men were highly motivated to make sure that the body stayed in the tomb. It does not get any better than that! And so with this very first attempt to explain away the resurrection, the Jewish leaders prove once and for all that the tomb was empty! And that is the first problem with their story. By making this argument they admit one of the most convincing proofs of the Lord’s resurrection, that the tomb was empty.

II. There is a second basic problem with the idea that the disciples stole the body, and that is, according to the story put out there by the Jewish leaders, THE EYE-WITNESSES WERE SLEEPING AT THE TIME THEY SUPPOSEDLY SAW THE THEFT HAPPEN.

Can we think about that just a little bit? Let’s just let that sink in: According to this conspiracy cooked up by the Jewish leaders (the best story they could come up with), the eye-witnesses were sleeping when they supposedly saw the theft happen. What would happen if I were to call the police to tell them that my neighbor robbed my house while I was sleeping? I think the first question they would ask would be, “If you were sleeping, then how did you know it was your neighbor?” And that would be a valid question! I have a feeling that those who admit to sleeping at the time of a crime are not usually considered to be the most reliable witnesses!

But in reality, it is highly unlikely that these guards would have been sleeping and even more unlikely that the guards could have been overpowered by the Lord’s disciples. The fact that the Jews had to go to Pilate to ask for a guard indicates that they were asking for a Roman guard. My understanding is that a Roman guard was made up of sixteen men—four would be on duty while the remaining twelve slept, and they would work in shifts of four to six hours. We know from ancient secular history that the penalty for falling asleep on the night watch was death. History tells us that Roman soldiers who were convicted of falling asleep on duty were stripped of their clothing and burned to death in a fire started by their own clothing. I don’t know about you, but to me that would be some serious motivation to stay awake! Not only that, but we know from history that Roman soldiers were held responsible for the prisoners in their care. In other words, if they lost someone they would need to give their own lives in exchange. We remember what happened when the angel helped Peter escape in Acts 12. The Bible tells us that when Peter escaped, “*...when day came, there was no small disturbance among the soldiers as to what could have become of Peter. When Herod had searched for him and had not found him, he examined the guards and ordered that they be led away to execution...*” (Acts 12:18-19). That is what happened to Roman soldiers who messed up on duty!

And just to emphasize why a bribe was necessary (and why this story was false to begin with), we should think just a moment about the disciples who were being accused of stealing the body. These are the disciples, the strongest and most outgoing of whom was Peter, a man who less than three days earlier was so terrified of a little girl that he swore up and down that he did not even know the Lord! And Peter was the strongest of these men! In fact, the Bible tells us in Mark 14:50 that all of the disciples “*...left [the Lord] and fled.*” So, is it reasonable to think that a small band of men who abandoned Jesus while He was alive would risk everything to go steal a dead body? In fact, it is ridiculous to think that a small band of discouraged disciples could have come to the tomb, broken the seal, stolen the body, peeled off a hundred pounds of myrrh (which is basically tree sap), that they would have then neatly folded the burial clothes, all while tiptoeing around sixteen highly trained Roman soldiers who knew they would die themselves if anything happened to the body. Which leads

us to the bribe: When faced with the truth, the Roman soldiers knew they could not go back to Pilate—the bottom line is that the seal was broken and the body was gone. Pilate would not believe what had really happened. Regardless of the circumstances, their lives were over, and so they took their case back to the Jewish rulers and told them the truth. The Jewish leaders offered (according to verse 12), “**a large sum of money,**” and the guards took it, hoping that the Jews would be able to smooth things out with Pilate. And so the guards left the chief priests agreeing to tell the lie that they saw what was happening while they slept! And just a side note here: You normally don’t need to bribe someone to tell the truth! But as it was (to these soldiers, at least), the truth was too strange and too amazing and too dangerous. And so they agreed to lie for a price—to tell people that as they were sleeping, they watched the disciples steal the body.

III. There is a third very basic problem with the theory that the disciples stole the body, and that is, THE DISCIPLES (IF THEY HAD STOLEN THE BODY) WERE SETTING THEMSELVES UP FOR NOTHING MORE THAN TORTURE AND DEATH—ALL FOR A LIE.

The evidence tells us that the gospel accounts were all written and circulated very soon after they were written, and the gospel writers (along with the other apostles) were persecuted intensely for their faith in the resurrection. For just a moment, consider a motive: What could have possibly motivated these men to lie about the resurrection? I would encourage all of you to either go to the library or go on the Internet and check out a book known as *Foxes Book of Martyrs*. It was written by John Foxe in the mid-1500’s, and it is the result of Mr. Foxes’ research into the history of persecution against those who claim to be Christians. The book starts with what he discovered concerning the apostles. According to Mr. Foxe, at least,

- Stephen is the first martyr—he was stoned to death as the Bible tells us in Acts 7.
- The second martyr was James—beheaded under the rule of Herod Agrippa (referred to in Acts 15).
- He continues with Philip, who was scourged, thrown in prison, and then crucified in Phrygia in 54 AD.
- Matthew, as a result of preaching in Parthia and Ethiopia, was killed with a halberd (basically a spear with an axe on the end of it) in 60 AD.
- James, the Lord’s brother, died at the age of 94, when he was stoned to death by the Jews and had his brains beaten out with a club.
- Matthias, the replacement for Judas, was stoned to death in Jerusalem and then beheaded.
- Andrew was crucified after preaching in Asia.
- Mark was dragged to pieces by the people of Alexandria, Egypt.
- Peter was crucified upside down.
- Paul was beheaded outside the city of Rome.
- Jude was crucified.
- Bartholomew was cruelly beaten and then crucified after translating Mark’s gospel account into the language of India.
- Thomas was killed by a spear in India.
- Luke was hanged from an olive tree in Greece.
- Simon was crucified in Britain.

Beyond the apostles, Chapter 2 goes on to describe the deaths of others who refused to give up their faith in the resurrection—men and women who were boiled in oil, beaten with clubs, thrown to wild animals, sewn up in leather bags full of scorpions and snakes and then thrown into the sea, burned to death in the marketplace, crushed with weights, thrown off cliffs, buried alive, torn apart with iron hooks, burned with torches, closed

up in caves to die of hunger, men and women who had their skin peeled away with red-hot tongs. Each of them was given a choice: Deny Jesus or die, and each of them chose to die. They all chose death. They saw Jesus after the resurrection, and it changed their lives forever.

The resurrection, then, was not a story that was invented and then passed along by a very small conspiring group, but it is the true conviction of huge numbers of people, men and women who were willing to die for that belief. For just a moment, try to imagine what motive people possibly could have had to invent such a story and then suffer and die in such horrible ways. People lie for profit, or to build up their reputation, to gain political power, or for some other advantage. People lie to save themselves, but people do not lie in order to be tortured and killed for that lie. What did they have to gain? Persecution, torture, and death. And yet they stuck by their story, even though it cost them everything.

How many people do you know who would die for a lie? Maybe there are a few. From time to time, we see a really weird story in the news. But how many would suffer daily, perhaps for years, and then die a horrible death for something they knew to be a fraud. Someone might say, "Well, nineteen terrorists died on 9-11." Yes, they died for a lie, but do you think those men knew they were dieing for a lie? I think they were deceived. They thought they were dieing for the truth. They thought they were headed to Paradise. But the disciples of Jesus were not deceived. They claimed that they had seen the Lord, that they had talked with Him, that they had eaten with Him. If they were not absolutely certain, they would not have allowed themselves to be tortured to death.

The truth is: The disciples had nothing to gain and everything to lose by stealing the body of Jesus from the tomb. What made the difference between a cowardly group of men hiding in fear on Friday night and the boldness that we see throughout the book of Acts? The answer is found in John 20:19-20, ***"So when it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord."*** They saw Him with their own eyes. That is the only explanation for why the disciples were so willing to suffer and die for what they believed.

Conclusion:

This morning, as we summarize the evidence for the Lord's resurrection, it seems that we can react to the information in several ways. Like the Jewish leaders, we can do everything possible to deny that it happened. Like the soldiers, we can wait and let someone else tell us how to handle it—we can put the focus on keeping ourselves alive and employed, we can go with the flow and allow the religious professionals to tell us what to believe. Or, like the women and the other disciples, we can fall down in worship and then obey when we are told to go out and tell others about it.

We weren't there. We didn't see what happened. But we believe it. We believe it in the same way that we believe that WWII happened. We were not there, but we've talked to those who were. We have seen the monuments. We have read the eye-witness accounts. In a similar way, we have the testimony of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, ***"...that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles;***

and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.” If you believe this testimony, we would invite you to do something about it, to obey the good news. The good news is the death, the burial, and the resurrection of Jesus. We obey the good news by reenacting it in our own lives—we die to sin, we allow ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism, and then we are raised up through our faith in the power of God. If you have any questions, we would love to study with you, but if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org