

Sunday, March 31, 2024

Matthew 28:1-15 | "The Greatest Surprise"

Today, we'll be talking about *surprises*. Some people do not like surprises; they would like it if their entire life, *down to the last second*, was structured and specific. After all, to have even the slightest deviation would invite *chaos*. But then others do like surprises; life, for them, ought to have a little unpredictability. Otherwise, could you even call it living if everything was so *painfully* predictable? **Funny enough, these two types of people often marry each other.**

Arguably, the *greatest* surprise of them all was the *resurrection*. If you didn't know, people don't usually come back from the dead, especially after they've been crucified. The Romans were good at a great many things, but they were *experts* when it came to killing people. Yet, despite their best efforts, there is a claim that at least one person came back from the grave: *Jesus Christ*.

Yet, we must ask, is such a claim valid? Did the greatest surprise of them all really occur? If so, that would be both impressive and life-altering. Or is the resurrection nothing more than the greatest hoax in human history? It would still be extraordinary if such a lie had been so popularized, but, practically speaking, it would be pointless.

The only way to determine the validity of the resurrection is to consult the records of those who lived in Jerusalem. Some eyewitnesses *affirmed* that Jesus had risen from the grave, and some *denied* it. Given that none of us, living 2,000+ years later can cross-examine either side for ourselves, we are forced to make a judgment based on written testimony.

But make no mistake, my dear friends; a decision *must* be made. There is no middle ground when it comes to Easter. Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection are astonishing facts or elaborate fiction.

Which side are you on? Believer? Or non-believer? How you answer that question will determine quite a lot.

To see the "surprising-ness" of the resurrection, we must be introduced to a word: "behold." In one sense, "behold" means to look or see, as in, "The grand canyon is a wonder to *behold*." But the word "behold" can also indicate surprise, and it can mean something akin to "you're not going to believe this," "guess what," and "get this." We get this latter meaning from how it is used to translate the Greek term **ἰδοὺ** (*id-oo*) in the N.T. So, look out for the word "behold;" an indicator of surprise.

READ: Matthew 28:1-15 (ESV)

¹ Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, **Mary Magdalene** and the **other Mary** went to see the tomb. ² And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ And for fear of him, the guards trembled and became like dead men.

⁵ But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you.”

⁸ So they [the Marys] departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ And behold, Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” 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 tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.”

¹¹ While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. ¹² And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers ¹³ and said, “Tell people, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ ¹⁴ And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” ¹⁵ So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

Three days after the crucifixion...

i. People saw the empty tomb.

Mary Magdalene, the other Mary (aka, the mother of James and Joseph; cf. Mat. 27:56, 61), and Pilate's guards had a shared experience; they all felt the earthquake and saw the angel. But unlike the Marys, the guards—hardened Roman soldiers—*passed out* and, as Matthew put it, “became like dead men.”

So, while the guards were unconscious, the angel said that Jesus had “risen” and invited the women to “Come, see the place where he lay.” Though we’re not told that they actually did so, one can safely assume they did as they were told. It is far more likely they, devote Jewish women, obeyed rather than disobey a direct order of an angel? The angel then instructed them to relay a message to the apostles: “he [Jesus] has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him.”

But what about the guards?

Sometime after the ladies departed, the guards woke up. We know they must've checked the tomb and found it empty because, later in vs. 11, we are told that, instead of going to Pilate—their commanding officer—they immediately went and said the “*chief priests* [emphasis added] *all that had taken place.*” Why is it important to note that the soldiers went to the chief priests instead of the Pilate? We'll answer that question in a moment.

Had the tomb still been occupied, they likely would've stayed. Abandoning your post would've been met with extreme punishment. The only thing that would compel a Roman soldier to risk being considered MIA was if there was no longer any incentive to remain at their post. For instance, if the tomb they had been guarding was suddenly found empty, the only explanation they had was that they didn't know how exactly because they had passed out.

ii. People talked with Jesus.

The Marys did as they were told and headed to give the good news to the disciples. Matthew tells us they ran with “*fear*” (this is the same word that described the guards when they fainted—cf. Matt. 28:4) and “*joy.*”

Jesus greets them warmly, and they immediately “*take hold of his feet and worshiped him.*” They need no one to tell them the proper protocol. They know Jesus ought to be worshipped. He is God, after all. The resurrection proves that as much.

Also, notice how Jesus' feet could be taken hold of. He was no ghost or spirit. Physically speaking, he was really there. Jesus' soul wasn't the only thing to be resurrected; it was his body, too.

Jesus tells the Marys to, firstly, “*not be afraid.*” It's been quite an overwhelming morning. And then, secondly, “*Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.*” There is little deviation from the Angel's instructions, with one glaring exception: Jesus calls the disciples “*brothers.*” Though they had abandoned him, the Lord would not abandon them. They were still his family, even Peter, who betrayed him. Funny enough, Mark's retelling reveals that the Lord made special mention of Peter (cf. Mar. 16:7).

iii. People lied about the resurrection.

So, why did the soldiers go to the *chief priest* rather than *Pilate*? Because they knew that if anyone could save them from being severely punished, it would've been them. It's bad for the soldiers to claim the disciples stole the body of Jesus while they slept, but it's worse to admit they got weak-kneed (“*trembled*”) and passed out (“*became like dead men*”). Admittedly, they

may still be punished. But this assumes Pilate catches wind of the story from the people and cares enough to verify it. Roman Governors were not known to care much for the claims of the people they ruled. But, even if he did verify it, the chief priests would "satisfy" him, which implies some form of persuasion. The religious leaders had already persuaded Pilate to crucify an innocent man (cf. Matt. 27:20-26; Jn. 19:12) so they could keep these soldiers from any serious harm.

Interestingly, we're not told if the chief priest *actually* believed the guard's report. One assumes they didn't believe it, considering they immediately began disinformation campaigns to discredit the disciples. But it's possible that they believed the reports. As a tactic, bribery is often used to conceal the truth. Though, this theory seems unlikely. I don't think the religious leaders believed the guard's report. The empty tomb and eyewitnesses' testimony were insufficient to convince everyone that Jesus was alive. Though he was told by his fellow apostles that Jesus had risen from the dead, Thomas didn't believe in the resurrection. It took seeing and speaking to the Lord firsthand to convince the doubting disciple (cf. Jn. 20:24-29). So, if one of Jesus' own disciples had a hard time believing that Jesus rose from the dead, then, undoubtedly, the religious leaders would be even harder to convince, even if they had eyewitness testimony from their own guards, which told them otherwise.

Regardless of priests' views on the resurrection, the average person would more easily believe that some soldiers fell asleep at their post, however unlikely that may be, over the possibility that a man rose from the dead.

However, two observations need to be made at this point.

First, the guards were only at the tomb because the chief priest begged Pilate. What was supposed to be an insurance policy to help them combat the lie of the resurrection has now become a liability.

Secondly, if the guards were asleep when Jesus' body was stolen from the tomb, how is it that they can even assert it was the disciples? I guess it's an easy inference. But, at best, that's all it would be. They didn't actually see it with their own eyes.

But it is important to note that while Christians claim that Jesus rose from the dead and non-Christians claim that Christians stole the body of Jesus, **no one denies that, after three days, the tomb was found empty.** The only question is, whom should we believe?

The apostles – A relatively small group of people who had no power and eventually were executed for their insistence that, however unlikely it may seem, Jesus did, in fact, rise from the dead.

- Or -

The chief priests – The corrupt bureaucrats who wielded Judaism for gain and who, if the resurrection was allowed to propagate throughout Israel uncontested, would lose all their wealth, power, and prestige.

RABBIT HOLE: Coincidentally, these competing explanations for why the tomb was empty are also proof that the resurrection (whether factual or not) has been at least a part of Christian apologetics since its inception.¹ That Jesus rose from the dead is not a late addition but was a central claim of the gospels since the start of Christianity (e.g., Paul writes about it in 1 Cor. 15, a letter composed sometime in A.D. 50.). Otherwise, why do all four gospels—three of which were composed sometime between A.D. 50-62—claim an empty tomb?

So, what's the takeaway?

The resurrection is either fact or fiction. Christ is either alive, as the Scriptures assert, or he's dead, and the Bible is the greatest fantasy novel ever produced.

If Christ is dead, our **faith** in the Lord is **worthless**.

READ: 1 Corinthians 15:14(ESV)

“And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your **faith** is in **vain**.”

Without the resurrection, religion is pointless, and all the things that go along with Christianity—i.e., hope, charity, morality, etc.

If Christ is alive, our **labor** in the Lord is **priceless**.

READ: 1 Corinthians 15:58 (ESV)

“Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your **labor** is not in **vain**.”

¹ Wright, N.T., *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, Volume 3, (Minneapolis; Fortress Press, 2003), p. 638-639.

Video Description:

The Greatest Surprise (Matthew 28:1-20)

SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

Today, we'll be talking about *surprises*. Some people do not like surprises; they would like it if their entire life, *down to the last second*, was structured and specific. While others do like surprises; life, for them, ought to have a little unpredictability. This is why, when it comes to the *greatest surprise in human history*—i.e., the resurrection—you're bound to get some mixed responses. Did Jesus really come back three days after being crucified? Or is it the greatest hoax ever?

The only way to determine the validity of Easter is to consult the records of those who lived in Jerusalem at the time of the resurrection. As we'll see, some eyewitnesses *affirmed* that Jesus had risen from the grave, and some *denied* it. Which testimony will convince you? How you answer that question will determine quite a lot.

Pastor's manuscript can be found here:

Grace Pointe Baptist Church

12029 Eastern Ave.

Baltimore, MD 21220

Contact: info@GracePointeLife.com

Website: <https://www.gracepointelife.com>

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