

The Resurrection Hoax

11 Now while they were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened. 12 When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, 13 saying, "Tell them, 'His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.'" 14 "And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will appease him and make you secure." 15 So they took the money and did as they were instructed; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day. (Matt. 28:11-15)

In this science fiction age, some people think that the greatest day in human history would be the day when extra-terrestrials visit the Earth and make themselves known. I don't believe that will happen, since I believe the only extra-terrestrials are the beings known to us as angels and demons, who have already visited our planet.

Indeed, greatest day in human history would be the day our Creator walks among us, conquers our rebellion and its penalty – death. But we believe, and the Bible teaches, that that day has already been. We believe that that day was the day of Jesus' Resurrection. The greatest day in human history took place 1987 years ago.

But whenever you have what is claimed to be such an extraordinary event, there will be those who deny that event, and claim it did not happen, or that it happened in another way, or that there is some other explanation for it.

And the resurrection of Jesus has been claimed to have been a conspiracy, a hoax, a planned, staged, faked event. One man claimed that Jesus staged His own death, by drinking a sedative that mimicked death on the cross, and then revived in the tomb, and pretended to have risen.

Others claimed that someone just made the whole story up so as to deify Jesus. Others have claimed that someone stole the body, and hid it, and then allowed resurrection stories to develop.

The thing about these conspiracies, hoaxes and other passover plots is that there is no evidence for them. No writing from the time even hints at these ideas. There are no historical accounts from the time that even attempt an alternative theory to explain the empty tomb. These were all developed in Europe during the Enlightenment from the 17th century onwards.

There is one exception. The Gospel of Matthew, written somewhere between 50 and around 66 records a conspiracy, a hoax, a plot of a different kind. This is not a hoax to hide the body of Jesus, but a conspiracy to explain the missing body with a false account. This was a hoax to deny the Resurrection, to try to give an alternative explanation for the empty tomb.

Matthew is the only record we have of this plot, who must have obtained the details from sources in Jerusalem. Perhaps some of those originally in the plot became believers and years later shared what had happened.

The amazing thing about this hoax is that everything about it ends up proving the thing it denies. The line from Shakespeare's Hamlet, "thou dost protest too much" means you are overly insistent about something, to the point where the opposite of what you are insisting is probably true.

What we'll see is that this hoax is definitely an example of "thou dost protest too much". As we take it apart, not only will it fail to persuade us of its unbelief, but our faith in the truth of our risen Lord will only grow.

I. How the Hoax Congealed

11 Now while they were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened. 12 When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, 13 saying, "Tell them, 'His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.

Surprisingly, the perpetrators of this conspiracy are not those trying to prove the Resurrection. They turn out to be two unlikely groups: the guard that was posted at the tomb, and the elders and chief priests.

When it comes to resurrection hoaxes the usual suspects are the disciples of Jesus or the women who came to the tomb. But the Gospel accounts tell you exactly how prepared the disciples were to perpetrate a resurrection hoax:

45 When He rose up from prayer, and had come to His disciples, He found them sleeping from sorrow. (Lk. 22:45)

Then all the disciples forsook Him and fled. (Matt. 26:56)

Peter and John followed Jesus to the trials, but after Peter denied Him a third time, we read Peter went out and wept bitterly.

Only John followed Jesus to the Cross. The others were apparently hiding or in utter despair.

The women weren't thinking about a resurrection, because we read they were wondering how they were going to finish embalming the body of Jesus with that stone rolled over the mouth of the tomb.

Mary Magdalene still didn't understand when she saw the angels.

Then they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him." (Jn. 20:13)

The eleven did not believe the women.

9 Then they returned from the tomb and told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. 10 It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary *the mother* of James, and the other *women* with them, who told these things to the apostles. 11 And their words seemed to them like idle tales, and they did not believe them. (Lk. 24:9-11)

Peter and John reaching the empty tomb still and didn't get it.

9 For as yet they did not know the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead. (Jn. 20:9)

It's one of the proofs of the resurrection that the people often accused of stealing the body and hiding it were actually frightened, despondent, not thinking about a resurrection.

On the other hand, the people thinking about the resurrection, wanting to prevent it from happening or from being believed were the enemies of Jesus.

62 On the next day, which followed the Day of Preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees gathered together to Pilate, 63 saying, "Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise.' 64 "Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night and steal Him away, and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead.' So the last deception will be worse than the first." 65 Pilate said to them, "You have a guard; go your way, make *it* as secure as you know how." 66 So they went and made the tomb secure, sealing the stone and setting the

guard. (Matt. 27:62-66)

But once this guard came back on Sunday morning with an account of a burst-open tomb, they developed a story.

Their story was this: the soldiers were asleep, and while they were asleep, the disciples of Jesus crept up, rolled the stone away, took the body of Jesus, but left and folded the graveclothes. To get these soldiers to risk their reputations and even their lives to perpetrate this story, they gave them a large amount of money. We don't know how much, but since soldiers could be executed for sleeping on duty, and since telling people that they were sleeping guards is telling everyone you were a total failure as a soldier, this money had to be substantial- enough for the guard to probably retire on.

Now that was the hoax, and Matthew tells us that it eventually became a commonly believed idea amongst the Jewish people of his day.

But just as many a lie traps the liar, so this hoax in so many ways betrays the truth. What it attempts to suppress and censor actually comes protruding through the cover.

II. What the Hoax Revealed

What does this hoax reveal? Several things.

13 saying, "Tell them, 'His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.

First of all, it proved that the body was missing. There would be no need for this conspiracy, no need for this theory if the body of Jesus was still in the Tomb. If the women had gone to the wrong tomb, or if the disciples of Jesus had all had hallucinations of the Resurrection, the enemies of Jesus could still have had the solid, physical evidence that Jesus was dead, buried, and His body was in the tomb. But this hoax only underlines what almost everyone admits: the body truly was missing.

Second, it tells us that whatever happened, the soldiers had forsaken their post and were afraid. 14 "And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will appease him and make you secure." 15 So they took the money and did as they were instructed

Think of it: why did they report what had happened to the Jewish leaders? Why not report it to Pontius Pilate? Probably because they knew that Pilate would have had them executed for losing the body, no matter what the explanation.

They were afraid because of what had happened: what they had seen, the fact that the body was gone under their watch and afraid that they would not be believed. If they had been attacked by sword-wielding disciples, they would not have been afraid. They would have called for reinforcements and gone looking for those disciples. But they had seen something that terrified them, and were now terrified of further consequences.

Third, it shows that the priests were desperate to get another explanation out to the public. 12 When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, 13 saying, "Tell them, 'His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.'

Their theory was deeply flawed and illogical. First, how would sleeping soldiers know what happened while they slept? Second, how could any guards have slept through the rolling of a several tonne stone? Third, why would the guards have admitted to an offense punishable by death-sleeping on their watch? Fourth, why did they not immediately prosecute the disciples for stealing the body? In the book of Acts, Peter and John appear openly and publicly before the very same

chief priests. This theory was the best they could do, but it was still very poor. They had a dilemma: an empty tomb, three days after the Crucifixion, with soldiers having been eyewitnesses of a supernatural event. Their flawed and faulty theory shows how much they did not want the truth to come out.

The hoax, in trying to cover up the truth actually showed that the body was missing, that something had frightened the guards off, and that a very implausible scenario was offered to explain it all.

But in the end, this hoax was developed because of a truth.

III. What the Hoax Concealed

11 Now while they were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened.

What had happened?

2 And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it. 3 His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. 4 And the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead *men*. (Matt. 28:2-4)

Now many things took place that Sunday morning. It is quite difficult to take the four Gospels and place in order what happened. But it seems to be something like this:

Very early in the morning, Three women (Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome head to the tomb, wondering who will roll the stone away. Upon arriving, they see two angels, who has rolled the stone away, who shows them where the body lay originally. They are told to return and tell the others. Mary Magdalene outpaces the others and tells the 11, who do not believe her. Peter and John go to the tomb, followed by Mary Magdalene. John gets there first, but Peter enters first. They inspect the empty tomb, the folded graveclothes.

Once gone, Mary again sees two angels, and then sees the risen Lord. She returns to tell the others. The other two women are met by the Lord, who confirms the angels' words. They return to the eleven, who do not believe them.

Jesus appears to the two on the road to Emmaus. They return and tell the eleven. Jesus appears to the 10, Thomas absent.

But before all those things, and before those witnesses, was what these guards witnessed.

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Very early on Sunday morning, not recorded in narrative, but recorded all over the New Testament, God raised Jesus from the dead.

God the Father raised Jesus from the dead: God the Father who raised Him from the dead), (Gal. 1:1)

God the Son raised Himself from the dead: 18 "No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father." (Jn. 10:18)

God the Spirit raised Him from the dead: But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, (Rom. 8:11)

The human soul and spirit of Jesus, already in perfect union with the Logos, second Person of the Trinity, returned to the human body of Jesus in the tomb. That body did not disappear or disintegrate. Instead, the now mangled and mutilated body of Jesus was transformed. It was transformed from a lowly body to a glorious body. It was sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption, sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory, sown in weakness, it is raised in power, sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. With one exception: this glorious, incorruptible, powerful spiritual body deliberately retained the wounds and scars of the Cross: so they would know it is the same Jesus who died, and so that through all eternity we would see the cost of our redemption.

We don't know what accompanied this moment, whether it was silent, or whether there was the sound of music, whether light streamed out of the tomb or whether it was a blink of an eye. But we know that the Risen Jesus folded up some of the garments and placed them there. And then, His glorious body did not need the stone rolled away, for He could enter rooms with closed doors and leave.

But instead, something needed to happen to let others in, and reveal to the world that this had taken place. So we read that an angel from Heaven, with a face like lightning appeared, and rolled back the stone, bursting the Roman seal of ropes that had been placed over it.

The guards, probably a minimum of four, but possibly many more, were overwhelmed with terror. Some fainted, some were paralysed with fear. When they recovered, they undoubtedly inspected the tomb, saw it was empty, and knew they had to tell someone. They did not report to their own tribune, for fear of execution, so they went to the Jewish priests. They knew they had information which the priests would find valuable to suppress, and this was their only chance of survival.

As they went in to Jerusalem, the women arrived at the tomb.

And in the days that followed, those fearful, hiding disciples became public witnesses of the resurrection. When threatened to stop, they had this simple answer: "For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard." (Acts 4:20)

Every year, we will continue to hear of theories to explain away the single greatest day in human history. But every time, each one will only make the truth more evident.

Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect? 4 Certainly not! Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar. (Rom. 3:3-4)

Because He is risen He is risen indeed.