

MATTHEW 28:1-15 SERMON NOTES

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THE INCONVENIENT TRUTH - THE EMPTY TOMB

In 2006 the then US vice president Al Gore fronted a documentary about Global Warming. It was titled 'An Inconvenient truth'. I have titled my talk today **The Inconvenient Truth - The Empty Tomb**.

Today, it is increasing hard to determine what is truth and what is falsehood. This has escalated with proliferation of social media platforms. Anyone can put stuff on the web to a global audience. False or fake news is really hard to spot.

For example, here is a question for people under 18. Are you ready?

"How many animals of each kind did Moses take on the Ark?"

You see, it is really easy to make a mistake when error is hidden beside some truth. Moses didn't take animals into the Ark, it was Noah.

I don't know about you, but I really struggle to understand the mentality behind some of the fake news items and conspiracy theories that are sweeping the globe at present. Many of them specifically designed to confuse and defraud. And, I struggle to understand why so many people are sucked in by them.

Anyway, my question for you today is:

What do you do with an inconvenient truth?

In the passage we are studying this morning we are presented with a conspiracy theory that was circulating soon after Jesus' death. Matthew 28 verses 11-15.

Let's read about it. We will start with the earlier background in chapter 27 verses 62-66. Can you follow in your Bibles. We pick up the story on the day after the crucifixion, which was actually the Sabbath.

27:62 The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. ⁶³ "Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.' ⁶⁴ So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first."

⁶⁵ "You have a guard," Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." ⁶⁶ So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.

28:1 After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

² There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. ⁴ The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

As we heard last week, in Verses 5-10 Matthew recounts the experience of the women who went to the tomb that Sunday morning. Now to our main text - picking up the story at verse 11.

*28:11 While the women were on their way (that is, to tell the disciples what they had seen) **some** of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests **everything that had happened**. ¹² When the chief priests had met with the elders and **devised a plan**, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, ¹³ telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' ¹⁴ If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." ¹⁵ So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.*

Let's pray. Lord thank you for these scriptures that we have read. We know your word is a wonderful light for our path. May you enlighten us again as we allow your word shine on us. Amen

Matthew is the only gospel writer to describe the posting of the guard and the conspiracy we have read about. There are a number of possible reasons for this. Not only is Matthew's gospel written a bit later than Mark and Luke's, but also, he is writing to a Jewish audience, which would have, by then been well aware of this stolen corpse story.

To help us understand the context we need some background.

It was a Roman custom for the bodies of crucified people to be left on their crosses in full view to deter others from standing up to Roman law. However, under Jewish law, the dead had to be buried by sundown on the same day. The bodies would then be buried in a dishonourable place. The Roman's did allow the removal of the body, but it required permission from the governor.

However, it was never given in cases of treason.

So, when Joseph surreptitiously asked Pilate to take down the body and put it in an upper-class tomb, the rest of the Sanhedrin were obviously taken by surprise. And it was probably this that prompted them ask for a guard because they were worried that the disciples might steal the body. The fact that Pilate allowed it indicates his understanding that Jesus was not guilty of treason.

Now what about the guards in today's account? It is often assumed that the guards were Roman soldiers. However, there are a number of reasons why they are most likely to be temple guards.

Since it was a Roman execution, the Jewish authorities had to ask Pilate if a guard could be posted at the tomb. In chapter 27 verse 65, Pilate says, "You have a guard. Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." In other words, he is refusing to use his soldiers. But he gives permission for Jewish temple police to guard the tomb and to seal it. You can imagine Pilate being a bit cynical about it. They were of afraid Jesus when he was alive; now dead they are still afraid! He says, "Yes you can secure the tomb as well as you can but use your own police."

That the guards were most likely temple police is confirmed later when they report to the Jewish authorities **not to Pilate**. In the conspiracy, the guards were then bribed to say that they fell asleep. Would a **Roman** soldier take a bride and also admit to sleeping on the job? Admission of both could result in the death penalty – doing either was tantamount to suicide.

So, we come to our main text and the inconvenient truth.

I have three points

- 1. Witnesses to the Inconvenient truth,**
- 2. Hiding the Inconvenient truth, and**
- 3. The Implications of the Inconvenient truth.**

1. WITNESSES TO THE INCONVENIENT TRUTH: THE GUARDS

The guards were the first witnesses of the empty tomb.

Immediately after the angel rolled the stone away what happened to the stunned guards? Verse 11 says? "*some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests **everything that had happened.***"

The guards have left the scene before the women arrived. So the chief priests must have heard this report before the disciples did. Can you imagine the scene as these frightened guards turn up very early on Sunday morning to the surprise of their employers. They have been guarding the grave for less than a day! I imagine a dialogue like this.

"Hey what's going on chaps. Why aren't you guarding the tomb?"

And one of the guards blurts out, "the body's gone, it disappeared."

"What?" says the chief priest, "Ok guys, let's calm down and explain."

Another guard replies, "It was at the end of the 4th watch, just before dawn. Suddenly we were all wide awake. The ground was heaving and we were dazzled by a bright light. An angel glowing like the sun almost blinded us. And he went straight to the tomb. He broke the seal and rolled the stone away. Then he sat on it almost daring us to

challenge him. And the tomb was empty – the body wasn't there at all. Just the grave cloths where it had been. We were completely terrified and some of the guys fainted. We got out of there fast."

The implications of what had happened must surely have not been lost on the chief priests. It must have been their worst nightmare.

Remember what had happened only about 40 hours before. They had engineered things so that they had Jesus where they wanted him – hanging on a cross. They were in control or so they thought. And they mock him. *"He saved others, but he can't save himself! He's the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we'll believe in him."*

Now staring them in the face is a situation much more stunning. Will they believe in him now? We're talking here about the chief priests who were mainly Sadducees. They didn't even believe in the resurrection of anyone. Humans die, full stop. That's the end. The finality. They don't even believe in the immortality of the soul. But now faced with incontrovertible evidence that Jesus has risen, the truth is just too inconvenient for them. Their paralysed minds and rock-hard hearts will not change their unbelief and apostasy. So, what do they do? They call a meeting. They plan how to hide the inconvenient truth.

2. HIDING THE INCONVENIENT TRUTH.

Verse 12, *When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.'"* The language used here shows that meeting is a formal one with the majority of the 70 members of the Sanhedrin. This is the highest court in Israel, whose job it is to administer justice and truth.

Earlier they had met formally before taking Jesus to Pilate. They needed to engineer a suitable charge so Pilate would execute him. Now they get together again to arrive at an official resolution to do what? To lie. A convenient lie. They didn't merely ignore the inconvenient truth but spread falsehood. Their deceit knows no bounds. Just as they had sought and protected false witnesses at Jesus trial they willingly promise to protect the guards as false witnesses. And money is no problem when it comes to hiding the truth and hiding their lies.

Did you notice that in their lies they are admitting that the tomb is empty? The body is gone. You see the evidence is too strong to deny. These are people who are not in any way sympathetic to the idea of a resurrection, but their admission is major evidence in its favour. They knew that it was impossible for the crucified body to escaped from the grave.

They had gone to extraordinary lengths to prevent the body from being stolen. Pilate allowed them to the organise a guard and place a seal on the tomb. Why? Their reason was so that the disciples wouldn't steal the body and fraudulently say Jesus' had risen. Now, the very scenario they tried to prevent, has become their story to hide the inconvenient truth. Rather than admitting the truth they formally decide to deceive the nation.

So, what about the conspiracies to hide the truth. When checking out conspiracy theories you really need to think deeply and objectively. You need to check your assumptions. Often fake information is dressed up to look authentic. When we have a close look at the stolen corpse theory it just doesn't stack up.

In fact, the story seems completely ridiculous in at least 5 ways.

Firstly, where were the disciples? Since Jesus' arrest they have almost completely disappeared from view. They were not expecting a resurrection. It seems that the Jewish leaders understood Jesus' claims of rising better than his followers. They had run for their lives. They are still hiding in fear. Grave robbing was a serious crime. Not only did they have no motive to steal the body, the idea couldn't have been further from their minds.

Secondly, are we to believe that while all the guards were asleep, some of the disciples crept up, broke the seal and rolled a 2-tonne stone away from the grave without a sound. Then they lifted the corpse without spreading the 35 kg of spices everywhere and escaped with the body completely unnoticed.

Thirdly, if the guards were so deeply asleep, how did they know who a stolen the body? And if they did wake-up during the body snatch, why didn't they raise the alarm.

Fourthly, if the Jewish authorities had evidence of the body theft, anyone would ask why they didn't have the disciples arrested and punished?

Lastly, within a few weeks the disciples were being persecuted, beaten, and imprisoned for boldly preaching that Jesus had risen. Are we to believe that they were willing to die for a lie?

As for the guards what were their motives for going along with the conspiracy?

Were they just really embarrassed about failing to do the job they were asked to do? Maybe they were so shocked and dazed by what happened they thought it was all a dream? So, they agreed to lie to please their bosses. Or more likely the offer of a large pay-out sealed their decision to accept the hush money and go along with the fraud.

Well, you may say, so what. It was just a convenient lie done over 2000 years ago. What's the big deal? Which brings me to my last point,

3. THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE INCONVENIENT TRUTH.

The empty tomb provides important historical evidence for the resurrection. If it was all a conspiracy, a hoax, then there are huge implications for us and for the church for the last 2000 years.

My question to you earlier was, **What do you do with an inconvenient truth?**

We have seen what the Jewish leaders did with the news of the resurrection. They chose to reject it and lie that it ever happened. The guards sold their souls to go along with the lie. But what are we going to do with it?

Are we going to just ignore it and pretend that it never happened, as most of the world does even at Easter? If it is actually the truth and we accept it, then that changes everything. It is no longer inconvenient.

The truth of the resurrection then is the most momentous truth this world has ever heard.

But does the truth of this good news of the gospel message make any difference to us? The truth that Jesus died for our sins. *That he was buried, that he was raised to life again. That he was witnessed alive by not only that small band of disciples but by hundreds of people.*

That truth completely changed those scared young men. It transformed them into fearless preachers who were willing to die for it and many did. In a few years that truth caused these men to turn the world upside down.

This is what Paul said about this truth: *"If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Also those Christ followers who have died are lost. ...and we are of all people most to be pitied."* 1 Cor. 15 17-19.

The resurrection proves that what Jesus said about Himself is true. It also proves that what the Bible says about the world is also true. We don't need the Bible to tell us that this world is in a terrible mess. It is a world that needs saving from sin.

The resurrection also proves that God will judge the fallen world one day. As Paul said, *"God is now declaring to people that everyone everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead."*

If the good news of the gospel is truly good news what are we doing with it?

Most of us are probably not guilty of openly denying or lying about the truth like the religious leaders. We may however be more willing to hide the truth about our beliefs to friends and colleagues. We may be fearful of ridicule or rejection. Is it too inconvenient?

Good news is for sharing.

For the disciples the empty tomb was only the beginning. It is the same for us. May Easter not be an end but the start of something new, to spur us into being more forthright in sharing the truth.