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Matthew 28:11 - 28:15



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this discourse, Steve Gregg examines the events after the resurrection of Jesus as described in Matthew 28:11-15. The passage includes the account of the guards who witnessed the resurrection and how the chief priests attempted to suppress the story. Gregg points out that the guards' witness and the wounds on the corpse they saw support the reality of the resurrection. Moreover, the skeptic's argument for a missing body does not hold up against the evidence and historical context presented in the text.

Transcript

In the 28th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, we have the account of Matthew recording events that transpired after the resurrection of Jesus. He tells of a few of the appearances of Christ after his resurrection, although the other Gospels include details and actually a larger number of appearances of Christ after his resurrection. But there is one story in this Matthew's account that is unique to his account and is not mentioned by the other Gospel writers.

That is that which is found here in verses 11-15. We read, Now, while they were going, now, they means the women. The women had come to the tomb.

They had seen an angel. And the angel had told them to go tell the disciples that Jesus has risen. And so, they actually started in that direction and they encountered Jesus himself.

And he encouraged them and told them the same thing, go and tell my disciples that I've risen and I'll meet them in Galilee. And so, that's the context of this statement of verse 11. Now, while they were going, behold, some of the guards came into the city, that would be into Jerusalem, and reported to the chief priests all things that had happened.

Let's stop for a moment here. What did they report to the chief priests? Did they report that Jesus had risen from the dead? Well, it's not likely that that was part of their report because we don't have any record that they saw him rise from the dead or ever heard that he had risen from the dead. They may have assumed it.

They may have put it together. What did the guards actually see that they could have reported? Well, earlier we read that as they were guarding the tomb, there was a great earthquake. And that would have gotten their attention.

And an angel came down from heaven who had a very striking appearance, his face shining like lightning, his clothing as white as snow. This angel came down from heaven, opened the tomb, moved the stone, and sat on the stone looking at him. This so terrified the guards that they fell dead away faint and were unconscious.

At the time, the women came to the tomb and received instructions from the angel of what to do. And the women were gone apparently by the time the guards came to. Now, when the guards came to, we don't have any record of them doing anything except going into the city.

But we can be fairly sure that when they came to and saw the tomb opened, they would have wanted to look inside. Remember, these guys were sentries. They were posted there to guard a body.

And they were specifically supposed to guard it against theft. Very important. They were expecting the disciples to come and steal the body, and so the guards were put there to prevent this.

And now they wake up from having been unconscious. And they find the tomb opened, and certainly they would have looked in to see whether their charge had been lost. And sure enough, it was lost.

It was gone. And so they may not have known whether Jesus rose from the dead or not. But they ran into town and reported what they knew, namely the tomb was empty.

And they might have reported that there had been an earthquake. They might have even mentioned the angel coming down. It's hard to say.

But they certainly indicated that the body was gone. Now, it's interesting. They did not go to the governor.

These Roman soldiers were apparently answerable to the governor. But they went to the chief priests. And this is because they knew that the chief priests would have a vested interest in concealing this matter, or at least in putting a spin upon it.

And so it says, Now, the chief priests did not want the story getting around as it was reported by the guards, namely that something supernatural had happened and the body of Jesus is no longer available. They would much rather believe that something very natural had happened, that some men had come and taken the body away, although no one could really say honestly that that had happened. No one had witnessed that happen.

And yet that was a much better story for the purposes of the Jewish chief priests who had had Jesus crucified. Because if the disciples stole the body, of course that makes the disciples criminals along with Jesus. Whereas if they didn't steal the body, it raises the very strong possibility that Jesus rose from the dead, as he said he would do, and that would give all kinds of headaches to the chief priests for that story to get out.

And so they were willing to pay money after they took counsel. The counsel got together and decided what to do, and they decided to put up some money, hush money really, to pay these soldiers so they wouldn't tell the truth. And they said, you just tell people that the disciples stole the body while you slept.

Now, it's interesting that the chief priest said, if news of this comes to the governor's ears, that would be Pilate's ears, then we'll cover for them. We'll secure you in this. Which probably means they'd buy off the governor too.

You see, the Roman governor would be under obligation to arrest these soldiers and probably have them executed if he learned that they had fallen asleep at their post. Now, in fact, they had not. They never did fall asleep at their post.

All this happened while they were awake. But that doesn't make a very good story. If they'd been awake and the disciples came to steal the body, then the soldiers would have fought them and would have either killed the disciples or the disciples would have killed the soldiers.

In any case, there would have been signs of a struggle and some wounded or dead bodies around, and there was no such evidence, so they couldn't claim that. If the disciples stole the body, it had to be without a struggle, because no evidence of a struggle could be produced. And if they were going to steal it without a struggle, it would have to be as the guards slept, because nothing else could have prevented the guards from defending their watch.

Now, here's the problem. Guards are not allowed to sleep. Sentries are supposed to stay awake.

It's punishable by death for a sentry to fall asleep when he's supposed to be watching something. This has been true in even much more modern times, in times of warfare, but it was true in Roman times. We know this is true because we have not only secular history to tell us, but even the Book of Acts tells us of certain guards that were watching Peter when he was in prison, and he was supernaturally released by an angel, and the guards were commanded by Herod to be put to death, because you're not allowed to lose that which you're guarding.

That's simply the law. So these soldiers, if they fell asleep and lost their charge, they could be put to death. So for them to circulate this story that they slept and the disciples

stole the body would be to circulate a story which would be against them.

If the governor heard about it, it could result in their arrest and execution. So the Sanhedrin said, well, we'll sweeten the deal. We'll give you some incentive to tell this story.

We'll give you a chunk of money here, and if the governor hears about it and you start to get in trouble, we'll pay him off too. And so the soldiers went out, apparently, and told that story. It says, so they took the money, and they did as they were instructed.

And it says, the saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day. Until this day would mean, of course, in Matthew's day when he was writing this, which was probably about 40 years later. But Matthew could have written that even in our time and said this story continues until this day, because it is the story that continues until this day in many cases, that the disciples stole the body.

In fact, it is the only credible story, if indeed it is credible at all, that stands as any kind of an alternative to the true story of the resurrection. When you think about it, the story of the resurrection is very much assisted by the fact that there was an empty tomb. And that there was an empty tomb can hardly be denied historically.

The death of Jesus is a known historical fact, not only from the Gospels, but from other contemporary records. Josephus, the Jewish historian, records the death of Jesus as a separate and non-Christian historian. So does Tacitus, a Roman historian of the period.

He was not a Christian either. There are reports of the death of Jesus, in other words, from contemporary history, other than the Gospels. So that Jesus lived and died and was crucified in the manner that he was is not disputable.

It is supported by historical documents of the first order of reliability. However, that he rose from the dead is only confirmed in the Gospels. But the fact that the disciples reported Jesus risen from the dead a few days after he had been buried, and that that report was not a welcome story, that is, the leaders of the Jews did not like that report and they would love to have disproved it, indicates that the tomb of Jesus was empty when the story began to be circulated.

Otherwise, those who wish to discredit the story could simply have gone to the tomb, exhumed the body, and presented the rotting body of Jesus and said, listen, these guys are saying Jesus rose from the dead, here he is right here, we went to the tomb, here's the body, let's hear no more of this nonsense. And indeed we would have heard no more of that nonsense if that had been done. The fact that this never was done suggests that the body was not available for viewing.

That is to say, the tomb where he was buried did not contain the body. The enemies of Christianity were never able to find the body of Jesus, even though they no doubt went

to the tomb to look for it. That's where I'd look for it if I were them.

And yet their inability to produce the body argues eloquently for the fact that the tomb was empty. Now how did the tomb get empty? There's only two possibilities that make sense. One is that which is recorded in the Gospels, namely that Jesus rose from the dead and he presumably walked out of the tomb, and that's why the tomb was empty.

He left under his own power. The other possibility is that Jesus did not rise from the dead and his body was removed from the tomb by someone else. But there's not very many people who would have any motivation for moving the body.

The Romans would have no motivation for doing so, nor would the Jews. And if they did have some reason for doing so, they would have no reason to keep it concealed. In fact, they'd have great incentive to reveal where they'd moved the body to so that they could silence the testimony of those who said that Jesus rose from the dead.

The only people that might conceivably have a motive for stealing the body and keeping it hidden would be those who wanted to support a notion that Jesus had rose from the dead, though he really hadn't. Those who would want to purport that would be, no doubt, the disciples, because they were the ones who were soon afterward preaching that Jesus rose from the dead. In other words, a sensible person would say, if the body was stolen by anybody, the disciples seemed to be the only people who could have had a motive.

But then, once we say that, we might question, but did they have a motive? Did the disciples have something to motivate them to steal the body, even though there were guards there guarding it, they would take their own life into their hands to steal the body, in order to argue that it had risen from the dead? Let me ask you this, why would they do so? We might say, by retrospect, well, they became very famous men. They are the apostles. They wrote the Bible.

They are remembered fondly by all the Christians in all history. But hold on a minute. They had no way of knowing that Christianity would become so influential.

They had no way of knowing that they would become famous. The only thing they could have anticipated would be martyrdom, because if they were preaching that Jesus rose from the dead in the same town, that he had been crucified in, there would be every reason to expect themselves to get crucified, too, as his associates. He was, after all, condemned as a criminal, and those who were associated with him were in danger of being arrested on the same charges.

And yet, they did claim that he rose from the dead. They did not make any money on this claim, by the way. The disciples were not rich men.

They were poor men, and they did not make themselves rich on this testimony. There is nothing, really, that we can find that would provide incentive for them to leave the

vocations they knew, fishing, tax collecting, those kinds of things, and go into the business of starting a religion, something that, naturally speaking, they were not very eminently qualified to do. These men were not eloquent.

They were not Bible scholars. In fact, one might argue, how did they? How did they so successfully lead the Christian movement at the beginning? Some of them, I mean, they certainly were not men with great religious training. How did they become so influential? Well, the book of Acts actually tells us the answer to that.

It was that Jesus worked through them, working miracles to get the attention of the public. And it was as he worked miracles among them that they convinced the world that Jesus had risen from the dead and that he was still active among them. But without those miracles, they could hardly have been expected to succeed, and they couldn't have anticipated those miracles in advance.

There's no reason to believe that these men would have wanted to steal a body, pretend that it had risen from the dead, and set up a religious system that would be almost impossible to anticipate success from. How could they hope to convince people that a man had risen from the dead and that he was the Messiah? They couldn't present the body, they couldn't present the living Jesus, because he ascended into heaven. Why would they even purport to have such a story if it wasn't true? It doesn't resemble the story of anything else that Judaism anticipated in the Messiah.

And for reasons like this, we can argue the disciples had no motivation. They had nothing to gain. All they gained was persecution, and eventually martyrdom for being the leaders of the Christian movement.

There's really nothing there to motivate or give incentive for them to lie about this. The second question we have is if they were motivated to steal a body, could they have pulled it off? Well, that's doubtful, because their presence was anticipated. That's why the guards were there.

The Jews anticipated the disciples might try to come and steal the body, and so they put a guard there. We don't know how large the group of guards was, but it was large enough to anticipate 12 apostles coming. And so the guards were trained soldiers.

They're called soldiers throughout this thing. The disciples were not trained soldiers. They were fishermen and peasants and other things like that.

The likelihood is not great that the disciples could have overpowered the guards that were there anticipating them and ready for them and armed for them. So I don't believe the disciples, A, had a motive to do it. Secondly, I don't believe they had the ability to do it.

And there's a third thing. If they had the motive and if they had the ability, and if they

could have overpowered the guards, how could they have concealed the fact that they had done so? In other words, let's give the skeptics this, that the disciples overpowered the guards and took the body. Would this not result in some dead guards or at least some wounded ones? The guards would not give up their charge without a struggle.

That's what they were there for, to fight for the protection of that corpse. They would have fought and either won or lost. If they lost, they'd be dead or at least badly wounded.

And yet there was never any evidence presented that the guards had had a struggle. No wounded guards, no dead guards. You see, even if the disciples could overpower the guards and had a motive to do so, they could not have concealed afterwards the fact that that's what had happened, because the wounds or the corpses of the guards themselves would bear witness to what had happened.

But no such evidence was ever even suggested. Instead, the evidence was given that while the guards slept, the disciples took the body. Now, why would that story be given? Well, simply because there was no evidence of a struggle.

If the guards had not been asleep and the disciples showed up, there would have been a struggle. But if the guards slept through the whole thing, then there would be no need for a struggle and the disciples might well have stolen the body. The question is, could the disciples have found the guards asleep and all the guards would have slept through that noisy business of breaking the stone loose and rolling it and getting the body out? There'd be a lot of puffing and panting and groaning and scraping and hammering and chiseling and so forth going on.

I mean, I do not believe that Roman guards typically would fall asleep at their post at all. And if they did, they wouldn't all fall asleep at the same time. And if they did all fall asleep at the same time, they would not remain asleep during that whole noisy affair.

No, it just does not make any sense. To say that the disciples stole the body either by overpowering the guards or while the guards slept, neither story really makes any sense. And what does make sense is the story that we're told by the witnesses, and that is that Jesus rose from the dead.

Now let me just anticipate that some listeners may be saying, Steve, that doesn't make sense. It makes much more sense, no matter how improbable it is, it makes much more sense to say that someone stole the body than to say that a body rose from the dead because bodies simply don't rise from the dead. Well, that's not true at all.

First of all, there are many modern cases documented of people who were clinically dead and came back to life. So the whole idea of somebody being really dead and then really coming back to life is not really that unheard of. Secondly, during Jesus' ministry, he had

himself raised some people from the dead.

And so both medically in modern times and biblically, in Old and New Testament times, there were people raised from the dead. The idea that a man might come back from the dead is simply not inconceivable. Furthermore, when you add to that that Jesus was who he claimed to be, and he proved it by many miraculous signs, and that he claimed that he would rise from the dead, that makes it all the more probable that he would rise from the dead.

And then when you have the witnesses of four writers and upwards of 500 people who saw at one time Jesus after he rose from the dead, you have additional reason to believe he rose from the dead. There's nothing intrinsically improbable about it. It's very agreeable with what he claimed he would do, and it's agreeable with the fact that many, many witnesses say they saw him after he rose from the dead.

In fact, it's the most reasonable thing in the world, given the data, given the evidence available, to suggest Jesus rose from the dead is the only reasonable thing to suggest. In fact, only one thing would make it unreasonable, and that would be if I or you would decide to believe that supernatural things do not occur. Now, there are many who have made that decision, and it is their conviction that supernatural things do not occur, that there are no miracles.

However, there is no evidence for this conclusion. It is simply a faith statement. If you are one of those who say there is no such thing as the supernatural, you are simply expressing a religious sentiment that you hold.

You are not expressing anything that has been or ever could be proven scientifically, nor are you stating anything for which evidence can be produced. You are simply making a statement of your faith. As a matter of fact, I would say you're making a statement of your bigotry, because to say that such and such a thing cannot happen, even though you have no evidence that it cannot happen, is to be bigoted.

It's less bigoted to say, well, something could happen, whether I've seen it or not. It may be that I'm not aware of any case of a miracle occurring, or I've never observed a miracle, but I cannot say that there has never been a miracle, or that it could not ever be a miracle. That is being what we call open-minded.

The reason I'm a Christian is because I'm more open-minded than a skeptic. Skeptics sometimes think we're closed-minded, but the skeptic is the one who's closed-minded. He rules out the possibility of miracles right from the start, and then tries to find explanations for the apparently miraculous.

A more open-minded person says, well, you know, I don't think miracles occur every day. I don't see them very often. In fact, I may have never seen one, but that doesn't mean

that they can't occur.

Who am I to suggest that everything I've seen exhausts the possibilities? There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamed of in your philosophy, as Shakespeare said. And I think that it is this closed-minded bigot that decides in advance that there are no miracles, and only that person finds it unreasonable to believe that Jesus rose from the dead. Because if we allow that some miracles could occur, there's no miracle more likely to occur, or more likely to have occurred, based on the witnesses, than the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

And only an a priori prejudice against the supernatural, a bigoted one at that, could make this an unreasonable suggestion. We have many witnesses. On less witness than this, a man could be put to death in a court of law.

But we know that Jesus has risen from the dead because we have great witnesses, and because we can know him ourselves today.