

April 16, 2017 by Steve Brandon



Passion Week - Resurrection Sunday

Matthew 28

Passion Week (Sunday)
Matthew 28

1. The First Responders (28:1-10)
2. The First Deniers (28:11-15)
3. The First Priority (28:16-20)

He is risen!
He is risen indeed!

This past week at Rock Valley Bible Church, we have been focusing our attention upon the Passion Week. That is, the time between Palm Sunday and this morning, Resurrection Sunday. Our attention has been given to Matthew's account, which is found in Matthew 21-28.

Last Sunday morning, we began in Matthew 21, looking at the events of the week. In chapter 21, we saw the Triumphal entry. We saw Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, proclaimed by the crowds to be the Messiah! But what began in triumph soon led to conflict, as the religious leaders wanted nothing of Jesus. And so, in chapter 22, they came to Jesus with questions, not trying to learn from him, but trying to trap him. And Jesus passed the test. He turned the tables so that none dared to ask him any more questions.

Jesus then, in Matthew 23, pronounced curses upon the hypocritical Pharisees, who looked good on the outside, but were corrupt to the core on the inside. In Matthew 24 and 25, we see Jesus telling his disciples of the things to come. He will return and set all matters straight. So, "Be ready!" is the message Jesus told his disciples.

Then on Friday, just two days ago, we worked through the account of the crucifixion from Matthew 26-27. We saw Jesus celebrate the Passover for the last time with the disciples. We saw Jesus praying in Gethsemane, and then betrayed by the Judas. We saw the unjust trials of Jesus, condemning him to death. We saw the beating of Jesus and his crucifixion. And we left him in the tomb.

But the story of Jesus doesn't end in the tomb. It ends just as it began, in triumph. It ends with the resurrection!

Let's begin by reading the account in Matthew 28. If you haven't done so already, I invite you to open your Bibles to Matthew 28. I want to read the chapter in its entirety.

Matthew 28

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. 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. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 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." So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."

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

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

In verse 1, we encounter two women, "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary" (verse 1). These were the same women that were with Jesus in His burial. Matthew 27:61 tells us, "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb." You can simply call these women, "The Marys." Or, by way of outline, you can call them, ...

1. The First Responders (28:1-10)

These are the ones who first saw the risen Jesus.

Once the Marys left the tomb, surely they had returned home before the beginning of the Passover celebration, which would begin at sun down. They spent the Passover in their homes, not daring to walk to the distance to the tomb during the Sabbath day. But, the moment the Sabbath was over, just "as it began to dawn," (NASB) "[they] went to see the tomb" (Matthew 28:1).

They came at their very first opportunity. They came, looking for Jesus. Their coming to the tomb was an act of devotion. They weren't simply coming to "look at the grave" as an observer. They were looking for the body of Jesus. Mark tells us that they brought spices and were coming to the grave to "anoint Him" (Mark 16:1).

Although Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus had initially anointed the body of Jesus, it needed more spices, which these women were bringing. They loved the Lord Jesus and were faithful to Him even after His death by doing one final kind deed for His body that would soon decay. And yet, we know that the Lord had promised not to "allow His Holy One to undergo decay" (NASB, Psalm 16:10).

And so, when these women came to the scene, they didn't find what they had expected to see. They were expecting to see a grave with a giant round stone covering the entrance to the tomb. According to Mark's account, the stone was the center of their discussion along the way. They were discussing with themselves how they were going to roll the stone out of the way (Mark 16:4). It was so "very large" (Mark 16:4) that they knew that they would need help. The stone was too large for two women to handle. Perhaps they were hoping for the gardener of the cemetery to be around to come to their aid and help move the stone for them (John 20:15).

There were a few surprises in store for them. First of all, the stone that covered the entrance to the tomb was already "rolled back" from the tomb (Matt. 28:2). This stone was no longer covering the entrance to the tomb. Rather, it was away from the entrance and they could enter the tomb easily. But that wasn't the only surprise. Seated upon the large, round stone was an angel, whose "appearance was like lighting, and his clothing as white as snow" (verse 3).

According to verse 2, it was this angel who had moved the stone away. Perhaps he moved it using a "great earthquake" that verse 2 mentions. Perhaps he simply used his strength to roll it away all by himself. From other accounts we have of angels, certainly this one had the strength to do such a thing.

At any rate, his appearance stunned the guards. Verse 4 tells us that the guards "for fear of him." And they "became like dead men." In other words, they were "scared stiff!" At first, their reaction was one of fear and trembling. But, quickly after this, these guards froze. They were in a state of shock! Perhaps they had fainted to the ground. Perhaps they simply didn't know how to respond to this angel. They were terrified. This is completely understandable. After all, they had never seen such an appearance of an angel before.

Every year in our country, come October, there are people who like to dress up in scary, Halloween costumes, like skeletons or ghosts or demons. But none of their costumes will be nearly as frightful as this angel right here. Not because the appearance of this angel was so dark, but because his appearance was so light! It was like lightning! The appearance of the angel was of a flashing brilliance of light, which could be detected even in the brightness of the morning.

Understandably so, these women were likewise terrified, for the first words out the angel's mouth was, "Do not be afraid." (verse 5). This was far easier said than done. For one thing, you simply don't encounter angels every day. For another thing, the angel's appearance was enough to scare anyone away. But the angel's words proved to be words of comfort, aimed at calming down these terrified women. He said, ...

Matthew 28:5

I know that you see Jesus who was crucified.

These words came as a comfort to the Marys. This angel knew why they were there. I don't believe that this angel needed to be omniscient to know these things. He could also have observed what these women were carrying in their arms: perfume and spices. He knew that you only come to the cemetery with these things in your hands if you are coming to anoint a body. This angel knew about who had been in the tomb. He knew that Jesus had been buried there. He knew that Jesus was no longer in the tomb.

The angel continued on ...

Matthew 28:6

"He is not here, for he has risen, as he said."

How easily His words could have come with condemnation: "What are you holding in your hands? Are those spices for burial? Why are you bringing spices? Didn't Jesus tell you that He would rise from the dead? Didn't Jesus tell you over and over and over and over again? Your faith is so small. You will never please Him with such small faith at that. Why didn't you believe? Besides, this is the third day since He was crucified. He said that He would rise up 'on the third day' (Matt. 20:19). O foolish women."

But these words weren't condemning words. They were comforting words. They were words of encouragement and help, just like God's words often are.

The angel continued, ...

Matthew 28:6

... "Come, see the place where He lay."

At this point, the angel probably stepped down from his stone and began his role as a tour guide. He led the women into the tomb to show them exactly where Jesus had been laid to rest. The women had seen Jesus placed into the tomb (Matt. 27:61) and so they knew where His

body was set. But, alas, it wasn't there! I suspect that they saw the same thing that Peter saw when he came running into the tomb.

John records that Peter "beheld the linen wrappings lying there, and the facecloth, which had been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself" (John 20:6-7). The significance of these wrappings demonstrate that nobody came to take the body away. For should the disciples or some grave robber steal His body, he would have taken away the linen wrappings as well. But, Jesus made His bed before He got up.

The angel quickly exhorted the women what they were to do next.

Matthew 28:7

Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has risen from the dead and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; you will see him there.' Listen, I have told you."

What a privilege it was for these women to behold the empty tomb.

But may I note here that the only reason these women were privileged to see the empty tomb is because they went looking for Jesus.

The same is true for you as well. If you seek for Jesus, you will find Him. The LORD promised the people of Israel. "You will find Him if you search for Him with all your heart and all your soul" (Deut. 4:29). It still is true for us today.

Two thousand years after the resurrection, you won't find Him by going to Jerusalem and looking in an empty tomb, hoping for an angel to direct your way to Him. No. Today, you will find Him in the pages of the Bible. The Bible will direct you to Christ. In fact, in you want to summarize the message of the Bible it is simply this: Jesus Christ crucified for sinners. You will find him by faith.

In verse 8 we see the Marys being obedient to the angel's command.

Matthew 28:8

So, departing quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, they ran to tell his disciples the news.

These women believed in what the angel had told them and they responded with quick obedience. That's the response of faith. The angel had told them to, ...

Matthew 28:7

go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has risen from the dead.'

Indeed, that is what they did. They "departed quickly." There was no delay in their obedience. They knew that they had seen this angel. They had seen the empty tomb. They had some news to tell. And so, they responded quickly.

Their heart was entirely into it. It says in verse 8 that they "ran to tell his disciples." They didn't walk. They didn't go for a stroll. They ran.

So, picture it in your mind, two Jewish women, who had girded up their tunics and were running along side the road. To catch the scene, perhaps you might imagine several middle-aged women today after church pulling up their dresses and running down the street to get a message out. I don't suspect that it was too lady-like in their culture for a woman to run down the road as they did. But, I don't think that they cared. They had some news to tell and they were going to run just as fast as they could to tell the disciples.

I'm sure that along the way, their minds were spinning, thinking about the events of the past few days. The week had begun with such promise, and had deteriorated quickly with Jesus upon the cross. Yet, they remembered that Jesus had predicted his resurrection from the dead. But, "Could it really be?" Is he really raised?

And as they thought these things, perhaps they were encouraged to run even faster to see the other disciples. We are told that their hearts were filled "with fear and great joy" (verse 8). I believe that they were fearful, because they didn't quite know what to expect. Discovering an empty tomb was news of great hope! I believe that they were joyful, because they knew that their hope wasn't lost. They had some good news to tell. They were going to tell the disciples that Jesus was risen from the dead!

But before they could get there, they ran into an old friend. Look at verse 9.

Matthew 28:9

Just then Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!"

Certainly, it must have been a shock for these women to see Jesus. They had begun to have thoughts that Jesus had risen from the dead. But, they didn't know exactly what that meant. For all they knew, Jesus had risen from the dead and returned to His heavenly Father, never to walk upon the earth again. For all they knew, Jesus was gone. And yet, here was Jesus, greeting them in flesh and blood.

The closest thing that I can relate to this is when I was going to seminary in Los Angeles. A friend of mine was driving his car out to Illinois and had asked me if I had wanted to drive back to Illinois with him. The plan would be that I would drive with him to Illinois and fly back home on a ticket that he would purchase for me. I never told my family what I was doing. For all they knew, I was out in California.

I can remember the time very well. We arrived at my parent's home around 4pm on a Sunday afternoon. I remember the time, because I was thrilled to be home early enough to attend the Sunday evening church service with them and see many people at church as well. I just walked in the door and boldly shouted, "Hello! Anybody home?" It was a great time of surprise and rejoicing! At first, those in my family were a bit confused. But, as the reality sunk in, there were hugs and kisses all around, as they were eager to hear about the story of me driving across the country. I'm sure that Jesus had a bit of these same feelings.

What a time of joy! We read in verse 9 of the response of the Marys. The response of the Marys was totally appropriate.

Matthew 28:9

... They came up, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him.

The emotions at this point must have been absolutely overwhelming! There must have been tears of joy! There must have been a sense of the reality that everything that Jesus had taught them for the past several years was true. He was the Messiah. He was the Son of God. Death has been conquered!

At this moment, worship was the only appropriate response to the risen Lord! The idea that we get from verse 9 is that these women were prostrate on the ground, clinging to His feet, giving glory and honor to Him as the Lamb of God! When we read John's account, we know that this lingered for a bit, until Jesus finally said, "Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father" (John 20:17).

I don't think that either of these women were very much interested in ceasing to worship Him. They were overjoyed! Jesus was the only one who would stop them.

But when Jesus was finally able to free Himself from these women, He gave them instructions of what to do next. He said, ...

Matthew 28:10

Then Jesus told them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to leave for Galilee, and they will see me there."

I doubt that these words were too pleasing for these women to hear. Now that Jesus had been risen from the dead, I'm sure that it was their desire to be with Him as much as possible! They wanted to continue to worship Him!

Do you ever feel this way? When worshipping Jesus at church or at home, do you ever wish that it would never end? Such ought to be the heart of those redeemed by Christ. This ought to be your response this resurrection Sunday. Worship of the risen Lord!

But such wasn't the response of everyone. We have seen, The First Responders (28:1-10). Let's look now at ...

2. The First Deniers (28:11-15)

Matthew 28:11

As they were on their way, some of the guards came into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened.

Can you imagine the scene? This whole scenario plays out at the tomb of Jesus. And two reports go out. The first report was that of the Marys, who went to tell the disciples what happened. The second report was that of the guards, who went into the city to report to their superiors what happened.

1 - The Report

We read in Matthew 27 about why these guards were at the tomb in the first place. The Jews were troubled about the events of the death of Jesus. They had thought through a scenario that gave them great fear. They feared that the disciples of Jesus might pull off a fake resurrection. The conversation is recorded in verses 63-66. The chief priests and the Pharisees said to Pilate, ...

Matthew 27:63-66

"Sir, we remember that while this deceiver was still alive he said, 'After three days I will rise again.' So give orders that the tomb be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come, steal him, and tell the people, 'He has been raised from the dead,' and the last deception will be worse than the first."

"You have a guard of soldiers," Pilate told them. "Go and make it as secure as you know how." They went and secured the tomb by setting a seal on the stone and placing the guard.

There is some uncertainty as to who made up this "guard." They may have been Jewish policemen who normally guarded the grounds of the temple under the oversight of the chief priests. They may have been Roman soldiers, who regularly sought peace among the Jewish people. There is some uncertainty as well in terms of the number of guards that were at the tomb. Based upon ancient history and the word here used to describe the "guard," some say that there may have been up to 16 soldiers were sent to guard the tomb. From the biblical account, we know that there were at least three.

We read in verse 11 that "some of the guard" came to report the facts of what they had seen. "Some of the guard" is at least two, possibly more. And "some of the guard" is not "all of the guard." Which means that there were one or more soldiers still stationed at the tomb. And so, we have at least three soldiers, probably more, guarding the tomb on the morning of the resurrection of Jesus. They were stationed at the tomb with the specific goal of preventing the disciples from coming and stealing the body away. They had failed in their task.

And now, they had to report it to the chief priests, who certainly wouldn't be happy. I'm sure that as these soldiers presented their case to the chief priests, they were as honest as they could be, trying to explain what happened. Their explanation might have sounded something like this:

"Sirs, we know that you gave us only one assignment: to guard the tomb of a dead man. You certainly gave us enough men to guard the tomb under normal circumstances. But this was far from normal circumstances! For the most part, all was quiet. During the Sabbath, not a soul came near the tomb. And then, just as our watch was ending, there was a severe earthquake, which grabbed all of our attention. Soon, we saw a bright light come from the heavens and descend upon the

tomb (28:2). None of us have ever claimed to have seen an angel before, but this must have been an angel! He was clothed in brilliant, flashing white (28:3). He came down and began to roll the stone away (28:2). And then, he sat right upon the stone, as if to declare victory (28:2).

I know that we are soldiers, trained to fight, but this was different! We have never seen such a creature before. We didn't know what to do. Almost immediately, some women came to the tomb, carrying spices and the angel spoke to her, saying, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you see Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay" (Matthew 28:6-7)

These women looked in the tomb to see what was inside. The look on their face was unforgettable! They seemed a bit stunned. They seemed happy, and yet, very much confused and afraid. And then, they turned to run away. When they left, so did the angel. After a few seconds, we simply looked at each other and walked over to the tomb to see what was inside. The body was gone! We didn't know what to do. We left some of our squadron at the tomb, and we came to tell you what we saw and experienced. What I have told you is the testimony of all of us. What shall we do?

What shall we do? Indeed, that was the question. And so, we see the chief priests convening a counsel, which comes in verse 12.

2 - The counsel

Matthew 28:12

And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers

This counsel would have been similar to that which gathered a few nights before when they sought to find Jesus guilty so as to put Him to death. It was crisis time for the council. Their worst nightmare had come true. They knew that Jesus said, "After three days I am to rise again." (This is what they quoted to Pilate in Matthew 27:63).

They tried to prevent any possibility of this taking place, by assigning a guard over the tomb. But now, the tomb was empty. They had heard the testimony of the soldiers. Upon cross examination, they would have found the story to be completely verified by all of the soldiers who were at the tomb. They knew that there was no reason for these soldiers to lie about these things that they had seen. All the facts had lined up. The earthquake had been felt in the city, which was only a few hundred yards from the tomb. There were eyewitness reports of having seen a bright light descend from heaven upon the cemetery. They had to act fast. The best that they could come up with would be a bribe.

And so, "a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers" and told them to tell a lie, which comes in verse 13.

3 - The lie

Matthew 28:13

"Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.'"

It must have been a lot of money given to these soldiers to have given in to such an excuse. Soldiers are paid to keep their post. Soldiers are trained to keep their post. Soldiers are trained to rotate their watch throughout the night. The chances of them falling asleep are very slim. Besides this, the difficulty of performing such a task of stealing the body would have been incredible!

These guards were given one task to perform: protect the body of Jesus from thieves. As in all security situations, if the security task is a narrow task, the job is easy. Should the security task be large, it would be more difficult. For instance, protecting our country against terrorism is practically impossible, because the enemy may attack from all sides. However, to guard a single door, which is approximately four feet high by a few feet wide in a secluded area is a simple task to perform.

For the disciples to have even dared to come near the tomb while these soldiers guarded it would have been an act of bravery in and of itself! But, bravery was not among the characteristics of the disciples. When the soldiers came to arrest Jesus, "all the disciples left Him and fled" (Matt. 26:56). The apostle John tells us in His gospel that these disciples were hiding away in a room with the door shut, "for fear of the Jews" (John 20:19). They weren't about to show themselves in public, much less near the tomb of Jesus which was surrounded by guards.

Now, suppose that they did come and did find them asleep. The stone that was rolled in front of the tomb was very large. It would have been about five feet in diameter and a foot or two thick, weighing in at more than 1,000 pounds! You don't just roll a stone of that size without causing a minor earthquake. The noise of stone on stone, or the tremors caused in the ground would have been sufficient for the soldiers to have been awakened.

And then, think about carrying the body out of the tomb. The body of Jesus would have easily weighed 250-300 pounds by the time you include the weight of the spices that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea initially applied to His body (John 19:39). You don't just carry something that heavy without making any noise.

Furthermore, the grave clothes were left behind in the tomb (John 20:7). If the disciples had sought to carry away the body in secret, they wouldn't have neatly folded up the linen wrappings. They would have taken the body to another location, where they might unwrap the body.

On top of that you need to consider the character of the disciples. Throughout the entire New Testament, their testimony is that they were honest and honorable men. To have stolen away the body of Jesus and kept it secret for all of their days would have been entirely contrary to the teaching of their master. Jesus told His disciples to speak the truth. "Let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; and anything beyond these is of evil" (Matthew 5:37). The testimony of all the disciples is that they were upright and righteous men. The same is true of the early church. Unbelievers in Jerusalem "held them in high esteem" (Acts 5:13). They simply weren't the type to deceive the governmental authorities like this.

This lie would be a tough one to sell. And yet, it was the best that the counsel could come up with their limited time to think about it. It would have been very difficult for the soldiers to propagate this lie. Not only would they need the "large sum of money" (NASB) as noted in verse 12, but they also needed assurance from the high priests that such a plan would indeed work.

This comes in verse 14.

4 - The assurance

The high priests told these soldiers, ...

Matthew 28:14

And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble."

The soldiers knew that the high priests were pretty influential people. They had some assurance that such a promise could be kept. Certainly, at some point, Pilate must have found out about what took place. It would be almost impossible for the Romans not to notice the numbers of followers of Christ arising in his own city. Fifty days after these things, three thousand people were converted and began to roam the streets of Jerusalem (Acts 2:41). And a short time later, several more thousand came to faith in Christ (Acts 4:4). From the perspective of the religious leaders, the apostles, "have filled Jerusalem with [their] teaching" (Acts 5:28). The political turmoil that came about as a result of these things was intense! When Peter and John preached, the temple was buzzing with activity and chaos. The Sadducees felt threatened and imprisoned Peter and John (Acts 4:2).

Though the Jews had a measure of independence from the Romans, they took note when there was trouble. The Roman guards kept constant surveillance over the temple complex from their high towers in the Antonio Fortress. For they had a great desire that the Jewish people be at peace with themselves. The Romans were poised and ready to come in and establish peace at any time. Certainly, Pilate knew and heard about this trouble that was brewing. How he responded is unknown to us. I suspect that the chief priests "won him over" (NASB) just as they promised (verse 14).

5 - The plan worked

The result of everything was that the plan worked. This we see in verse 15. The soldiers ...

Matthew 28:15

they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

Most evangelical scholars date Matthew's gospel some 30 years after Jesus rose from the dead. And so, this theory propagated for many years after the fact. A hundred years later, Justin Martyr, who was born about 100 A. D., made mention that this theory was still circulating during his time. And yet, I trust, as I have demonstrated, you might clearly see how this theory doesn't hold much weight. It has many difficulties.

Those who say that His body was stolen (Matt. 28:11-15) have a difficult time fitting such a theory into the facts surrounding the resurrection. The disciples weren't brave enough to try such a feat. The noise that they would have generated in opening the tomb and carrying the body would have easily awakened the guards, if indeed, the guards were sleeping. The disciples wouldn't have left the grave clothes in the grave. The character of the disciples doesn't match with such an underground plot. I would go so far as to say that it's impossible for the disciples to have stolen the body of Jesus Christ!

But this "stolen body" theory is only the first of theories to deny the resurrection. Matthew told us of The First Deniers (28:11-15). But many others have come up with other theories of how to explain away the resurrection.

A second theory is that some say that He didn't die. This theory holds that Jesus merely "fainted" upon the cross. He didn't really die. He just looked like He was dead.

But, just think about what Jesus experienced. Before Jesus was placed upon the cross, He was whipped and scourged and beaten by a Roman cohort (Matt. 27:26-31). He had a crown of thorns pressed painfully upon His head. So badly was He beaten that He wasn't strong enough to carry His own cross to the place of the crucifixion (Luke 23:26). When crucified, Jesus had iron nails driven into His hands and His feet, upon which He hung for six hours, losing much blood. He certainly became dehydrated, and at one point requested something to drink (John 19:28). Because the day of preparation was almost at hand, the Jews asked Pilate for the legs to be broken, lest the three criminals remain upon the cross during the holiday. But, those crucifying Him, "saw that He was already dead" (John 19:33). Just to make sure that He was dead, "one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately there came out blood and water," which is a clear sign of death (John 19:34).

The executioners, who had seen many deaths before, were all agreed that Jesus was dead and willingly handed His body over to His friends (John 19:38-42). And then, Jesus had 100 pounds of gummy spices attached to His body, while being wrapped with some linen sheets. These sheets would have wrapped completely around His head, face, and mouth, making it nearly impossible for Him to breathe. He then would have been placed upon a cold, stone slab in a dark tomb which was closed by a 1,500 pound stone. A seal would have been placed upon the stone on the outside, which would have to be broken before the stone was rolled away. Outside, there were soldiers standing guard.

The theory that says that Jesus didn't really die would have you believe that the incredible suffering He endured wasn't enough to kill Him. You would have to believe that even after crucifixion, Jesus retained enough bodily fluids to live. You would have to believe that He was able to breathe through the wrappings around His body. You would have to believe that the cold stone upon which He was placed helped Him to resuscitate. You would have to believe that He was able to free Himself from the linen wrappings and burial spices. You would have to believe that He was strong enough to roll away the rolling stone from inside, where it was impossible to get any leverage. You would have to

believe that the soldiers outside the tomb didn't notice that the stone had been rolled away and that Jesus was able to make a sneaky exit. Furthermore, you would have to believe that Jesus recovered enough to give His disciples great hope in the power and reality of the resurrection. The disciples went from seeing Jesus risen from the dead to proclaiming the power of the resurrection to all who would listen. A weak, sickly, feeble man would not have turned them so!

A third theory we see is that some say that His body was in another tomb. Those who believe this would have us believe that the women were so distressed that they couldn't find their way back to the correct tomb. They claim that there were many tombs around Jerusalem during the time of Christ, which is true. But, as each of them would have been hewn in the rock, they all would have had their own distinctive look and feel which would be easily recognizable.

We read in Matthew 27:61 that the Marys were "sitting opposite" the grave (Matt. 27:61). Surely, they knew where Jesus was laid to rest. When the angel told them to "See the place where He was lying" (Matt. 28:6), they would have noticed whether or not it was the same location. But, think with me a moment about what it would take for this theory to be true. The women went to the wrong tomb. Peter and John ran to the wrong tomb. The soldiers were guarding the wrong tomb for several days. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus went to the wrong tomb. The entire Jewish counsel went to the wrong tomb. The Romans went to the wrong tomb. The angel appeared at the wrong tomb. To believe this theory, you need to believe that the whole world went to the wrong tomb!

All it would have taken to stop the propagation of Christianity was for one person to go to the right tomb and produce the body of Jesus. Someone could have even gone to the right tomb several weeks or months later, only to discover a body that shouldn't have been there. They would have alerted the cemetery authorities and the matter would have been straightened out! But, nobody ever claimed to have found the body of Jesus.

Such a theory is difficult to believe. In fact, I would say that it takes more faith to believe that everyone went to the wrong tomb than it does to believe that Jesus raised from the dead. They went to the right tomb.

A fourth theory: some say that He resurrected only in the minds of the disciples. Perhaps you are familiar with the cartoon, Calvin and Hobbes. Calvin is a creatively imaginative little boy with a stuffed tiger named Hobbes. When nobody is around, Hobbes comes to life. And he becomes Calvin's playmate. However, when others are around Hobbes is shown for who he really is, a stuffed tiger toy. When people say that Jesus resurrected only in the minds of the disciples, they have a similar idea. They say that Jesus didn't rise from the dead, but the psychological state of the disciples of Jesus was such that they only believed that Jesus rose from the dead, when, in fact He didn't. And so, all of the appearances of Jesus are understood as the fruit of their imagination.

Such a theory really picked up steam in the 1800's in Europe. One of the reasons why it was so popular is that those who didn't believe in the physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus could still sound like they believed in the physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus. In other words, when they were asked, "Do you believe that Jesus rose again from the dead?" They could say, "Absolutely." Such an affirmation would satisfy many doctrinal statements and churches. "Our pastor (or our professor) believes in the resurrection of Christ!" What they don't have to tell their churches or their schools is what they mean when they say that they believe in the resurrection from the dead.

Should they explain what they mean, they would explain it this way. "I believe that that the disciples believed that Jesus raised from the dead. Since the disciples believe that Jesus raised from the dead, for them, He did rise from the dead, if only in their head. And thus, I can affirm that Jesus rose from the dead, because He rose from the dead in the minds of the disciples." But, should you ask these people, "Do you believe that Jesus rose again bodily from the dead?" They would say, "No. I don't believe that."

This is the doctrine of many liberals in the church today. They are called, "Neo-evangelicals." They are "evangelical" in the sense that they can affirm the old evangelical creeds. They are "Neo" or "new" in the sense that they have an entirely different (and new) approach to these doctrines. They appear to affirm the historical doctrines of the faith, when in reality they deny them.

This is illustrated in William Barclay's autobiography. His commentaries are widely used by many evangelicals, as he has some excellent insights into the history of the days when Jesus lives. Furthermore, many of the doctrines that he expounds sound very good. But, in reading his autobiography, I remember how he exposed his true beliefs, as a neo-evangelical would do. He said, "I had always had difficulty in repeating the Apostles' Creed for there are items in it which I could not hold" (i.e. like "I believe in the resurrection from the dead."). But, Barclay continues that a big breakthrough came when he realized that in the original introduction to the Apostles' Creed, the wording was not "I believe," but "We believe." Thus, he reasoned, "When I am reciting the Creed, I am not claiming that all this is without exception my personal belief; but I am stating that it is the Church's belief, and this of course I can do." [1]

Regarding this theory that Jesus only raised from the dead in the minds of the disciples is so clearly against the clear testimony of Scripture that it hardly needs to be refuted. The Scripture speaks about Jesus returning in bodily form to see and experience. He talked with His disciples. He ate with them. He let them feel Him and touch Him, to make sure that He was real. It wasn't merely in their minds that he appeared. He was really there.

There are other theories. Some say that He resurrected only as a spirit, sort of a ghost. Some say that the resurrection account is entirely fiction, added on years after Jesus died. It was so long ago, that none could refute it, because all eye witnesses were gone. Some say that the body of Jesus was discarded from the cross and thrown into a pit, along with other executed victims. They claim a body was never produced because the body was impossible to identify.

Everything we believe in is at stake in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Consequently, theories about what took place on that Easter morning will continue to go on and on. When you take the account recorded for us in the Bible at face value, there is only one conclusion that you can come to. Jesus Christ rose bodily from the dead!

This is the only theory that can take into account the entire transformation of the disciples from fearful men to bold witnesses. To believe that the body was stolen wouldn't have given such boldness to the ones who stole the body. To believe that Jesus didn't actually die upon the cross would not have persuaded the disciples of an unbelievable future hope. To believe that they got the wrong tomb would never have

resolved their doubts. To believe that Jesus only resurrected in their minds doesn't help either. Deep down, they would have known that they were deluded. They wouldn't have been willing to die for their faith. The physical bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the only plausible theory that you can derive from the facts.

Josh McDowell made the conclusion, after extensive study on the subject: "After more than 700 hours of studying this subject, and thoroughly investigating its foundation, I have come to the conclusion that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is one of the "most wicked, vicious, heartless hoaxes ever foisted upon the minds of men, or it is the most fantastic fact of history."

I told you earlier of the time when I surprised my family, driving in from Los Angeles and walking into the house unannounced. My wife has a story like that as well.

When her sister's first baby was due, Yvonne told me that she would really like to spend some time out in California, helping her sister with their first child. She thought that it would be nice to surprise her and come out to California unannounced. And she really wanted to see Janelle in the hospital with the baby.

We found out that they were going to begin inducing labor on a Monday morning. And so, Yvonne left our house on a Monday afternoon to travel out to California to pay a surprise visit to her sister. We tried very hard to keep it a surprise. When Yvonne was in the air, flying to California, we weren't going to answer the phone, lest we receive a call from California telling us of the new birth without being able to contact Yvonne (as she was in the air). So, that Monday afternoon, we didn't answer the phone at all.

Just after Yvonne landed, she called me to see if I had heard any news yet. I told her that I hadn't. Not ten minutes later, I received a call from Janelle, who told me that she had delivered a healthy baby boy. While on the phone, I told Janelle, "I would put Yvonne on the phone. But, she's out and she hasn't come home yet. I'll call her cell phone and tell her to call you."

Immediately, I called Yvonne, who was on her way to her parents' home from the airport. She called Janelle to catch up on how everything went. She found out that both mother and baby were doing well. She said, "Oh, how I wish I could be there and see the baby." She had a big smile on her face, I'm sure.

So, on her way home from the airport, she stopped at the hospital to see Janelle and the baby, within an hour or two of being born. Needless to say, her sister was shocked when she saw Yvonne. She was very confused and blown away with her sister showing up from across the country.

I watched the video several times and was able to transcribe Janelle's first words when she saw her sister. The video was about a minute long. This is what she said, "Uh. ... What are you doing here? ... Oh my gosh. ... What are you doing here? ... Wow. ... Oh wow. ... Oh my gosh. ... Wow. ... Wow. ... Oh my goodness. ... It's like ... It's like wait! ... Wow. ... Thank you. ... How nice of Steve to let you go! ... Oh my gosh. ... How long are you here for?" At that point, the video clip stopped, so I don't know how many more "wow's" she said. I wouldn't be surprised if a few more came out of her mouth.

I tell you that story because there was a period of time that she was in utter disbelief. It just didn't compute for her. Less than an hour before, she had spoken with my wife, assuming her to be in Illinois. And then, Yvonne shows up!

I believe that this is similar to what took place when the disciples first saw Jesus risen from the dead in Galilee (verse 17). The last that they had seen of Him was when the Romans were taking Him away to be crucified. And here He was, standing before them in complete health! For some of the disciples, it just didn't compute. And thus, they doubted.

As I pondered this text this week, the thought came to my mind, "Why did Matthew include this little phrase for us?" This is the climax of the book! This is where it is all headed! Of anything that Matthew wanted to convince his readers of was the reality of the resurrection. He didn't want to put something in the text that it going to lessen the impact. However, I think that it is here to encourage us. Here were people who were looking upon the risen Christ, and yet, there were still doubts in the minds of some of them.

Jesus did rise from the dead. And yet, it's difficult to believe. It's difficult to believe that someone has risen from the dead, especially someone who has been so cruelly beaten! In fact, do you know how difficult it is to believe this? It's impossible, apart from the Lord opening our eyes to believe. Jesus told us "with men [salvation] is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26). God grants the faith to believe what is written about Him.

And so, church family, be comforted in your doubts and difficulty to believe. Some of the disciples had doubts as well. But, don't rest to think that it is fine to stay in your doubts.

When some of the disciples were here found doubting, I don't believe that they were doubts of unbelief! I believe that they were doubts like Janelle, whose sister had flown across the country to be with her and her newborn. "Can it really be? It is really true? I can't believe it!?! Wow! Wow! Wow!" Regarding the resurrection, such ought to be our doubts! They ought to be doubts of amazement, seeking to believe. We ought to be in awe of the greatness of the news, as we attempt and try to fully grasp it!

These disciples first marched to Galilee (verses 16-17). Once they arrived, Jesus gave them orders to march to the world (verses 18-20). His instructions to them are three-fold: He first speaks of His authority (verse 18). And then, Jesus speaks of our actions (verses 19-20a). Finally, Jesus gives them His assurance (verse 20b). Let's look first at ...

In verse 18, Jesus said, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth." When Jesus walked the earth, He had much authority. He had authority over disease, cleansing the leper and raising paralytics and casting away fevers (Matt. 8:1-17). He had authority over nature, calming the storm with a word (Matt. 8:23-27). He had authority over the demonic realm, casting out a legion of demons from two men (Matt. 8:28-34). He had authority over sin, forgiving the paralytic of His sins (Matt. 9:1-8).

But, it was through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, that God the Father gave Him all authority. Jesus rules the universe. It was the

resurrection that declared Jesus to be "the Son of God with power" (Rom. 1:4; Acts 13:33). It was the resurrection that has given Jesus the authority to be the final judge of the whole world (Acts 17:31). It was the resurrection that lifted Jesus up to sit at the right hand of His heavenly Father (Psalm 110).

Next, Jesus said (in verses 19-20), "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you." In light of the glorious Lord that we serve in heaven, it is our task to "make disciples" here on earth. In fact, this is the main verb in this sentence: "make disciples."

When Jesus says, "make disciples," He was simply telling His own disciples to multiply themselves. They were followers of Christ. They were to encourage others to follow Christ as well. We need to see people come to faith. We need to see people continue in the faith. Question: "What is Rock Valley Bible Church" all about? Answer: "Making disciples." It is in our mission statement, we are to, "Enjoy His Grace and Extend His Glory."

And in this command to make disciples, the great assurance that we have is that we won't be unsuccessful. We see His assurance come in verse 20b. Jesus said, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Jesus knows how difficult the task is. Jesus knows how impossible the task is. Without His aid and without His help, we would all flounder and fail. He has promised never to leave us nor forsake us (Heb. 13:5). The Jesus who walked with the disciples is with us! Let us walk boldly in that assurance.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on April 16, 2017 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.
