

Putting First Things First (Building our Faith)
The sign of the resurrection #9
The Stolen Body Theory

Intro: In our building faith series last year, we not only responded to some of the arguments that have been made by unbelievers against faith and against Christianity in particular; we have also taken an in-depth look at the positive proofs that support our faith in Jesus Christ. And there is no greater proof than the sign of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Over the past few months we have methodically investigated the evidence the NT gives us for the resurrection by asking three essential questions:

Did Jesus really die?

How and where was He buried?

Is there adequate testimony from proper sources to confirm His resurrection from the dead?

The result of this investigation is a series of hard facts that the skeptic or unbeliever must confront. To Christians these facts as presented in the gospels lead us to the inescapable conclusion that Jesus arose from the dead.

However, all through the centuries unbelievers have denied the resurrection and offered various theories to explain by natural means why the disciples came to believe that Jesus was alive after his death and who spent their lives proclaiming it.

So it seems only fair to add one more question in our study: Is there a reasonable naturalistic theory that adequately explains how the apostle's believed and proclaimed that Jesus was raised from the dead?

In our last lesson we looked at the resuscitation theory--the idea that Jesus really never died and therefore revived in the tomb and came forth to declare himself Lord over death. It does not pass the test of objective scrutiny and must ignore the mountain of evidence showing that Jesus really died on the cross.

Today let's consider another attempt to explain the empty tomb--the stolen body theory. The idea is that Jesus' body was taken from the tomb by someone; and then on the basis of it, Jesus' disciples concluded that He had been raised from the dead. All advocate this theory must face:

The problem of the Roman guard

The stolen body theory is immediately confronted with a very significant difficulty. It is the testimony of Matthew that a Roman guard was placed at the tomb to prevent anyone from taking the body away and claiming that Jesus had been raised.

“Now on the next day, which is the one after the preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with Pilate, and said, “Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, ‘After

three days I am to rise again.' "Therefore, give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, lest the disciples come and steal Him away and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last deception will be worse than the first." Pilate said to them, "You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how." And they went and made the grave secure, and along with the guard they set a seal on the stone." (Matthew 27:62–66)

Josh McDowell in "The Resurrection Factor" offers several powerful points about the Roman guard which he substantiates from reliable ancient literary sources.

The guards were not merely temple police, but a contingency of soldiers from the Roman legions.

Typically the Roman custodia might consist of as many as 16 soldiers, able to defend 36 square yards of territory against an invading force. In Acts 12 Peter was guarded by 4 quaternions (16 soldiers) inside a prison. Would there not be at least this many to guard something outdoors?

Soldiers of the Legion of this period were noted for their fighting skill and discipline. They maintained their watch by sleeping in shifts with the sleeping soldiers circling the protected area with their heads toward the soldiers on guard and rotating every four hours. All of them were never asleep at the same time; and any intruder would have had to basically walk past the heads of the twelve who slept.

Roman law required that soldiers who failed at their tasks were sentenced to death. That's why we see the Philippian jailor in Ac. 16 ready to commit suicide when he thought his prisoners had escaped.

So then we should ask, "What person or group of persons would dare defy this formidable guarding force in order to remove the body of Jesus?"

Was the body stolen by random grave robbers?

To ask the question is to answer it. Random grave robbers would seek out opportunities that offered no possibility of detection. They certainly wouldn't bother to take on an experienced fighting force like the Roman legions.

The attempt to take Jesus' body would have held great risk to anyone trying it. They risked dying immediately in battle with the soldiers. Even they somehow succeeded, they risked punishment if detected.

Grave robbers would only be interested in valuable objects they might use or sell. What could they possibly do with a decomposing body?

Was the body removed by the enemies of Jesus?

It seems obvious that the enemies of Jesus would have nothing to gain at all by removing the body of Jesus. In fact they would have defeated their own cause by giving the apostles a basis for saying he had been raised. This is the very thing they were determined not to happen.

Had they indeed taken the body out, then later when the disciples taught in Jerusalem that Jesus was raised from the dead, they could have countered their teaching by producing the body of Jesus; thus falsifying once and for all the apostles' testimony..

Was the body stolen by Jesus' disciples?

It is interesting that Justin Martyr in his Dialogue with Trypho in the 2nd century AD pointed out that the Jews in the first century had commonly blamed the apostles for the theft of the body. Such an idea confirms the Matthews account that, when Jesus was raised, the soldiers were bribed and told to say that the disciples came and stole the body away. Let's see if the charge will "stick."

What psychological motivation would have caused them to want to steal the body of Jesus?

The psychological state of the disciples was one of fear and defeat.

The two disciples on the road to Emmaus reveal their disheartened and defeated mindset. They said:

““But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all this, it is the third day since these things happened. “But also some women among us amazed us. When they were at the tomb early in the morning,” (Luke 24:21–22)

Would the apostles have had the state of mind to seek to steal the body and proclaim that Jesus had been raised?

Would the apostles have had the courage to take on the Roman guard, risking their lives for such a task?

Peter the night before had fearfully denied that he even knew the Lord. How would he in two days find the courage to attempt to steal the body of Jesus from those who had crucified the Lord? And echoing in his ears would be the Lord's warning just three days before, "He who lives by the sword will die by the sword."

While Jesus lay in the tomb they were cowering in fear in an undisclosed location lest they be next.

*When therefore it was evening, on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst, and *said to them, “Peace be with you.” (John 20:19)*

Is it conceivable that they could have successfully overcome the Roman forces there?

The disciples were common workers who would have been no match for the Roman legionnaires.

Is there any reason to believe that a handful of disciples could be any match for a group of seasoned soldiers?

If they did succeed in doing so, why were the disciples not arrested afterward and made to produce the body?

Had the disciples actually succeed in defeating the Roman guards, their problems would have only just begun.

They would have been hunted down and brought to justice for their act of rebellion against the empire.

Would they have taken the time to remove Jesus from his burial clothes?

One of the remarkable facts of the empty tomb is the fact that it was not entirely empty. Something very telling remained:

*“And the two were running together; and the other disciple ran ahead faster than Peter, and came to the tomb first; and stooping and looking in, he *saw the linen wrappings lying there; but he did not go in. Simon Peter therefore also *came, following him, and entered the tomb; and he *beheld the linen wrappings lying there, and the face-cloth, which had been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself. So the other disciple who had first come to the tomb entered then also, and he saw and believed.” (John 20:4–8)*

Why is this detail significant? If some thief had simply removed Jesus' body from the tomb, would they have taken the time to remove the burial wrappings in which he had been placed? And why place the face cloth where it would have been located had Jesus remained there?

Would they not have been hypocrites to feign unbelief and surprise when the women came and told them that the tomb was empty?

Now they were Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James; also the other women with them were telling these things to the apostles. And these words appeared to them as nonsense, and they would not believe them. (Luke 24:10–12)

If the disciples had stolen the body, then they already knew that the tomb was empty. Their attempts to express disbelief would have been nothing more than a hypocritical performance.

Is it conceivable that they would have stolen the body and then preached all over Jerusalem that Jesus was raised?

From the very beginning the apostles experienced the antipathy of the Jerusalem authorities and were constantly under their watch and harassment.

What did they have to gain by such a proclamation? It brought them hardship, persecution for their whole lives, and finally death.

How can we explain their changed attitude toward the Jewish government?

Is it conceivable that they fled for fear when Jesus died but later boldly faced these same people, knowing that they were in possession of the body of Jesus?

Where did Peter get the boldness to say, "We ought to obey God rather than men?"

How can we explain the ethical system they taught?

Like Jesus, the apostles taught a message of love and truthfulness.

Would they do so knowing that they themselves were the biggest liars of all?

Would they go to their deaths for the resurrection knowing that they had perpetrated a fraud on the first century world?

It is unreasonable to imagine that Jesus' disciples would have stolen Jesus' body from the tomb. In fact, it would take more faith to believe that the disciples stole the body than to believe their account that Jesus was indeed raised from the dead.

Conclusion: There is no theft theory that will stand close scrutiny. Indeed, every attempt to explain the resurrection by natural means ends up doing one of two things.

First it dismisses without reason some or all of the Biblical evidence without giving a sufficient reason to do so.

Second, it asks us to believe what is more incredulous than the Bible record itself.

As Hanson has said, “The difficulties of belief may be great; the absurdities of unbelief are greater.”

He’s alive!