

Building Our Faith The Sign of the Resurrection

What were the circumstances at the tomb on the first day?

Intro: Perhaps you have heard of the Jefferson Bible. Thomas Jefferson made his own cut and paste compilation of the gospel story. It ends with these words:

62: Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid. 63: There laid they Jesus, 64: And rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre, and departed.

Jefferson did not believe in miraculous events like the resurrection, so he ended the story of Jesus with the report of his death and burial. However, the true historian must account for all the evidence of those who witness an event and not eliminate anything merely on the basis of philosophical presuppositions such as the impossibility of God's existence or the existence of miracles.

With that goal in mind, we are looking at the evidence for the ultimate miracle--the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. In our previous lessons we have already looked at two important and essential questions:

Did Jesus really die?

How and where was he buried?

And now we turn to the next logical question: "What were the circumstances at the tomb on the first day of the week?"

With elegant simplicity, the gospel writers record the coming of the women early on Sunday morning to anoint the body of Jesus after the Sabbath; they find there a very different scene from the one that had existed on Friday, the day that Jesus was buried. Here are seven facts reported by the gospel writers that must be taken into account and explained:

Fact #1--The Roman seal on the tomb of Jesus was broken.

Remember again what happened the day of Jesus' burial. The Jewish authorities were concerned that the disciples might come and take the body away affirming that Jesus had been raised from the dead. So then they requested a squadron of Roman soldiers to prevent this.

And they went and made the grave secure, and along with the guard they set a seal on the stone. (Mt. 27:66)

Now on the first day that seal was broken; and we must ask:

What man or group of men would have dared defy the authority of the Roman government in breaking that seal? To do so would have invited certain execution if the perpetrators were found and apprehended.

Who would have had the courage and military skill to break the seal, since it would also involved defeating the Roman guard that had been placed there.

What motivation would such persons have had to attempt this?

On the face of it, it doesn't make sense that any human being would have attempted such a thing.

Fact #2--The Roman soldiers had abandoned their post.

Remember that the Jewish leaders had gone to Pilate and asked for a squadron of soldiers to protect the tomb from the disciples, who they thought might seek to steal the body and then claim that Jesus was raised from the dead. What we should have expected on the first day of the week then is the continued presence of the Roman soldiers standing in their place and the tomb still occupied. But instead all of this has changed. The soldiers are no longer at their posts.

When the women come to the tomb early Sunday morning to anoint Jesus' body, they are apparently unaware of the squadron of soldiers that have been placed there after their departure on Friday evening. They ask one another, "Who will roll away the stone?" And from their vantage point the text is entirely silent about the Roman soldiers. They are not there; but why not?! Would they have merely left their post?

Certainly not! Under Roman military code abandoning one's post was punishable by death by burning.

Were they overcome by enemy forces?

Who would this fighting force be? Certainly they would have had to be prepared to fight against professional soldiers who had every advantage. They would have risked their lives to seek to enter that tomb.

And what possible motivation would they have had?

Were they called off by the authorities?

For what purpose? Clearly the Jewish authorities had been aware of Jesus' prophecy that he would be raised "on the third day." They certainly would not have called off the soldiers in view of that.

Or did something happen so fearful that even they left their posts under the threat of death?

This is the explanation of their absence by the gospel writers. They had been terrified into fleeing the scene. Whatever caused them to leave had to be more fearful than the fate they would have suffered for failing in their duty; because the penalty of abandoning one's post was death, possibly by burning! The NT itself gives an experience frightful enough to warrant this fear—an earthquake and appearance by an angel.

And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. And his appearance was like lightning, and his garment as white as snow; and the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men. (Matthew 28:2-4)

This explanation is supported by the way the Jewish authorities handled the situation.

Now while they were on their way, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all that had happened. And when they had assembled with the elders and counseled together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, and said, "You are to say, 'His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.' " "And if this should come to the governor's ears, we will win him over and keep you out of trouble." And they took the money and did as they had been instructed; and this story was widely spread among the Jews, and is to this day. (Matthew 28:11-15)

Do you think that the Jewish authorities bothered to go to the tomb and see for themselves what had happened? Why would they have chosen to pay off and protect the guards rather than prosecute them for failure at their task? It seems clear that the guards knew something the Jews didn't want them to tell; and thus the soldiers had the advantage over those who had utilized them as guards. They were forced to pay for their silence and to promise to protect them from their superiors.

And wouldn't it have been interesting to be a lawyer cross-examining these guards and ask, "If you were sleeping, how did you know it was the disciples who took the body?" Isn't that the lamest alibi you ever heard?

So then this too is a fact that needs to be account for: Why were the soldiers no longer at their posts?

Fact #3--The stone that had covered the opening of the tomb was rolled from the tomb.

Mark describes the ladies coming to the tomb to anoint Jesus and their discovery of this fact:

*And looking up, they *saw that the stone had been rolled away, although it was extremely large. (Mark 16:4)*

It is interesting to notice the subtle differences in how the position of the stone is described.

Matthew says the stone was "rolled up"

Luke says, it was "rolled from" the tomb.

John uses the word "airo" meaning carried or taken away.

Last week we noticed that the stone probably weighed from 1 ½ to 2 tons. It could easily be rolled down into place; but it would have taken a number of strong men to move it the other way! Who moved the stone?

How can we account for this evidence?

Did someone remove it? If so, who and why? How did they get past the guards? Could they have moved such a stone while they slept?

Again the Scriptures provide an answer to the question:

And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. And his appearance was like lightning, and his garment as white as snow; and the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men. (Mt. 28:2-4)

Can the rolled away stone be explained in any other way?

Fact #4--Jesus' body was no longer in the tomb.

...but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. (Luke 24:3)

This is one point upon which both the gospel writers and the Jews of the day agreed.

In the first place, they urged the soldiers to say, "the disciples came and stole the body away." Why would they say that, if the tomb was still occupied?

Later Justin Martyr would report that the Jews had in fact sent messengers around the Roman world affirming that the body of Jesus had been stolen:

"...after you learned that He rose from the dead, but, as I said before²³⁶³ you have sent chosen and ordained men throughout all the world to proclaim that a godless and lawless heresy had sprung from one Jesus, a Galilæan deceiver, whom we crucified, but his disciples stole him by night from the tomb,..." (Dialogue with Trypho, chapter 108)

But what these Jews were unwittingly helping to prove was that the tomb was no longer occupied!!!

Fact #5--The grave clothes of Jesus remained in the place where he had been laid.

*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. (John 20:6-7)*

Remember I described to you how that in Jewish burial custom the body was wrapped repeatedly with cloth and the spices enfolded into the wrappings resulting in a "binding" of the body in the burial garments.

When Peter and John came to the tomb they report seeing, in the place where Jesus had been laid, the wrappings in which he was buried. There they lay without a body!—a collapsed shell of cloth and spices. And lying there apart from the grave clothes, the face cloth—rolled up by itself.

What accounts for the burial clothes remaining behind while the body of Jesus is missing?

Fact #6--Visitors to the tomb report testimony by angels that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

And the angel answered and said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. "He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying. (Mt. 28:5-6)

How can we explain the testimony of the women who said they saw angels and heard this message from them? Were they hallucinating? Lying? Or did they simply tell the truth about what they saw?

Conclusion: Many attempts have been made to explain or to explain away these evidences. But none will do justice to the evidence, but one. To acknowledge the facts themselves as all true, proving that Jesus rose again.