

**Which story do you believe?
Matt 28:1-15**

Friends, there has always someone who seeks to discredit the report about an earthquake, an angel and an empty tomb which the women and the guards witnessed on that first Easter morning so many years ago.

The Chief Priests sought to counter the claim that Jesus had come back from the dead by circulating a story which claimed the disciples came and stole the body.

Others have tried to discredit the claim of Jesus' resurrection by writing off his post-mortem appearances to his followers as simply mass hallucinations.

Or they have theorized that many years after this "historical person" called Jesus of Nazareth had lived, the details and events of his life and death somehow became legendary and the myth of Jesus – as the one who came back from the dead was created, written down and passed on to become scripture.

Some have even suggested that the resurrection didn't happen because Jesus never died. Muslims for instance, believe that someone other Jesus was crucified on the cross.

Others think that after undergoing such an excruciating ordeal, Jesus passed out on the cross and was mistakenly buried alive, however he came too in the tomb and managed to get out and this was misunderstood as "a resurrection."

Now we could spend the next several hours going over the amount of writing that has been produced in refuting these attempts to discredit Jesus' resurrection. And you would leave here equipped with compelling arguments that would defend the Easter story from the most virulent of criticism.

But friends, while these arguments are helpful in a debate, very few people have ever been moved at a heart level by facts and proofs and what we need to realize is that nearly all the controversy which people have raised about Jesus' resurrection right from the beginning comes from issues in their heart – and not from a lack of compelling arguments in their head.

Proverbs 4:23 says *“above all else guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it”*

Friends, scripture reveals to us that the core of who we are, the essence of who we are is known as our “heart” and it directs how we live, think, feel and believe – and so attempts to discredit the resurrection of Jesus reveal a great deal about the hearts of those who would do so.

Take the Chief Priests for example, what does their action reveal about their hearts, about what they believed?

Well, they believed that they were the religions leaders of God’s people – but ironically they didn’t really believe in God. They did believe however in the religious system that they operated, which gave them power and status and wealth and influence with the Romans.

But in his life and ministry Jesus had exposed this. He had revealed their spiritual emptiness and their hypocrisy as leaders.

And Jesus had also claimed to be the messiah, the promised deliverer of Israel – the one who would come and lead the nation back to God, which all sounded good in theory and gave the common people hope, but truth be told the Chief Priests had a good thing going on as leaders and an actual messiah would only serve to take away their power and status.

Reports of Jesus resurrection would have confirmed his status as messiah with the people and completely undermined their position. Yes in theory they served God, but to have the bonafide Son of God alive... after they had crucified him, the people following Him and not them – not good! Their party would be over.

So they need to discredit the resurrection report... *“Let’s tell everyone the disciples stole the body”* because their hearts believed in religion as a means to power and position.

Now what about the soldiers who witnessed the events but changed their story to agree with the Chief Priests? What do their actions reveal about their hearts?

They experienced the earthquake, saw the angel appear and move the stone, they were overcome with holy terror and passed out...but yet they are willing to lie about having fallen asleep on the job and admit that a bunch of backwater fisherman managed to get past them to steal a body. This kind of dereliction of duty for a Roman soldier was punishable by death.

But we are not dealing with soldiers whose hearts believe in duty, in honor, or in the ideals of the Roman Empire. No these soldiers are likely disillusioned recruits, or mercenaries.

“Join the Roman army they said, see the world they said, find glory and honor they said...but we’re stuck in this country having to babysit the Jews who are always getting stirred up about some ridiculous religious controversy and now we’re guarding a dead body! What in this for us?”

“But wait – you’ll pay us how much? Ok, sure we fell asleep and the body was stolen!”

They agree to discredit the resurrection report because they saw a chance to profit from it, their hearts believed in money – because that’s what makes the world go ‘round.

And what about those who over the centuries have tried to discredit the resurrection report with hallucination or myth theories? What’s going on in their hearts?

Well friends, hallucinations and myths are not things of substance or reality, they are fantasies, wishful thinking, and they can’t really do much for you in the real world.

You see these people believe that what you can see, touch, taste and measure...that’s reality – anything else is meaningless.

And for them death is the end – there’s nothing beyond biological life. They pride themselves on being stark realists who don’t need religion as a crutch or live their life by superstitions, they can face the cold hard truth – *“coming back from the dead! Nonsense – the world runs according to the laws of science, that’s all there is – get over it.”*

Still others feel they in some way have been let down by religion. They used to believe that there is something more to life, that there was a God... but then something bad happened and to use a popular phrase – I can't believe that if a good god existed - that he would let so many bad things happen in this world...

And so they need to discredit, or deflect the resurrection by passing it off as the psychological projections of weak minded or superstitious people who need a little extra to cope with life.

And what about Muslims who don't actually believe Jesus was crucified, what's going on in their hearts? Well since they believe Jesus was a prophet who spoke for God, in their hearts they can't believe that God would allow one of his prophets, let alone His Son, to suffer such a humiliating death which was reserved for the lowest of criminals! God is too holy and powerful for that, that would make God weak.

So you see friends – hearing the report of what happened at the tomb on that Sunday morning stirs up whatever is in our hearts. The Resurrection always initiates some sort of reaction.

Try it out on some one you know – go up to them and ask them what they think about Jesus' resurrection? I guarantee you it will produce some sort of reaction.

But, right now it's about you. Friends, this morning we have heard the report about the earthquake, the angel, the empty tomb – what's your reaction? What's going on in your heart?

Friends if you examine your hearts – and if you find this report incredulous, hard to believe, a bit fantastic and unrealistic because of what it is claiming – that Jesus had the power to overcome death... then perhaps your heart is similar to the Chief Priests'.

You like being power, in control of your own life. You've got a good thing going on – sure religion is all right in a pragmatic sense - for those times in life when you need a little something extra, but you're not too keen on having a risen Lord who calls for your allegiance and obedience on a daily basis

Or maybe you're like the soldiers – you're amazed at what you hear, but it doesn't last beyond this mornings service because

in your heart you're self centered and its all about looking for opportunities in life that suit you.

What you're more concerned about is resurrecting the economy, because in the end that's where it all comes from. It's what gives us our livelihood and pays the bills right? So you'll sing whatever tune pays.

Or perhaps you hear about the resurrection and you say "why couldn't that kind of miraculous power have been around in my life when I needed it most." Why doesn't God come down and fix things in our world today the way He came down and supposedly brought Jesus back to life?

Or maybe you're just glad that we can get to the resurrection part of the Easter celebration because your heart sympathizes a bit with the Muslims. And while you believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and that He died on the cross – it's a bit hard for you to fully embrace that Christ's victory was achieved through such humiliation and suffering and the quicker we can get past that and on to victory and power the better.

Friends, the resurrection always produces some sort of reaction... Are you more likely to discredit it, downplay it, dismiss it... or does it answer a longing in your heart. Does it fan into flame the smoldering embers of faith, does it confirm what you've barely dared to wish for all along but now you know and see is true?

Friends, ask yourself – why were the women going to the tomb? Christ was dead; he had been wrapped in linen with seventy five pounds of myrrh and spices. The entrance to the tomb was blocked, sealed and guarded by soldiers. Why were they going to the tomb?

Friends, in their hearts they believed that somehow something would happen that would allow them to get past these obstacles so they could anoint Jesus' body. Anoint it to express their belief that there was a life to come, that on the last day there would be a resurrection to life.

As we read in John 11:24 *Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."*

So they go to the tomb, not quite certain how it will all play out but they go anyway.

And they experience the earthquake, they see the angel, they witness the empty tomb and it confirms what they believe in their hearts is possible! In spite of what seemed to be the reality they had seen... Jesus had come back to life- He was alive!

And they are rewarded for their obedience and their belief – Jesus himself comes to them and greets them and confirms that they should go and report to His disciples.

So friends what we learn from all this... is that its what's already in your heart which determines how you react to the resurrection report and what you get out of it...and whether or not you see will the risen Jesus.

So what I want to encourage you to do is consider changing your heart...so that you can believe in the resurrection.

Movie makers and authors call this “suspension of disbelief”. When you go see Harry Potter in the movie theatre, or when you read the LORD of the RINGS you suspend what you believe to be real, and allow yourself to enter into the world in which the movie and the novel takes place – where magic can happen, where there are elves and orcs and rings of power.

Friends, the resurrection report is an invitation to suspend your disbelief and enter into the world of the story of scripture where Easter Sunday is a crucial and decisive victory for God in his plan to overcome death, for each of us – to over comes the consequences of sin and evil in our lives, and bring new life into our lives for the sake of this world.

And if you suspend your disbelief enough, and enter into the story of the Scripture enough, pretty soon you'll find that what you believe in your heart is changing...

And it's not just a story anymore...it's a true story, and you have a part to play in it. And the story starts to become your reality and the part you play becomes your life – and you discover that finally you are truly alive.

And as you celebrate the resurrection with heart of faith and belief – you encounter the risen Christ, and he's real!

And He greets you and says “Do not be afraid! But go...and tell others about me, tell them about my birth, my life, my death and my resurrection.” – and how can you not!

Because friends look at what we've witnessed, and look at what it can do to our hearts. Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. So which story do you believe? Amen.