

### **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 to" 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 all the fact and apologetics which refuting these attempts to discredit Jesus' resurrection. And you would leave here equipped with compelling arguments that would enable you to 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 compelled to respond from facts and proofs...

What we need to realize is that the attempts to discredit Jesus' resurrection come mainly from what is going on at the

core of who someone is in their spirit – 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 an attempt to discredit the resurrection of Jesus reveals 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 religious 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 through his life and ministry Jesus had exposed what they believed. 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.

This 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.

So, 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 noble soldiers who 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!”*

So 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.”*

Their hearts are full of a material, pragmatic stoicism that refuses to be coddled by believing in how you wished things had turned out instead facing reality.

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.

Their hearts are full of cynicism and bitterness...

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, and death by crucifixion would make God weak – thus no death... no resurrection....

So you see friends – hearing the report of what happened at the tomb on that Sunday morning always 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 and I!

This morning we have heard the report about the earthquake, the angel, the empty tomb – what’s our reaction? What’s going on in our hearts?

Friends if we examine our hearts – and we find this report a bit disturbing because if it is true... and Jesus really is the Son of God and has put a claim on my allegiance... then perhaps what is in your heart is similar to the religious leaders.

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 know something drastic has happened, that much is obvious lots of people are all worked up about it – but you are not exactly sure why??

The tomb is empty that is for certain, but this holds no significance for us because our heart is full of ourselves; and to be honest an empty tomb isn’t what we are looking for at the moment - unless you can show me what is in it for me...

Like how it can make me happy, or improve my wellness or help me prosper at my work, or make my marriage and family life better and keep my kids out of trouble...

Show me how this benefits me and I’ll say *“Christ is risen indeed!”*

Or perhaps when we hear about the resurrection and we think *“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?”*

And this reveals that our hearts are full of hurt and bitterness and cynicism...

Or maybe when we hear about the resurrection we’re relieved that all the gory unpleasant details of Good Friday and the Passion of Christ are finally over - now we’re at the ‘nice and happy’ resurrection part of the Easter celebration!

Because while we do believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and that He died on the cross – it’s a bit hard for us to fully embrace that Christ’s victory was achieved through such shame and humiliation and suffering – because that might mean that any victory in our own life must come about through shame and humiliation and suffering and that’s not what the follower of a mighty powerful God should endure...

So friends, as I said the resurrection always produces some sort of reaction, what reaction does it produce in our hearts?

Are we 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, look at the women in the resurrection story and ask yourself – why were they going to the tomb?

Christ was dead; he had been wrapped in linen and buried. The entrance to the tomb was blocked by a large rock and it had sealed and it was 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.

Martha had confessed to Jesus in John 11:24 when her brother Lazarus had died; *"I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."* so they go to the tomb to express their faith - not quite certain how it will all play out but they go anyway.

And when they arrive 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 the reality they had seen and experienced... Jesus had been resurrected 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 the resurrection to His disciples.

So friends what do we learn from all this? It is what's already in your heart that 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 not to just guard your heart – but consider *changing* your heart, so that your heart responds to the resurrection report in faith and belief.

This kind of change of heart is what 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 whatever disbelief, self-centeredness, bitterness or cynicism is in your heart and instead 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 overcome 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 often enough, and enter into the world of the Scriptures on a regular basis, pretty soon you'll find that what is in your heart is changing for real...

And the scriptures are not just a story anymore...they have become a true story, they have become THE story and you realize that you have a part to play in it.

And the world of the scripture starts to become your world and its story frames your life – and you discover that finally you are truly alive.

And then, hearing the resurrection report reveals that your heart is full of faith and belief and everlasting life. And through the work of the Holy Spirit you encounter the risen Christ, and He's real!

And when we read the Easter story and He greets the women – we know He is also greeting us... and telling us *“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 we not friends – because this reality of the resurrection has changed our hearts and who we are...

We are no longer skeptics, or deniers of the resurrection – we are recipients of its benefits and we want everyone else to experience this as well.

So friends – you've heard the report this morning... go and tell others about it, and ask them *“which story would they believe?”*

Amen.