

Matthew 28:11-15

Introduction

This morning we come to the conclusion of the story about the guards. Two weeks ago, we saw the posting of the guard at the tomb (27:62-66). Last week, we saw the guard overwhelmed and terrified by the angel of the Lord (28:1-4). And now this week, we see the guard reporting to the chief priests all that had taken place, and then going out to tell a story about the body of Jesus being stolen.

Remember that a whole lot of people (both unbelievers *and* believers) assume that Matthew includes the story of the guard posted at the tomb in order to “prove” the resurrection (or at least to prove that the body of Jesus wasn’t stolen). And so the unbelievers mock Matthew’s “proof” as something not only invented by him, but also completely unconvincing. If they feel that way about the posting of the guard, then you can imagine what they have to say about the guards’ report to the chief priests, and how they were “bribed” to spread the story that the body of Jesus was stolen. Once again, they say, Matthew has invented a highly unlikely story in order to serve as an *argument* for something that’s even *more* unlikely – like the resurrection. In other words, they believe that here is an obvious place where Matthew has stooped to their own level of debate, and argument, and rationalistic “proofs.” And this is just where *they want* Matthew to be. If it’s really the “*evidence*” that demands a verdict, then they’re more than happy to give their verdict. One biblical “scholar” calls this passage “embarrassing” (Grundmann; quoted in Bruner). Another says that this is “obviously a legendary story” (Perrin; quoted in Bruner). Someone else calls this a “Matthean fiction” (Luz; quoted in Bruner). Yet another says that this is “an apologetic, of later origin (Fitzmyer; quoted in Bruner). And finally, one Bible “scholar” asks: “Why quibble with the incredible?” (Beare; quoted in Bruner) All of these writers find all sorts of “problems” with Matthew’s account of the guard – things that seem to them highly unlikely, if not impossible. But the basic *mistake* they’ve made is in once again assuming that Matthew is “arguing” – that the reason Matthew includes this story is to provide “evidence” and “proof” for the resurrection of Jesus in response to those who don’t believe. This is the very same mistake that even many Christians have made.

Matthew’s point, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is *never* to argue with unbelief, but to *proclaim*. His point is *not* to defend, but to *convict*. Matthew’s point is not to prove anything to unbelieving men, but to bring much praise and glory to God. Matthew’s point, as always, is theological and practical – it’s about the truth of God’s Word (which ultimately needs no *human* defense), and what that truth *means* for our lives today.

I. Matthew 28:11 — While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place.

Here’s Matthew’s favorite word again, but this time it’s not in a place that we might have expected. While they were going, *behold*, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. This time, the point of “behold” is obviously not wonder, and excitement, and joy – like it was in verse 9: “And *behold*, Jesus met [the women] and said, ‘Greetings!’” This time, the point of “behold” is obviously not to add to the drama and awe of

the story – like it was in verse 2: “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.” This time, the point of “behold” is obviously not to mark the announcement of good news, as it was in verse 7: “And **behold**, He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see Him.”

So what’s the point of “*behold*” this time? “**Behold**, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place...” Most translations seem to conclude that there’s no point at all – unless it’s just a fancy way of transitioning to the next section. So instead of “behold,” the NASB translates with the word “now”: “*Now* while they were on their way...” (cf. NKJV). In fact, *most* translations leave the Greek word for “behold” completely untranslated. So the NIV simply says: “While the women were on their way...” (cf. NRSV; HCSB; NET; NLT). But I believe Matthew says “*behold*,” for a reason! I believe he says “*behold*,” because the story he’s about to tell is not just another historical event; it’s an event with **meaning** – an event that tells us something we very much need to know and remember. Behold! Pay attention! This is important! This is not just an interesting story. This is not just a proof or an evidence to add to your collection of arguments. This is God’s Word and God’s **truth**. **Behold**.

Matthew could have said: “Now behold, some of the guard went into the city.” But apparently, he wants us to read about what the guards are doing *in light* of what the women are doing at the very same moment. So he writes: “**While they were going** [*while the women were going to tell the disciples that Jesus was raised from the dead*], **behold**, some of the guard went into the city and **told** the chief priests all that had taken place.” Matthew has used the Greek word for “told” only eight times in his Gospel and before this chapter the last time was all the way back in chapter fourteen. But in chapter twenty-eight this is now the *third* time that we’ve seen this word. In verse seven, the angel said to the women, “Go quickly and **tell** His disciples that He has risen from the dead.” And then in verse eight, it was Jesus who said to the women, “Go and **tell** My brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me.” Now, in verse eleven, instead of the women going to **tell** the disciples, we have the guard going to **tell** the chief priests. “**While** [the women] were going [to **tell** the disciples that Jesus was raised from the dead], **behold**, some of the guard went into the city and **told** the chief priests all that had taken place.” Can you see how Matthew is obviously wanting us to feel the **tension** between the activity of the women, and the activity of the guards – and ultimately between the message of the women, and the message of the guards?

Now when the guard goes into the city to tell the chief priests all that had taken place, what “*all*” does this telling include? We need to remember that Matthew never says that the guards witnessed the resurrection. They did not! They had never seen any resurrected Jesus. Jesus did not appear to them as He *did* to the women. What they actually saw was the earthquake, and the angel of the Lord. And then it was only after they had revived from their fear and terror that they discovered the tomb was open, and the body of Jesus was gone. So now the obvious question is how to *explain* what they have seen. Here are the facts, so what do they *mean*? But isn’t it *obvious*? Isn’t there really only *one possible* explanation?

II. Matthew 28:12 — And when they had assembled [synago] with the elders and taken counsel...

If you were here two weeks ago, then you know right away what's about to happen even before you've read any further. Once again, Matthew uses the language of Psalm chapter 2:

- ✓ Psalm 2:1–6 — The nations rage and the peoples *plot*... The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers *take counsel together [LXX: assemble together; synago]*, against the LORD and against his Anointed [Christ], saying, “Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.”

The chief priests and elders have assembled to plot and take counsel together *against* the Lord.

III. Matthew 28:12–14 — 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 often, we read these verses and assume that the chief priests and elders knew exactly what they were doing. They *know* that Jesus really has risen from the dead, and so now their only goal is to “save face.” After all, how could they *not* know in light of the clear evidence that was right in front of their faces? First of all, there’s no body. Second of all, the guards have reported an earthquake and the presence of a supernatural being. Thirdly, it’s *highly* unlikely that all of the guards had fallen asleep. And fourthly, even if the guards *had* all been sleeping, how could every single one of them have slept through the moving of the huge stone and the removal of Jesus’ body? Already, we’re getting all worked up – as though we’re the only sane people in the world – as though we’re the only people in the world who have *common sense*. We’re just warming up to the argument aren’t we? – Maybe even becoming a little self-righteous?

But does Matthew make any of these points? Does Matthew include this story as an apologetic (an evidence or a proof) for the resurrection? Is Matthew trying to make the point that as long as someone has good common sense, he will believe in the resurrection; and as long as someone is sincere, he will place his trust and faith in Jesus? But that would be to think far too highly of ourselves (cf. Bruner) And here’s the problem. The chief priests and elders *were* “sincere,” and they were no more lacking in common sense than we are. The guards had not actually seen a risen Jesus. Neither had the chief priests and elders seen a risen Jesus. They *did* believe in the resurrection of the dead, but they *knew* that Jesus could not have been raised from the dead because He had spoken against the Law of Moses, and He had even spoken against God’s holy temple. He (*a man*) had even claimed to be *equal* with *God*. It was unthinkable – it was *impossible* that God should raise Jesus from the dead because this would be to vindicate the blasphemous teachings and claims of Jesus. This they *knew* that God could *never* do. We should not think for a moment that the chief priests and elders really believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead. They didn’t. In fact, they “knew” that He had not. So now their only concern was to protect the flock from the dangerous *lie* that this deceiver and blasphemer *had* been raised. So did they really believe that the guards had all just fallen asleep? Maybe. Or maybe they believed that there had been some work of witchcraft and sorcery. They had already accused Jesus of casting out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons (12:22-24). So maybe it was sorcery that caused the guards to fall into unconsciousness, so that while they slept the disciples of Jesus

could steal His body away. But in the end, the simplest and safest explanation was just to say that the guard had fallen asleep. After all, if the vulnerable and gullible sheep heard about anything “supernatural” happening, they might just conclude that it was really the work of God rather than the work of the devil. Matthew never once mocks the “*sincerity*” of the chief priests and elders – as though they were any less “sincere” than we are. And neither does Matthew ever mock the common sense of the chief priests and elders – as though they were in any way more lacking in “common sense” than we are. Matthew is not trying to argue and defend, or engage in apologetics. So then, what *is* the point? What is it that Matthew wants us to “*behold*”?

Matthew began this section by pushing us to feel the *tension* between the activity of the women, and the activity of the guards – and ultimately between the message of the women, and the message of the guards. But now we come to see how Matthew concludes.

IV. Matthew 28:15 — So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

Literally: “So they took the money and did as they were “*taught*.” The Greek word for “taught” is not at all the word we would have expected here. It works, but it still feels strange to say that the guards did as they were “taught.” That’s why all the modern translations say that they did as they were “instructed.” But there’s another Greek word that would more naturally mean “instructed” (parangello; cf. Mat. 10:5; 15:35). So why does Matthew use the word that feels so *unnatural*? Why does Matthew say that the guards did as they were “*taught*”? Matthew uses this word sixteen times in his Gospel, and everywhere else it’s *always* referred to religious or spiritual teaching. Twelve times it refers to the teaching of Jesus (cf. 5:2; 7:28).

- ✓ Matthew 4:23 — And he went throughout all Galilee, *teaching* in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.
- ✓ Matthew 9:35 — And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, *teaching* in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction.

But the three other times that Matthew uses this word, it refers instead to counterfeit teaching (cf. 5:19) – especially the counterfeit teaching of the religious leaders of Israel.

- ✓ Matthew 15:9 — In vain do they worship me, *teaching* as doctrines the commandments of men.
- ✓ Matthew 16:12 — Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the *teaching* of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

So when Matthew says that the guards took the money and did as they were “taught,” he’s emphasizing that this message is a *counterfeit* teaching, a teaching that is opposed to the Gospel, a teaching that is a lie and a fraud, a teaching that is an enemy to God’s Word. There is no argument here – just an *assumption* of the truth of God’s Word in contrast with the lies and deceits of the enemy.

“So they took the money and did as they were taught. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.” Literally: “This **word** has been spread among the Jews to this day.” “Story” is a legitimate translation (Acts 1:1). But the Greek (logos) can also have the idea of a “message” (cf. Luke 4:32; 1 Cor. 2:4).

- ✓ Matthew 13:19–20 — When anyone hears the **word** of the kingdom [the message of the kingdom] and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart.

So once again, we see Matthew developing his theme of a false teaching and a **counterfeit** message. And once again, what we fail to see is any argument. There is no presentation of evidence or of proofs. Matthew simply assumes the *truth*. He just **assumes** that the only *true* explanation of the facts is the *truth* of the resurrection.

“So they took the money and did as they were taught. And this message has been spread among the Jews to this day.” There are only two other times in the New Testament where we hear of anything being “spread,” and in both of these cases what’s being spread is the truth and good news of Jesus’ power to heal (Mat. 9:31; Mark 1:45). But here in Matthew twenty-eight we know that what’s being “spread” is a **lie** – a counterfeit teaching that opposes and attacks the truth of the Gospel. Still no arguments – just an assumption of the truth of the resurrection in contrast with the lies and deceptions of the enemy.

At the very *first* proclaiming of the true Gospel, the lie of an “anti-Gospel” was already being spread (cf. Brown; quoted in Hagner). Even as the true teaching and message was first being proclaimed, the counterfeit teaching and message was already going out. But for all this, Matthew’s conclusion is very simple and very calm (cf. Bruner): “So [the guards] took the money and did as they were taught. And this message has been spread among the Jews to this day.” Still in Matthew’s mind are the words from Psalm chapter two (cf. Acts 4:23-31):

- ✓ Psalm 2:1–6 — Why do the nations rage and the peoples **plot in vain**? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers **take counsel together [LXX: gather together]**, against the LORD and against his [Christ], saying, “Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.” **He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision**. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, “As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.”

The chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together and took counsel to “made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard” (27:62, 66). But God was laughing, holding all their plans in derision – and He raised up Jesus from the dead. The chief priests and elders gathered together and took counsel to spread the lie that the body of Jesus had been stolen away while the guards were asleep. But God was still laughing, holding all their plans in derision – as we see from the closing words of Matthew.

- ✓ Matthew 28:18–20 — 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.”

Conclusion

“*Behold*,” says Matthew. This is important! Pay attention! There will always be lies. And there will always be people who believe the lies. Even at the very first proclaiming of the Gospel, the lie of an “anti-Gospel” was already being spread – and already being *believed*. But in the face of these things, we must never be unnerved or become anxious. In the face of Satan’s lies and counterfeits, God has ordained that the truth of His Gospel should be always spreading throughout all the world until in the end it finally, and ultimately, and everlastingly *triumphs* over all. Maybe now we can see that in one sense, the story of the bribing of the guard is really just an introduction and a setting of the stage for the “Great Commission” – for the triumphant “grand finale” of Matthew’s Gospel. That’s next week.

So for right now, let’s pay attention one more time to how Matthew just *assumes* that there is *the truth*, and there is *the lie*. Very calmly, and very simply, he proclaims that the *truth* is that Jesus has been raised from the dead, while the *lie* is anything that ever says otherwise. There’s never any argument – at least not like we might think of argument. Matthew never gets worked up and hot under the collar about proving the enemies of Christianity wrong. He wouldn’t have been bothered by the people today who say that he invented the story about the guards because he wanted another argument for the resurrection. These people are all worked up because they want to prove that Matthew’s arguments are a failure. But that’s impossible to do because Matthew never played this game. He never did stoop to the level of “arguing” and trying to “prove” the resurrection with evidences – which is probably the *real* explanation for why some people are so worked up. Matthew simply *assumes* the truth. It’s really quite amazing!

Now this isn’t to say that the truth is not reasonable or that it doesn’t have good evidence. The truth is far more reasonable and has far better evidence than any lie. But in the end, the truth about Jesus cannot *depend* on the arguments of human logic and evidence. The reason people believe the lie is not that they lack common sense. We need to be careful about the *self-righteous* idea that all we have to have is “common sense” to see that evolution is a lie. Remember: Matthew never questioned the common sense of the chief priests and elders – as though they were in any way more lacking in “common sense” than we are. The reason people believe the lie is not necessarily that they lack a “sincere” heart. We need to be careful about the *self-righteous* idea that all you have to have is a “sincere” and “earnest” heart in order to believe the Gospel when you hear it. Remember: Matthew never questioned the “*sincerity*” of the chief priests and elders – as though they were any less “earnest” and “sincere” than we are.

The problem is this: Our hearts are *all equally* blinded by sin. Because of our sin, we are literally unable to see and to receive the truth. When the chief priests and the scribes and the elders were saying, “Let Him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in Him” (27:42), they were mocking Jesus, but no doubt they also believed what they said. If Jesus were to come down from the cross, they *would* believe in Him (cf. 16:1-4; 12:38-42). But Jesus knew they wouldn’t. Jesus knew that even if He appeared to them after His resurrection, they still would not believe (Luke 16:29-31). Even today, the fact that we cannot *see* Jesus is never, ever, the *real* hindrance

to the 100% certainty of faith. Jesus knows that our problem is never a lack of evidence or good arguments – or even the lack of a “sincere” and “earnest” heart, but rather the blindness caused by sin.

And so therefore the *answer* to our problem can never be more evidence or better arguments. The answer to our problem can only be the saving *mercy and grace and power* of God alone. And this saving mercy and grace and power of God alone comes to us always and only in the simple *proclamation* of the glorious Gospel of Jesus Christ. Brothers and sister, look not ultimately to arguments and evidences, but to the saving power and beauty of the Gospel. And may we never, ever speak of common sense or “sincere” hearts, but rather always and only of God’s undeserved mercy and grace in *opening our eyes* to know and believe what is true.

As Matthew has written His Gospel, He has proclaimed in every single word and in every single text the good news about Jesus. Not once has he ever argued for the truth like *we* may think of argument. But I hope we can all agree today that never in all the world has there ever been a more powerful “argument” than *Matthew’s Gospel* for the **truth** that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. The most powerful “argument” for the truth is just the *proclamation of the truth* in all of its glory and beauty. And this Matthew has done *faithfully*, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, from beginning to end. All praise and glory be to God for His wonderful gift.