

The Resurrection: True or False
The Stolen Body Theory
Matthew 27:62-66
Pastor Jon Haakana

Once again we've heard the challenging words of a man we are calling Allen the Atheist. During our midweek Lenten services this year we are looking at theories that have been created to refute the Scriptural record of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Instead, we are using the Bible to refute these theories. Again, we are doing this not to convince ourselves, but rather, to be able to give answer to anyone who seeks a reason for the hope that we have and the truth we have become convinced of. And as we make our way to the cross and the empty garden tomb this Lenten and Easter season, it will give new meaning and appreciation for this most important miracle of God.

So far we have looked at two alternate theories to the resurrection of our Lord, the Swoon or Resuscitation Theory and the Wrong Tomb Theory. Both theories have been around for a while, but both are easily refuted by the pages of Scripture and other proven sources. Today, we look at the theory that is the oldest and the simplest explanation for an empty tomb; the stolen body theory. This is the only alternate theory that dates back to the first century. This makes it more historically important than the other theories since it uses the same evidence from the time period and tries to explain the events in the same historical and cultural setting.

One of the interesting things about having another first century explanation is that it backs up several important points that many of the other theories can't explain. The most significant of these is that the tomb was empty. Do you remember the checklist that was agreed upon by most Christian or non-Christian scholars as the minimal facts regarding the resurrection of Jesus – crucified, died, buried in tomb, tomb found empty, both followers and enemies of Jesus report seeing Jesus alive after his death? Well, the empty tomb might be the hardest minimal fact to explain away.

The stolen body theory says someone broke into Jesus' tomb and took the body. There are only three groups who might have a reason to steal the body: The Romans, the Jews, and Jesus' disciples. There are two big problems with the stolen body theory. The Romans and Jews each participated in Jesus' death to stop his influence. If the Romans or the Jews stole the body so the Christians couldn't, then all they had to do was say where the body had been moved to. Showing the body would have destroyed Christianity. If they could have produced a body they would have.

Matthew 28:11-15 tells us what happened between the guards at the tomb and the chief priests after the resurrection: "While they were going, behold, some of the guard went

into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. 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 they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day."

Second, the behavior of the disciples does not make sense if they had stolen the body. Out of the twelve disciples eleven of them died as martyrs. That means they would have died for a lie they KNEW was a lie since they were the ones who made it up. People certainly die for lies, but not for lies they invented. It would also mean that none of them in the conspiracy confessed to the lie in order to escape the pain of their deaths. And stealing the body does not make sense of their lives. These are men who gave up jobs, comfort, and home to travel to faraway places to tell people about Jesus. But they did not receive fame or riches. They were rewarded with beatings, persecutions, imprisonment, and hardship. There was no incentive to steal Jesus' body and lie about it. There was nothing to gain and everything to lose.

Besides, that evening of Resurrection Sunday we hear that the disciples were still perplexed and scattered, huddled together in hidden rooms. John talks of he and the other disciples "behind locked doors for fear of the Jews." A week later when Jesus appeared to the disciples, this time with Thomas present, they were still behind locked doors. Doesn't sound like a group of organized men carrying out a plan of larceny and deception.

Also, such a theory again ignores the evidence of the linen wrappings in the empty tomb. In John's account of the resurrection hear how the linens laid where they were and the burial cloth was folded separately. If someone had stolen the body, they would have either taken the body with the cloths or left the wrappings scattered or piled in a heap, but only a resurrection could account for the position of the linen wrappings with the body absent.

Dr. Paul Maier, church historian, author, professor and lecturer, says this in his book, *"The First Easter,"* None of these alternate theories offers any solid base for historical reconstruction of what happened on the first Easter morning. No one theory explains all the phenomena reported at the time and it would take an incredible combination of several of them to begin to do this." He continues, "If all evidence is weighed carefully and fairly, it is indeed justifiable, according to the canons of historical research, to conclude that the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, in which Jesus was buried, was actually empty on the morning of the first Easter. And no shred of evidence has yet been discovered in literary sources, epigraphy, or archeology that would disprove this statement."

So, what are we left with in the evidence we have thus far? The defeat of death in renewed life is the only message of that first Easter, and of every celebration in the years since. Easter is the only festival that looks in two directions at the same time: back in history to fathom what happened in the week that changed the world, and why God came to earth in the person of Jesus to become the sacrifice needed to atone for our sins and sins of the whole world. Easter also looks forward into the future with the assurance that people who die will rise again because of what really happened on the first Easter morning.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15: “If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith... But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.”

This we believe. This we trust. This we proclaim. In Jesus, Amen.