

I remember when I was a kid, we would always play games of imagination like war or cowboys and Indians, pirates or knights. And sometimes during the course of the game, you would have to do what? Play dead. With great dramatic flair worthy of an Academy Award.

Animals in nature use playing dead as great camouflage to survive.

Have you ever seen a possum play dead and become stiff as a board?

Or what about fainting goats?

Their bodies have a genetic condition

Where their muscles stiffen when they are frightened.

Playing dead is something they do to survive when threatened.

Today, we are going back one last time to the Day of Resurrection.

This time, back to Easter morning, as the women

had come to see what had happened to Jesus.

They didn't possibly think that

Jesus could just be playing dead.

But when they arrived

2 And suddenly there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow.

This part we have talked about back at the beginning of May.

An angel proving to the world that Jesus

had defeated death, not to let Jesus out.

But when I needed an extra week to make this series work,

I decided to focus on something that we just move past during the Easter season, usually. It is this verse...

4 For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.

I have never really talked much about the guards.

And I was curious to understand more about who they were and this massive conspiracy, and you know what?

I discovered the pivotal role they played in the birth of Christianity.

And how their story shows the cost of compromise,

how a lie never lies low, and how,

no matter how big it grows,

it can never take over the truth.

But to understand these dead men walking,

we have to flashback to Matthew 27 and Jesus' trial.

Even though Jesus was dead and buried and his disciples scattered, the chief priests and Pharisees were still a little nervous about Jesus playing dead, or maybe, in Monty Python fashion, only mostly dead.

They had asked Pilate to make the tomb “secure,” (27:62-64). Pilate tells them, “You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can” (27:65).

literally, “as secure as you know how”.

Perhaps Pilate says more than he realizes.

The presence of armed guards and official security measures at a tomb were highly unusual and highlights the political tension of the moment.

Now, like any good heist or Mission Impossible, you have a complex chain of events.

And they usually have some catchy titles...So here we go...in Oceans 11 style

First, the **Security**.

So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard. Matthew 27:66

The Stone.

The guards secured Jesus’ tomb by rolling a massive 1-2 ton stone in a groove in front of the cave’s opening. It would take several men to roll it back.

The Seal.

A strong rope was placed across the stone and anchored into the rock. And the ends were covered with a moldable wax and imprinted with the governor’s official Roman seal. Breaking this seal was a crime punishable by death.

And last the Guard.

A contingent of heavily armed temple or Roman guards was stationed at the entrance to ensure no one tampered with the stone. And why all of this Fort Knox finery?

Because after Jesus’ death, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. **“Sir,” they said, “we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise again.’** So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first.”

There was no way anyone was getting in there.

And then the earthquake and the angel brought the **Miracle**.

And the soldiers were so terrified they became like "dead men" and fainted.
I mean who wouldn't?

The guards were heavily armed and trained to be brave.
But facing the angel's bright appearance,
all their earthly power falls away in the presence of God.
Can you imagine what they had seen?

But after all the hubbub it is time for the **Meeting**.

11 ...Some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened.

Can you imagine telling your superiors a story like that?
Even in his death, Jesus has derailed their plans.

So how do they decide to handle what has happened? **The Bribe:**

12 After the priests[c] had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers

All that leads to **The Lie:**

The soldiers were ordered to tell people: **"His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.**

Now this is a big ask of the guard.

In the Roman military system, falling asleep on watch
or failing a guarding duty
carried a strict penalty of execution.

And the guards will do it all with **The Guarantee:**

14 If this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble."

The religious leaders promised to protect the guards
from the Roman governor if he found out
they had failed at their post.

We have your back.

And finally the **Take**.

15 So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story is still told among the Judeans to this day.

Quite the plan. It had me asking:

what do we make of all these details unique to Matthew's story?

The Guards' Report is pivotal in the narrative of the resurrection,
as it highlights the lengths to which the religious leaders
went to suppress the truth of Jesus' resurrection.

The bribery of the guards and the fabrication of the account

that the disciples stole Jesus' body emphasizes the resistance to accepting Jesus as the Messiah, despite the miraculous evidence of His resurrection.

I watch a lot of movies, and I always go to IMDB to read all the trivia about them and also what they call the goofs.

The goofs are mistakes in the story, including plot holes.

And there are several holes here...

so bear with me as I get my CSI on...

at MTSU I had plans to go into forensics

First of all, is it likely that Jesus' disciples who had abandoned Him upon His arrest would come back and risk their lives in order to steal His dead body?

Second, could they have really accomplished making it to Joseph's tomb, rolling away the stone, removing a body, neatly placing undisturbed grave clothes, and all without a sound and waking the guards if they were asleep? If so, these were the soundest sleeping guards in history. And this is an Oceans 11 level kind of heist.

Third, is it really likely that all of the guards would have fallen asleep?

Can you imagine this story being told?

Well, we fell asleep.

All twelve of you fell asleep at the tomb?

Fourth, if this story is what really happened, why didn't the Jewish leaders prosecute the disciples of Jesus?

By stealing a body, especially a body which had been sealed in a tomb with an imperial seal, they had committed a capital crime.

Why not prosecute them?

Fifth, if the guards were asleep, how could they have confirmed that the disciples had come by night to take away Jesus' body?

There are enormous problems.

We're just skimming the surface of the mistakes with this story.

And yet Matthew tells us this story was still being told in his time, decades later.

Matthew tells this story to vindicate Christ's resurrection against the "playing-dead" or "stolen-body" theories.

But he also has a bigger and broader reason.
Remember, Matthew is a Jewish Christian writing
to his own people who are part of the early Christian community.
He longs to see his own people embrace
the Lord Jesus Christ as the Messiah.
And he wants to say look,
I know the story that's told in your community
about what happened to Jesus Christ,
and do you really want me to believe that you believe that?

You can deny that George Washington was our first president.
You can deny that we have landed on the moon.
You can deny that there was a Holocaust.
You can deny that the Earth is round or that Elvis is dead.
And there are folks all around who do.

**But the very fact that Matthew mentions the Jewish leaders
themselves did not deny that the tomb was empty,**
but tried to come up with another explanation for why it was empty,
lets you know that nobody in Matthew's day
was suggesting that the tomb wasn't empty.
That was an absolutely established fact and reality.

Taking all the evidence together,
it is not too much to say that there is no single incident
better or more variously supported
than the resurrection of Jesus Christ.
And that is the extreme irony here and why Matthew's
story of the guards is so important to our Christian faith.

The religious leaders of Israel's worst
nightmare has now come to pass.
Jesus is gone. He's not in the tomb,
and their response is not to say just like He said,
He's been raised from the dead.
And their immediate response is not to admit that
they had been wrong in their attitudes towards Him,
not to admit that He was right in telling them
that He would be raised from the dead,
but in fact to devise a scheme to cover up the truth.

Matthew is showing you and me that unbelief
in the truth of God is not usually the

product of a lack of evidence for that truth.

It's a product of a heart that will not see
what is plain as the nose is on our face.

Throughout this passage, Matthew makes it clear.

It's a lot easier for the believer to believe
the truth than for the unbeliever to deny it.

The unbeliever has to work really hard
to come up with some sort of explanation
of how this thing is working out.

The believer doesn't really have to work very hard at all.

And you know what the real irony is?

First of all, the Chief Priests' strategy means they ensured that non-disciples will be among the first witnesses to the resurrection.

The earthquake, the angel, the angel's message,
the rollaway stone, the empty tomb. And the guards.
Non-disciples are there, and they can confirm it.

The second thing that this manages to do is show us
that the empty tomb is an absolute reality.

They didn't want to acknowledge the empty tomb.

So the very actions of Jesus' enemies,
taken prior to the resurrection,
now serve to confirm the reality of the resurrection itself.

Jesus' words and resurrection derail all the deceptions that were thrown at it.

Because you know what happens at the end of a cover-up?

You can't shut the Truth up nor keep it in a tidy little box.

God has a unique way of removing the lid and
bringing the Truth to life no matter how
hard the darkness seeks to keep it covered.

The same is true in our lives.

Truth will always stand and live.

And no stone will ever keep it sealed.

That was true then and it is true now.

Where do you need to hear the truth in your life or face it?

The truth will set you free.