

THE JEWISH LEADERS CONFRONTED WITH THE TRUTH OF CHRIST'S 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 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”.

(Matthew 28: 11-15)

On the first Easter Sunday there were two very important meetings. One took place on the evening of that day, and involved most of the disciples of the Lord Jesus. They gathered that evening because it had finally begun to dawn on them that the Lord had truly risen.

The other meeting took place much sooner, in the early morning. It involved the Sanhedrin, the council of priests, scribes, and elders. They gathered that morning because they had to deal with reports that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead.

Two meetings. One where the Lord Jesus Himself appeared to confirm the facts. The other where action was taken to deny the facts. Both meetings involved the greatest truth of history: the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

TRUTH OPPOSED, NOT OVERLOOKED

Usually on Easter Sunday morning we concentrate on what the women and the disciples did and saw. Let us, however, also pay attention to that other meeting, the emergency session of the Jewish Sanhedrin. We will do this not with a certain glee as we see the Jewish leaders squirming to get away from under the weight of the facts. We take no pleasure in the outcome of that meeting. It was a sad affair.

We will look at their meeting only in order to be confirmed in our faith that the Lord has truly risen from the dead and that we today, therefore, have to do with a living Lord and Saviour. We notice in this passage that the truth can only be repressed at great cost, at the expense of personal integrity and credibility. At the meeting of the Sanhedrin the truth was not accidentally “overlooked,” but wilfully opposed.

Our theme is: the Lord God confronts the Jewish leaders with the truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. There is a precise accounting of the facts, a wilful suppression of the truth, and a widespread acceptance of the lie.

SEALING THE TOMB

You know that the Jewish leaders had spared time nor effort to have the grave of the Lord Jesus sealed and guarded. Why were they so concerned about what might happen at this tomb? The answer is given in Matthew 27: 63. They remembered the statement of the Lord that after three days He would rise again.

This is remarkable indeed. The women and the disciples had apparently completely forgotten this saying of the Lord. At least, they did not take it very seriously, even though they had heard it more than once. But the Jewish leaders had not forgotten.

Did they really believe Jesus’ words? Of course, they would never admit to the possible truth of Christ’s saying that He would rise again. But still, there was the nagging doubt. They knew of the mighty power of this Jesus of Nazareth. They knew how He had raised the dead: think of Lazarus, the daughter of Jairus, and the young man of Nain. With this Jesus, they knew, you can never be quite sure! So even after He had died, Jesus occupied their fearful minds.

HIS DISCIPLES?

But they cannot admit to any of this doubt before Pilate. They call Jesus “this imposter.” And they suggest: perhaps his disciples – who may want to make use of Christ’s prophecy that He will rise again – will come to steal His body and claim that He has risen. That deception would be worse than all the previous ones. A Jesus who was believed to be alive posed a serious threat to their rule and power.

So they ask Pontius Pilate for a guard to secure the sepulchre. Pilate gives in easily; he is tired of the whole affair. He says: you have a guard of soldiers; go and make it as secure as you can. The explainers differ on the exact meaning of Pilate’s words. Did he say: you have your own guard, the temple police, use them? Or did he give them a Roman guard? Most explainers choose for the latter, because these soldiers are later afraid of what Pilate, the Roman commander in chief, might think of their efforts. So, let’s say it was a guard comprised of Roman legionnaires, hardened veterans, professional soldiers. We do not know how many men there were in this contingent (the traditional guard consisted of four soldiers), but it will have been a sizeable number, perhaps more than the usual. The Jewish leaders really want to make certain.

LIKE DEAD MEN

The guard is posted. The sepulchre is sealed. No one can come out, no one can go in! Finally the Jewish leaders can sit back and relax. The matter is definitely closed. But we have read how in the early hours, before dawn, an angel of the Lord comes down from heaven, and with mighty power rolls away the stone, breaking the seals, opening the grave. It also says specifically that he went and triumphantly *sat* on the stone. That indicates: try and roll it back, if you dare!

The soldiers are shaken with fear; it says that “they became like dead men.” They are petrified and immobilized. And when they finally come to their senses, they flee in all directions, wandering in a daze through the hill country around Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, the women have come to the grave and left it again. And we read in verse 11, “While they [the women] were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place.” Only some went. The others stayed away, out of fear or uncertainty. But somehow a report must be made to the authorities. So they decided: some of us will have to go and tell the story.

TELLING THE FACTS

Why do these soldiers go to the chief priests and not to Pilate, their commander? The answer is probably two-fold. The soldiers had been placed under the direct command of the Sanhedrin, and to them they therefore report. Secondly, Pilate might not be as receptive to their story as the Jewish leaders, who know more about Jesus and His claims. So they go to the chief priests.

What did they tell the priests? Matthew formulates it very carefully and precisely, “. . . they told the chief priests *all that had taken place*.” These men do not come with some incoherent story about apparitions and ghosts – even though they are in a state of shock and confusion – but they give the facts. It even says: they told *all* that had taken place. They did not omit a single detail. They did not come with part of the story, but they told the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth!

They said: look, we were standing on guard, as commanded, when there was suddenly an earthquake, and this person, with a face like lightning and raiment like snow, came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. There was nothing we could do to prevent it! One explainer even suggests that these soldiers, who were closest to the actual event of the resurrection, may have seen Jesus come walking out of the sepulchre, after the angel rolled the stone away. The Bible doesn't tell us that, so we may not state it as a certainty, but indeed these soldiers were the only witnesses of what really occurred at that sepulchre. And their conclusion can only be: something miraculous happened, the grave was powerfully opened, and that means that this Jesus has somehow come back from the dead.

A PRECISE ACCOUNTING

Do you think that these chief priests doubted the story of the soldiers? Do you think that they – who knew the Scriptures – could not identify a person in white raiment? They realized that they were faced here with the appearance of an angel of God and that the words of Christ were proving true in a manner which they never would have expected.

The chief priests are given a precise accounting of the facts. The first to hear about what happened at the grave are not the disciples, but the priests and elders. The fact of the resurrection does not pass them by unnoticed. In this way the Lord causes the resurrection of Christ to be made known to the Jewish leaders in precise terms.

No, Christ does not appear to them Himself. He had said to the priests: you will see Me no more until the day of judgment. He will appear later that day, on that second meeting, only to His disciples. But the chief priests are confronted with the facts just the same. In this way God makes another appeal to the Jews to come to grips with the facts and to confess the truth. The chief priests indeed see that the matter is of great importance: they call a full meeting of the Sanhedrin together.

A HASTY MEETING

In the early morning hours, the messengers go out to gather the elders. Imagine all these men being awakened, dressing quickly, and hastening with all their early morning dignity to the meeting.

The chief priests assemble, it says, with the elders. We have here another official meeting of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council. It does not say specifically whether the scribes, the theologians, were called in, but we can safely assume that as many members of the council as possible were present.

It must be noted that we have here the most authoritative church court in Israel. These are the men who must be the shepherds of the flock and lead the sheep in all truth. As they gather, and hear what happened, they have the opportunity to recognize the facts and make the truth known. They could have said to one another: this proves that we have unjustly dealt with a true Servant of the Lord, and we must now change our position. Let us tell the people what happened at the sepulchre.

VERY FEW OPTIONS

It says in the text that they took counsel. This means that they debated and discussed how to deal with the issue. Usually their debates were quite lengthy, but here there was very little time to lose. Actually the debate did not have to be lengthy at all, for there were few options. If they refused to change their stand – and they did – they could do one of two things: discredit and deny the soldiers’ story or bribe the soldiers to change their story.

The Jewish leaders sensed that the real story was not easily discredited. The people were still impressed with what Jesus had said and done and how He had died. Therefore the story would have to be altered. Let us not deny that the tomb is empty, for it obviously is, they argued, but let the guards say that they fell asleep and that Christ’s disciples came and took the body away.

This is nothing but purposeful and wilful suppression of the truth. The Jewish leaders know that they are now causing a lie to be spread. It would have been one thing to have said nothing or to have left the interpretation of what the soldiers experienced up to the people; it is quite another thing to change the story and knowingly suppress the truth.

THE SANHEDRIN’S PROBLEM

Meanwhile, the Sanhedrin is faced with a problem. These soldiers will not agree to present this as a version of what happened. It simply is not true. Besides, the story is self-incriminating. To fall asleep while on guard is the greatest shirking of a soldier’s duty. To admit it is to admit great failure. A soldier does have his code of honour. And if they tell this story and Pilate hears of it, will he not take measures against them? The penalty for falling asleep while on guard was severe. Do you remember what king Herod did to the sentries who had to guard Peter but were unable to do so? Herod had them put to death (Acts 12: 19). Would Pilate take a different stand? It’s bad for morale when soldiers who shirk their duty get away with it.

And so they *bribe* the soldiers to tell a false tale. It is clear from the original text that they paid them a large sum of money. Just as in the case of paying off Judas, the money will have come from the temple treasury. Think of the irony: the money given by God’s people to maintain the sacrificial service in the temple is now used to deny the reality of the greatest sacrifice ever made!

And what about Pilate’s possible disciplinary measures? The soldiers are assured that the Sanhedrin will intervene on their behalf. Verse 14: “And if this

comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." The Jewish leaders a few days earlier pleaded with the hated Roman governor. Now they must plead with his soldiers. But they will do anything to suppress the truth about Jesus. This is how deeply they have fallen.

AN UNBELIEVABLE STORY

Meanwhile, do you see how the quickly concocted story is one that holds no water? Anyone can see that. If the soldiers were sleeping, how do they know that it was Christ's disciples who took away the body? Sleeping guards cannot identify the so-called grave robbers. Secondly, would not the moving away of the sealed stone have made enough noise to awaken the soldiers?

How could the Sanhedrin ever believe that the people would accept this tale? How could they themselves dismiss the soldiers' testimony? Well, it is easy to believe what you desperately want to believe. The greatest deception of all is self-deception. And if you repeat a lie often enough, people will believe it. You can fool the crowd most of the time.

Let us realize, however, that the Lord in His mercy *sought* Israel to the end, even after the crucifixion. He gave to the leaders the facts. But they rejected them, and conspired to have the truth twisted. So the people were robbed of their rights. How terrible when officebearers withhold the truth from God's people!

CHRIST STILL ON THE AGENDA

Meanwhile, Christ is vindicated. He occupies the Sanhedrin's agenda even after He has been pronounced dead. And He never will get off that agenda either. The Jewish people will always be faced with the claim of the risen Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ! Yes, the whole world will be faced with this claim.

It is written so that we would know for sure: Jesus has truly risen from the dead. The facts bear it out. The meeting of the Sanhedrin, early on Easter morning, could not avoid the risen Christ. He forced them to make a decision. The sad part is that the Sanhedrin's false version has been widely accepted. For Matthew adds that the soldiers took the money and did as they were directed. He writes, "And this story has been spread among the Jews until this very day."

The soldiers *immediately* went out to tell the people of Jerusalem their version of the events of that morning, and the story spread like wild-fire: the disciples of Jesus have stolen His body. Satan is quick to have his own version of things in place before the disciples even get a chance to accept and proclaim the truth.

TO THIS VERY DAY

When Matthew writes that the soldiers' story has been spread among the Jews "to this day," he may well be referring to a time span of some forty years. Meanwhile many other things had happened to bear out the truth of the resurrection. Think of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, the signs and

wonders done by the apostles in Jesus' Name, and the establishment of Christian churches in many parts of the Roman empire.

Matthew does not say that all the Jews accepted the false version. Thank God that many of them did accept the true account. But on the whole, as also Paul testifies in his letter to the Romans, the people of the Old Covenant have by and large rejected the risen Lord Jesus Christ. It is for Paul, as it should be for us, a matter of great grief and sorrow.

As you may know, Matthew's main purpose in writing this Gospel was to convince the Jews that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the Messiah. Therefore he had to show how the false story about what happened at Easter came into the world. Jews everywhere had to read it and know how their own leaders falsified the facts. And in writing these words, Matthew again appealed to the people of Israel as yet to consider the truth. The Lord has confronted the Jewish people also at Easter with the reality of the resurrection.

NO PHYSICAL RESURRECTION?

The lie finds widespread acceptance. This is true also today, and not just among the Jews, but also in many so-called Christian churches. The resurrection is theologically a much disputed fact. It is made into a *symbol*, an expression of the church's hope for a better future. Jesus lives on, people are told, in our hearts. His ideals, His teaching, His selfless example are still with us. In that sense many will say: yes, His grave is empty. But a physical resurrection? A living Lord who rules supreme in heaven? No, that cannot be true. Easter is only symbolic of new hope, of spring, of the undying human spirit!

You know why so many are misled. It is because they do not acquaint themselves with the real facts, which means, in our time, because they do not know the Scriptures. They have no way of checking and unmasking the lies of their leaders. They simply accept that a physical resurrection can not have taken place.

Can a church which promotes such teaching against the testimony of Scripture still be called a "church"? Someone who left the United Church of Canada – where such views are tolerated and even propagated – said: I became a Christian *after* I left the United Church. The situation may not be the same among all members of that church, but the statement is a telling one.

THE EVENING MEETING

The system of lies about the resurrection of Christ has become more refined since the first Easter. But the truth remains clear as well: Christ has truly risen from the dead. Remember, there was also that other meeting on Easter Sunday, in the evening. Christ appeared there to declare His peace to all who love Him, and to send out the witnesses of the truth to proclaim the Gospel of salvation! That evening meeting proved to be of greater consequence than the morning meeting of the Sanhedrin. For the Gospel is still being preached.

There is widespread acceptance of the lie, and the self-deception of people will only grow. But, praise God, there is also widespread acceptance of the truth, the truth that sets us free in Christ.

The message of Easter is that we must live by the apostolic Word which Christ gave to us.

Praised be the Son
For His redeeming work is done!
He died, was buried, but He lives,
And to His ransomed people gives
His blessed Word to guide us! (Hymn 29)

This is the Word which has been proclaimed to you, so that you may rejoice in Him Who has risen from the dead and Who will return again, the Saviour, God incarnate.