

Not Done in a Corner

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There are many different kinds of stories recorded in Scripture, but every one of them has its purpose. Sometimes, the purpose is immediately obvious; sometimes, it is not. For an example of the latter, look with me at Matthew 28:11-15. At first glance, this is just another depressing proof of the hardheartedness of the Jewish leadership. Here, we see two guards who were actual witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus. They come to the chief priests and tell them what they have seen. However, the chief priests bribe the guards to claim instead that some disciples of Jesus stole His body from the tomb while they were sleeping. Apparently, that story was then widely spread about.

This is interesting to us for several different reasons. First of all, it establishes that the tomb was empty. Everybody, from Jesus' followers to His worst enemies, agreed that His body didn't stay where it was put. Second, it shows the damage control style of the Jewish leadership. They were not interested in unbiased proclamation of the truth. There were only two witnesses to the actual moment of resurrection—the two guards. Because of that limited number of witnesses, the chief priests could plausibly make up another explanation of events, and that's exactly what they did.

Third, this alternate version of events—that the disciples stole the body of Jesus—was so widely known that Matthew felt compelled to spend one of the last sections of his narrative refuting it. It's not like the Jewish leadership made this story up and then forgot about it. Instead, it appears likely that they aggressively promoted it for decades.

Fourth, and most importantly, this section of Matthew 28 is the only section like it in the New Testament. It's the only time that a gospel historian thinks it's necessary to counter the official version of events, and the fact that this is an exception is extremely significant. After all, we've already seen that the Jewish officials were hostile to the gospel and not at all shy about making up, if necessary, an account of events that supported their point of view. Why, then, don't we see the New Testament writers repeatedly addressing all kinds of anti-gospel propaganda?

The apostle Paul gives us a marvelous explanation for this phenomenon in Acts 26:25-26. The actual resurrection of Jesus was an event only experienced by a couple of people. In that, it was by far the exception. The ministry and miracles of Jesus and His apostles weren't some kind of private work. They didn't go off in secret with the most fervent adherents of Christ, and then come back out and announce to the public that another noteworthy miracle had occurred.

Instead, from the beginning of Jesus' ministry to the end of the book of Acts, the supernatural proofs of Jesus' authenticity primarily occurred in public. They took place not just in front of His disciples, in the presence of those who could be expected to concoct a miracle even if none had occurred. Instead, those miracles happened in the plain sight of the enemies and opponents of Jesus, many of whom were very shrewd and resourceful men. If there had been the slightest hint of collusion or fraud, those men would have noticed and told the world about it to defeat the gospel they hated, just like the so-called miracle workers of our day attract all kinds of negative attention and negative narratives. The gospel writers would have had to spend a lot of ink in rebuttal. And yet, that is precisely what we do not see.

Why not? Why didn't these adversarial witnesses to Jesus and His apostles expose the miracles of their Nazarene foe? The only logical answer is that they didn't because they couldn't. The miracles that accompanied the gospel were so public and so spectacular that they left the enemies of the gospel with no opportunity to refute them. Their very silence is one of the great pillars of our faith today. Let's consider this morning the works that were not done in a corner.

Jesus.

One of the most prominent examples of this public ministry was Jesus Himself. The Scripture is quite clear that Jesus did spectacular things and did them prominently. Look, for example, at Matthew 4:23-25. This is the story of a man who caused a national sensation. Jesus didn't fill His audience with people pretending to be sick and then "heal" them. He didn't perform miracles where the cure was not immediately evident. Instead, He healed every kind of sickness, every kind of disease, in everyone who came to Him. Cancer? Jesus healed it. Leprosy? Jesus healed it. Demonic possession? Jesus healed it. Even at this stage, He still had His enemies. Many Pharisees saw His works and claimed, for instance, that He cast out demons with the help of Beelzebul prince of demons. However, never in Scripture do we see a single Pharisee or a single scribe attempt to deny that Jesus was working miracles at all. His healings were so numerous and so obvious that they denied His opponents that rhetorical ploy. Jesus worked miracles, and the record could not be clearer.

Likewise, the record could not be clearer that Jesus died. We have this from the pen of one of the eyewitnesses, the apostle John. Let's consider together John 19:33-35. The Romans knew their business as executioners. They weren't about to let Jesus or any of the other condemned men off of their crosses until they knew those men were 100 percent dead, so they performed a test on Jesus to make sure He was dead. This reminds me of a soap opera episode I saw a number of years ago, in which they thought that one of the characters was only pretending to be in a coma. They took a needle and poked it into his toes to see if he would react. What we see in John 19 is the brutal Roman equivalent of the

needle test. They took a spear and thrust it into His side so deeply that water and blood flowed out. This wasn't some little toy spear, either. Later on, Jesus invited Thomas to put his entire hand into the gaping hole left by the spear. It's likely that if Jesus hadn't been dead when the Romans speared Him, the spear would probably have done the trick. And yet, when Jesus was subjected to this savage spear thrust, He didn't even twitch. He didn't twitch because He was dead, and that fact would have been perfectly obvious to John, the Romans, and any of the other bystanders. The Scriptural narrative leaves no room for the idea that Jesus just passed out on the cross and woke up in the tomb. Instead, it points to the unassailable fact that Jesus was dead, and that His death would have been a matter of public knowledge.

We see much the same thing when we consider the resurrection of Jesus. Paul describes the primary witnesses to the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:3-6. It's not like Jesus just presented Himself to the apostles and His very closest associates. Instead, in the 40 days following Jesus' resurrection, more than 500 people saw the Lord, and at the time Paul was writing 1 Corinthians, most of the 500 were still alive. You could go up to them and ask them, and they would tell you that they saw Jesus, alive and perfectly whole, after He had died. Admittedly, this is a bit different than Jesus' miracles. To our knowledge, none of Jesus' enemies saw Him after His resurrection. However, this is still extremely strong evidence for the fact of that resurrection. It's impossible that these 500 disciples could have conspired together to claim that Jesus was still alive when He was actually dead. Just as a matter of human nature, every conspiracy of that size has at least one person who is going to rat out his co-conspirators, yet there's no evidence inside the Scripture or outside of it that any of the witnesses to the resurrection ever recanted. Some of those men and women were tortured and killed for the claim they made, but they never withdrew it. Nor could this have been a hoax. After all, the closest followers of Jesus would have been numbered among the 500. They had followed Him for years, and they would have been able to spot an impostor just like we would notice an imposture of someone close to us. Like Thomas, they would have demanded proof, up close and personal. That's why John speaks not just of what his community of believers saw, but of what they touched with their hands. Those 500 people knew for a fact that Jesus had been raised.

The Apostles.

When the apostles took up the gospel after Jesus' ascension, they too maintained this standard of public, incontestable miracle. Look at how public the apostles' speaking in tongues was in Acts 2:5-6. This is not some pre-selected group of stooges. Instead, the audience to this miracle was composed of devout Jews from all across the Roman Empire and even beyond. Most of them had come to Jerusalem only for the festival of the Passover. They didn't hear the apostles speaking some kind of incomprehensible gobbledygook like what is often called "speaking in tongues" today. Instead, they heard them speaking the languages they spoke back home, sometimes thousands of miles from Jerusalem. To top it all off, they recognized that the men who were speaking weren't some kind of linguistic experts. Instead, they were Galileans, which was the first-century equivalent of being from Arkansas today. The apostles looked and dressed like a bunch of backwoods hicks, and yet, here they were, speaking every tongue known to the inhabited world. Is it any wonder that the crowd was bewildered? What they were hearing could only be explained by the supernatural.

We see the same thing concerning the healings of the apostles in Acts 3:9-10. Here, the apostles have just healed a lame man who had been lame since birth, for more than 40 years. In that time, he had supported himself by begging for alms at the gate of the temple. As a result, every Jew who visited the temple saw this man and knew that he was lame. Now, Peter and John have come to the temple at the hour of prayer, when the gate is thronged with worshipers, and healed this indisputably lame man. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of people, were present to see the first steps this man ever took. There was no opportunity for trickery, no chance for fraud. When the Sanhedrin meets, looking to discredit the apostles, all they can say is, "It is evident to all that a noteworthy miracle has occurred, and we cannot deny it."

Paul.

This same undeniable power is also evident in the life of Paul. Look, for instance, at what the Scripture says about his conversion in Acts 9:19-21. Here, we have a man whom everyone knows was Persecutor of the Church Number One. He lived a life of power and privilege. Now, all of a sudden, he throws all of that away to preach the very gospel that he used to persecute. Why? I don't think he enjoyed the stonings and death threats and midnight escapes. It's not like a man that firmly set in his ways could be persuaded out of them by mere human argument. Instead, the only plausible explanation is the one Paul gives—that Jesus miraculously appeared to him and convinced him he was wrong.

In addition, the miracles that Paul worked were just as spectacular and just as public. We see one instance of this in Acts 19:11-12, 17. Once again, we have a situation where numerous miracles are taking place. Paul is healing everyone who comes to him, and even pieces of clothing that he wore contained his healing power. Nor is he working in some hotbed of Christianity, filled with people who are predisposed to believe. Instead, this is the stronghold of the worship of the pagan goddess Artemis, with citizens who may never have heard of the God of Israel before. Nonetheless, because of Paul's works, the fear of the Lord falls on this whole province of pagans, and they magnify the name of Jesus.