

Fake News?

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By Rev Paul Graham

Read [Matthew 28:11-15](#)



Gospel accounts of the forty days between Easter Sunday and Ascension are few and far between. For instance, we only know that it was that duration because Luke gives us that detail at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles. And, apart from the enigmatic phrase that Jesus “gave many convincing proofs that he was alive” (Acts 1:3) we don’t get any sort of detail as to what they might have been.

I remember, many years ago, running an assembly that included cutting one of the teacher’s ties in half. The point being (with the agreement of the teacher) that this was the sort of outrageous act that would be proved true by the number of witnesses, just like the resurrection was proved by the number of people who saw the risen Christ.

And this brings me to this morning’s reading. We enter the controversial world of fake news. The guards, fearing for their lives as much as their livelihoods, make their grovelling report to their superiors. How to dress up their cowardice, their “tactical withdrawal” in the face of the drama at the tomb? To give an honest account of what transpired could well have led to a permanent termination of their employment.

But they took the risk; after all, what else could they say that would explain the events they had witnessed? The guards certainly weren’t employed for their imaginations...

So, the creative response came from those higher up the pecking order. If we look in detail at the tale the guards were paid to put about it’s still not looking great for them. They’re admitting that they were asleep on the job, which would be fine if they worked as mattress-testers. Not so great as they were meant to be looking after the corpse of a known troublemaker, someone who had got the attention of swathes of the population and appealed to many as the long-promised Messiah. OK, it hadn’t ended well for him, but the guards were there to ensure that the story had stopped on that Friday afternoon. Even hinting that they hadn’t done their job very well would lead to problems. At least they’ve got a pile of cash to cover their future bleak job prospects...

Tellingly, Matthew records that their story had the desired outcome, at least among some. Even more so, the story was still doing the rounds when Matthew was compiling his gospel.

It’s reassuring to see that there’s “nothing new under the sun” in that regard. For those who are followers of the news, we are aware more than ever of the suspicion that is cast by those who aren’t happy with the version of events that is presented. We hear the cry of “fake news” as it seems like everything can be brought into question by the dissatisfied. But even the term “fake news” is subject to a bit of fiction; rather than the commonly assumed view that it was a 2016 invention, it has its roots in the late 19th Century. It’s “fake news” to suggest that “fake news” is a modern phrase, let alone a modern concept!

Don’t get me wrong here (more fake news, if you like), I’m not suggesting that there are particular users of that term who are akin to the religious leaders of Jesus’ time. I’m not likening leaders today with leaders of first century Palestine. However, I am saying that we need to be wise about what we’re hearing and what we hold to be true.

Jesus came to bring the truth that set people free (John 8:32) and if we believe that statement still holds true today, we need to be mindful of what we hold to be “truth” in other areas of life. We need to be wise (as serpents) as not everything that we read is harmless (as doves) to us, our health and our relationships. We can find ourselves frustrated when people are decrying what we hold to be true, as I imagine the disciples must have been when they heard rumours of their grave-robbing exploits. Particularly when their once-dead friend had just been sharing a fish breakfast with them...

But this is where Scripture remains silent. In this account, Matthew doesn’t tell us how the story spread, what the reaction was among the fledgling church and how the situation played out (particularly as it was still unresolved in his day). What we do know is that the story had legs because the alternative was probably deemed less believable. Compare the two stories: disciples either stole the body or the body

came back to life and left the tomb of its own free will and under its own steam. Which one would you believe? Which one sounds like fake news?

The answer is, as every Sunday School teacher tells us, Jesus. Rooted in Jesus, his life leading up to Calvary and the testimony of those who followed in his footsteps. Repeatedly, Jesus told anyone who would listen that his death would not be the end, even if their understanding of his meaning was with the benefit of hindsight. So it shouldn't have been a surprise that that's exactly how it happened on that first Easter Sunday.

And, as for the disciples, we've got to admire their tenacity or their stubbornness. We know from historical records that the vast majority of those who saw the post-resurrected Christ were put to death in various and creatively horrible ways. Surely one of them (if not more than one), when faced with the imminent and vicious threat of death would have led the authorities to the reburied body if that's what they had done?

Yet they were willing to die for the truth of Christ's resurrected life. And for the truth that in death they would be reunited with him. A compelling case, which for those of us who believe the same must take on trust, as Jesus himself said to the no-longer-Doubting Thomas (John 20:29).

There is one key distinction between the two versions of events that has a relevance beyond Scripture, even beyond questions of faith. Put simply, who benefits from each story?

For the chief priests, spreading the story of body-snatching enabled them to regain control of the situation. As well as serving their own agenda, it maintained the goodwill of their Roman overlords, who would take a dim view of anything that would further upset the status quo. The winners in this version are the chief priests, even if it cost them a few more silver pieces.

For the disciples and their story of resurrection, they certainly weren't the "winners" in that sense of the word. Their lives were more at risk than ever; after all, they could easily have returned to the obscurity of Galilean fishing if they had wanted to (as Peter might have been attempting in John 21). But that's the point; Christianity isn't about the easy life, or the triumph of the individual (except Jesus himself, but even that was on humanity's behalf). The disciples stuck to their version of the truth because it was simply that: true. Whatever the cost, and it certainly wasn't measured in silver coins.

When it comes to the many pieces of news and its alternatives today, we need to be asking similar questions. Who is served by the conflicting stories that we hear and read? Does it benefit one person's agenda or the wider community? We might not be able to easily discern Christ in each circumstance, but we might be able to see which one he would align himself to; particularly at this time of uncertainty, where people are worried that they're not doing enough, or are doing the wrong thing, or are looking for answers to unanswerable questions, or looking for answers in the wrong places, or asking the wrong questions. That's an awfully large arena for news and its fake sibling to be given space. We are likely to get it wrong as we make our way through this crisis, but let's hope that we will always keep seeking the truth. Even if it isn't the easy path, we're more likely to find Jesus on it with us.

Amen.

(Photo by [Elijah O'Donnell](#) on [Unsplash](#))