

Conspiracy Theories

Matthew 28:11-17

Most people today are familiar with the idea of conspiracy theories. Usually in a political context, that refers to the actions of one political party to explain some set of circumstances by accusing those of the other party of organizing a coordinated conspiracy when there really is no evidence. In other words, the conspiracy is made up, the explanation offered for the conspiracy is, at best, hypothetical and, at worst, an outright lie. So for example, in President Trump's first term, there was the repeated accusation that he actively colluded with Russia in order to influence the election in his favor. We had the appointment of a special prosecutor, Robert Mueller, whose report concluded that "Ultimately, the investigation did not establish that the Campaign coordinated or conspired with the Russian government in its election-interference activities." So the whole accusation was a conspiracy theory, or, in the words of many others, a hoax.

What we have before us this afternoon is the exposure of a conspiracy theory, a hoax created by those who hated Jesus. They confronted the very real circumstance of his resurrection and in order to explain it away, in order to deny the evidence plainly before them, we read of an actual accusation that was leveled against the followers of Jesus that they stole his body!

Now, remember what we studied last week, how obvious it was that Jesus rose from the dead. Remember the irrefutable evidence that was plain to see.

Mat. 28:1 "Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb. 2 And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it. 3 His countenance

was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. 4 And the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men. 5 But the angel answered and said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. 6 He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. 7 And go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and indeed He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him. Behold, I have told you."

There was an earthquake! The very large stone had been rolled from the door. And we read that the guards "shook for fear of him, and became like dead men." They were guarding the tomb upon threat of their life, according to the instructions Governor Pilate had given them.

Mat. 27:62 "On the next day, which followed the Day of Preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees gathered together to Pilate, 63 saying, "Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, After three days I will rise.' 64 Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night and steal Him away, and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead.' So the last deception will be worse than the first." 65 Pilate said to them, "You have a guard; go your way, make it as secure as you know how." 66 So they went and made the tomb secure, sealing the stone and setting the guard."

They were there. They saw the earthquake. They saw the angel. The historical account of the gospel records tell us that without any doubt whatsoever. And yet, the Jewish leaders couldn't explain this supernatural intervention of God's power and they wouldn't believe in Jesus unto salvation, so they came up with,

I. THE ULTIMATE CONSPIRACY.

The ultimate conspiracy theory. The chief priests and elders assembled together, verse 12, a clear reference to the Sanhedrin Council, the Jewish leadership. And together, they gave this instruction to the guards,

v.13 “Tell them, ‘His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.’”

That is the conspiracy theory the soldiers were to spread. ‘His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.’ And again, it is worth noting that the Jewish leaders had expected that that exact thing would actually happen, and so they defended against any possibility of such a theft. Humanly speaking, the tomb was secure! And the guards who were assigned to that security detail knew it. They made the tomb secure. And they knew what actually happened.

v.11

They reported what had actually happened. They reported the truth. There was an earthquake. The stone was rolled away. There was an angel whose face was like lightening and clothes white as snow. They seen all of that with their own eyes. That’s the point. They reported the events as they actually took place, and the conspiracy theory suggested by the Jewish leaders was based upon,

A. An intentional disregard for the truth.

Emphasis upon the word intentional! They weren’t confused. They weren’t just mistaken or uninformed. They received eyewitness testimony from the soldiers guarding the tomb. And they told them to tell a lie, a hoax, an intentional deception to try and trick those who might be willing to believe that Jesus actually did rise from the dead. That’s the conspiracy theory. “His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.”

The gospel is clearly validated by the historical record. That is to say, the events of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection are all historical events. They all took place in history, validated by multiple eyewitness accounts.

1 Cor. 15:3 “For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. 6 After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. 7 After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles.”

However, those who do not believe, those who will not believe, are shown here in our text to be willing to lie in order to avoid the demands of faith to believe what is true. So this was their story, this was their intentional disregard for the truth, “His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.”

Let me emphasize again the presence of,

B. Collusion.

A conspiracy theory, of course, needs a conspiracy. It requires collusion among different parties in order to define the hoax that will be presented as truth. And this conspiracy was obvious.

v.12 “When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together...”

Lying so often requires collusion, because most lies involve more than one person. A conspiracy requires multiple parties, multiple participants, and therefore some sort of mutual commitment is necessary. A mutual commitment to lie. Again, that politically provocative word, collusion.

I really hate this sort of collusion in politics, and my opening illustration wasn't to imply that only the democrats are guilty of it. I really hate back-room conspiracies, behind-the-scenes collusion by which a story is fabricated. I hate the dishonesty of that in every context, and like most people, it makes me skeptical and distrusting of those who seem to be doing that very thing, it makes me very cynical. But the focus here is not upon any political frustrations, but upon the opposition which Satan employs in his attempt to silence or discredit the gospel. And why does he do that? Why do unbelievers join such a conspiracy and engage in such dishonest collusion? That's the question of Psalm 2, and the answer is that they hate Jesus!

Ps. 2:1 "Why do the nations rage, And the people plot a vain thing? 2 The kings of the earth set themselves, And the rulers take counsel together, Against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying, 3 "Let us break Their bonds in pieces And cast away Their cords from us."

The ultimate conspiracy when it comes to the gospel is the wicked and rebellious unbelief of those who hate Jesus the Messiah. They rebel against his authority over them, claiming for themselves their own autonomy to live and to believe however they choose. And such a collusion is so obvious upon the occasion of Jesus' resurrection. Along with another common element of conspiracy theories, money. Or, should I say,

C. Bribery.

v.12 "When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers."

Some things never change. Sin never changes. The human heart never changes. What do you do when you want to recruit a reluctant convert to your conspiracy? Give them money! A large

sum of money. Pay them off. If you want someone to toe the party line, if you want someone to say exactly what you want them to say, then offer them a bribe!

Again, with reference to our national politics, that is such a dangerous and devastating practice. The money could be campaign donations. It could be kickbacks. It could be insider information leading to financial and investment windfalls. Whatever the reward might be, bribery is deadly to the honest exercise of government and authority, and what these Jewish leaders suggest is simply despicable. "They gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, saying, "Tell them, 'His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.'"

But something else is needed. Protection.

D. Self-protection and preservation.

v.14

Again, the analogies to political loyalties today is obvious. The protection offered might just be political protection, but here in this context, it would certainly include physical protection. After all, the guards had actually failed in their job to secure the tomb, and they would be subject to severe punishment, even death. So the Jewish leaders offered the protection they could provide with their influence upon the governor, which itself, was quite surprising. But that's what evil does, it makes friends out of enemies, those who join together in the same conspiracy. So the Jewish leaders offer the soldiers the protection of their influence with Pilate, if they would join this conspiracy to lie about Jesus' actual resurrection.

It's funny, isn't it, in a very sad sort of way, that there are those who think they can succeed with such conspiracies in opposition

to God. The foolishness of thinking such a thing!

Ps. 2:1 “Why do the nations rage, And the people plot a vain thing? 2 The kings of the earth set themselves, And the rulers take counsel together, Against the LORD and against His Anointed.”

How does God respond to such folly?

Ps. 2:4 “He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; The Lord shall hold them in derision. 5 Then He shall speak to them in His wrath, And distress them in His deep displeasure: 6 “Yet I have set My King On My holy hill of Zion.”

Jesus is king! Jesus is Lord! That’s the answer to such conspiracy theories. They are doomed to fail, because God is the king and ruler of the whole world and Jesus is enthroned in power at his right hand. But these Jewish leaders will not submit to that at all, but rather persist in their foolish and desperate attempts to rid themselves of Jesus. Thus we see,

E. Persistent lying. v.15

History records this persistence. When the church father, Justin Martyr, wrote to Trypho in the middle of the second century, we find this quote: “You have sent chosen and ordained men throughout the whole world to proclaim that a godless and lawless heresy had sprung from one Jesus, a Galilean deceiver ... whose disciples stole him by night from the tomb.”

To this day, so many will persist in this lie. So many will simply refuse to acknowledge the existence of supernatural power. So many will deny the evidence, the historical eyewitness to Jesus’ resurrection, preferring to remain in their rebellion and unbelief. They remain dead, separated and alienated from God himself.

And as one commentator puts it so well, “We feel sure, however, that Matthew is not recording this merely to tell an interesting story...[H]e was writing to the Jews, though he was aiming also for the conversion of a much wider circle. What he is doing in conveying this truthful account found in [these verses] is this: he is showing how utterly ridiculous is the denial of Christ’s resurrection; in other words, how well-founded is the true account of what happened in Joseph’s garden.”

And so I proclaim the gospel to you, as I do one way or another every time I enter this pulpit. Today it is plain and direct,

1 Cor. 15:1 “I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, 2 by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. 3 For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.”

One further thought before we end this afternoon, and that is to take another look at the disciples, whom I would call,

II. THE DOUBTFUL DISCIPLES v.16-17

They don’t get it yet. We see a great change in the disciples after Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them. But here, despite all that Jesus had said about his own resurrection, despite all the eyewitness accounts they had of the empty tomb, they were still hesitant. Doubtful. But they did go to Galilee, as Jesus had instructed them, but the context seems to identify that as something of,

A. A resigned obedience.

In other words, they weren't going with any real expectation of seeing Jesus again. They were resigned to the reality of his death. But at least they went.

v.16

Remember what the angel had told the women at the empty tomb,

v.7 "And go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and indeed He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him. Behold, I have told you."

Then further,

v.9 "And as they went to tell His disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, "Rejoice!" So they came and held Him by the feet and worshiped Him. 10 Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me."

Mark's gospel records it even more clearly,

Mark 14:27 "Then Jesus said to them, "All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: I will strike the Shepherd, And the sheep will be scattered.' 28 "But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee."

So they went. And we read in verse 17 that some worshiped him. But then we read, "but some doubted." We see in the disciples,

B. Lingering doubt.

Luke's gospel is more specific at this point,

Luke 24:9 "Then they returned from the tomb and told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. 10 It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them, who told these things to the apostles. 11 And

their words seemed to them like idle tales, and they did not believe them."

It was on the road to Emmaus that two of the disciples had a more in depth encounter with Jesus.

Luke 24:25 Then He said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! 26 Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?" 27 And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. 28 Then they drew near to the village where they were going, and He indicated that He would have gone farther. 29 But they constrained Him, saying, "Abide with us, for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent." And He went in to stay with them. 30 Now it came to pass, as He sat at the table with them, that He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. 31 Then their eyes were opened and they knew Him; and He vanished from their sight. 32 And they said to one another, "Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?" 33 So they rose up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem, and found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, 34 saying, "The Lord is risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!" 35 And they told about the things that had happened on the road, and how He was known to them in the breaking of bread."

Thomas, however, you may remember, stands out among those who doubted,

John 20:24 "Now Thomas, called the Twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 The other disciples therefore said to him, "We have seen the Lord." So he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe." 26 And after eight days His disciples were again

inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, "Peace to you!" 27 Then He said to Thomas, "Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing." 28 And Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Jesus said to him, "Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

The point of all that is to say this, to proclaim this, that Jesus has risen from the dead. That he is alive. And blessed are you who believe! You believe, not because you saw it yourself as his apostles did, but that you believe what is proclaimed to you. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

And so I'll end with this encouragement and declaration of the gospel itself, word you can claim for yourself with confidence of your own salvation, and words you can proclaim to others that they, too, might believe and have life.

Rom. 10:9 "...that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation."