

“First Century Fake News”

5/05/19; Matthew 28:11-15

by Rev. Steve Hammond for FBC of Newport, NH

//11 While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. 12 When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, 13 telling them, “You are to say, ‘His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ 14 If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” 15 So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.//

—Matthew 28:11-15 (NIV)

Fake news is big news in our day. Gone are the days of Walter Cronkite securing the trust of most of the country. When he signed off with, “And that’s the way it is...” viewers had little or no reason to think that wasn’t the way it was. But now, ironically, with more news networks than ever before and more ways for anybody and everybody to report the news—we have more suspicion than ever in trusting the news we hear. Deliberate fabrications can be put out by just one person and have it multiplied by others so many times it can rival the real news. But even the “real” news of the mainstream media have been caught, numerous times now, fabricating stories.

And as if that’s not bad enough, there are cartoons and satirical sites that make fake news with the intention of it being funny, not fake. But some people can mistake these as serious news reports, which is a sad commentary on the average person’s inability to check out the validity and source they’re swallowing. AND it was a sad commentary on the state of our world in general, as sometimes the satire is rather believable. “We need to appoint a special council to investigate the conclusion of the special council.” That wasn’t from a news site. It was a cartoon (*michaelpiramiraz.com*). But stranger things have happened.

Listen to this:

In March [2018], Facebook threatened to reduce the visibility of the [The Babylon] Bee’s stories. The reason? One of Facebook’s fact-checking partners, Snopes.com, obviously labeled a Bee story (“CNN Purchases Industrial-Sized Washing Machine to Spin News Before Publication”) false rather than satire. Considering how important Facebook traffic is to Internet publications, the threat was no joke.

“We’ve been ‘Snoped’ before a number of times, but this was the first time Facebook used it to threaten us and to redirect readers away from our link and to Snopes’s website,” says Ford. “Over an article about CNN spinning news in a washing machine! It was just insane.” Snopes has fact-checked more than a dozen other Babylon Bee stories in the last two years. Last fall, the Bee even responded to all the unwarranted attention by publishing an article entitled “Snopes Rates Babylon Bee World’s Most Accurate News Source.” After an outcry on social media about the Bee’s mistreatment over the CNN gag, Facebook came to its senses and issued a public statement calling its treatment of the Bee a mistake.

—from *The Weekly Standard*, May 4, 2018 by Mark Hemingway

So I've got some news for you. Fake news didn't get its start in the twenty-first century. It goes way back, all the way to the first century and beyond. And we've got some first century fake news with us in our text today. It's from the guards. And it might be helpful to read a few verses leading up to our text.

Matthew 27:62-66

62 The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. 63 "Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.' 64 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." 65 "Take a guard," Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." 66 So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.

Matthew 28:2-4

2 There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. 4 The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

There are a lot of interesting considerations here and they can not all be addressed in one sermon. But one of the most interesting is how this account in Matthew is a window into the back and forth argument that would have taken place between the Apostles and the Jewish authorities. William Lane Craig summarizes it this way:

Christian: 'The Lord is risen!'

Jew: 'No, his disciples stole away his body.'

Christian: 'The guard at the tomb would have prevented any such theft.'

Jew: 'No, his disciples stole away his body while the guard slept.'

Christian: 'The chief priests bribed the guard to say this.'

So, who's giving us the real news here and who's making fake news? That's what everyone who didn't know for themselves would be asking. Probably most people would be inclined to lean toward the story from the authorities. That's what people do when they don't know for themselves what's what. But, even granting the authorities' story, there are some problems with it. First of all, it concedes the tomb is empty. Because the Christian claim, "The Lord is risen!" would have no back and forth argument if everyone knew the body of Jesus was never missing.

The disciples didn't make an effort to publicly preach the resurrection of Jesus until Pentecost (50 days after the resurrection). Yet prior to then, there evidently was this matter of a missing body. Notice it says "this story was *widely* circulated *among the Jews* to this very day." While Jesus was circulating among his followers and proving himself resurrected, the absence of his body was circulating amongst the general population in Jerusalem. So then, by the time the Apostle Peter preached the Good News at Pentecost, any answering done by the authorities had to include the well known fact that the body of Jesus was indeed—gone! Saying the disciples stole his body tries to account for that embarrassing detail.

Secondly, after the disciples would have pointed out the fact that there was a guard set at the tomb, the Jewish authorities come back with one of those “any-story-is-better-than-a-resurrection-story” type of answer. They insisted this theft took place while the guards were asleep. How they could know what happened if they had been sleeping is left to the imagination. They might have followed with, “Well, who *e/se* would have stolen the body!”

“Not us, that’s for sure,” would be the most likely reply. Followed by, “Those guards were bribed to give that fake news story!”

It’s interesting how the idea of the disciples having stolen the body of Jesus is not, to this very day, taken very seriously by anybody. No serious historian believes it. And most ordinary readers, believer and unbeliever, don’t believe it either. It just doesn’t make sense for them to do that.

They would be risking their own lives for a very dead and discredited Messiah. And they would be compounding that foolishness with expecting the absence of Jesus’ body to act like a reverse murder mystery case. You know, where the dead body pretty much proves there’s been a murder... and now the absence of a dead body is supposed to prove there’s been a resurrection?! It just doesn’t work that way.

While the absence of Jesus’ body was an embarrassment to the Jewish authorities, it was a side note to the Apostles. This matter of the guards is only mentioned in Matthew. Nowhere in the preaching of the Gospel do the disciples make a big deal—or any deal—out of the missing body. The big deal isn’t so much what’s missing; it’s the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Then finally, there are the guards. Amazingly, they would have known the inside story of the empty tomb. The text doesn’t say they saw the resurrected Jesus. It says they saw an “angel of the Lord” and it scared them nearly to death. How they could go back and report a fake version of what they’d seen is difficult to understand. (And by the way, the scriptures do not say these were Roman guards; it also does not say they were temple guards; it just says “guards.” Then it says they reported to the high priests, but then there was also concern with reporting to Pilate.) Whoever these guards were, though, they were in trouble for failing to *guard* the tomb. If they were Roman guards their very lives were at stake. And receiving a large bribe instead of their expected trouble is not beyond human behavior. We need only to look back at Judas to wonder how a person could see all the things he saw with his own eyes, and yet betray it all for 30 pieces of silver.

Those are some of the problems with the authorities’ story with the guards. But what about the other side? What about the followers of Jesus? One problem for the disciples would be in proving the guards were bribed. But it’s not like they were taking this to court. They most likely have the established facts on their side already: many people already knew about the setting of the guards around the tomb; and word was evidently circulating about the empty tomb even before the Apostles started preaching. If Jesus’ grieving disciples did pull off this caper and masterminded a complete turnaround of Jesus’ crucifixion, one might

say these men pulled off a 'resurrection' of sorts, the likes of which would be even more incredibly miraculous than the one attributed to the Almighty. Since such a thing would be well within the power of God, but not in character at all with these fishermen and tax collectors.

So there is essentially this one big 'problem' for the side of the Apostles. And it's a big one; it's their biggest problem: the resurrection itself, in the eyes of the public at least. Anything would seem more believable over a resurrection, wouldn't it? Empty tomb, stolen body, sleeping guards... surely that's the real story. The resurrection has to be the fake news, right? And so everyone would expect all this resurrection stuff to die down eventually. But of course that didn't happen. Just the opposite.

In the eyes of the disciples that biggest 'problem' of the resurrection was their biggest strength. The guards can say what they will. The authorities can spend their money and give people what they want to hear. But the disciples of Jesus were not all that caught up in the spin of, "Did they?" or "Didn't they?" steal that body. What they concentrated on was what they themselves knew to be true. Jesus Christ is risen! This is the "good news," the Gospel. And there's nothing fake about it. It's not about political power. It's not about winning an argument. It's not about money and profit. It's not even about the empty tomb!

It's about Jesus Christ, who died for our sins and rose from the dead. It's about all the rest of the Gospel story, which speaks for itself with an integrity and Spirit of God's truth that can be believed by "whosoever will." You can examine it yourself, and all you want. It will stand any honest scrutiny. It will outlive any charges of being "fake news." But at some point we have to render a verdict after the examination. Is this of any value or not? Are we to believe it or not?

In the end, though, each of us is also being examined by this Good News of Jesus. Think about it: How are these two stories standing in the test of time? The guards knew the truth and say the disciples stole the body of Jesus while they were sleeping. The Apostles knew the truth as well and they say Jesus rose from the dead. Time is seeming to tell which of these stories is fake news and fading away, and which of these, incredible as it may sound, is the Good News and growing stronger. But you have to decide for yourself. Your very choice in believing or not believing will be part of the proving of this matter of truth.

Jesus says he died for our sins, for our lies and theft and slander and sin of every sort. He says he loves us with the love of God. He says, too, that he is risen from the dead. And if you will take him at his word, he will raise you in the same way—beginning with your believing heart this very day.