

Who Would You Believe? Matthew 28:1-15

Many people might think that the phenomenon of “fake news” is a new reality. An online search reveals that many want to link this term to the advent of the newspaper and modern journalism. The truth be told, fake news is as old as civilization. Reporting partial truths, or even completely fabricated stories has been a means to gain power or get one’s own way from the dawn of creation. The father of lies has been at work since the creation of Adam and Eve, trying to confuse people with what is true and what is false. It would be easy to imagine Noah being accused of spreading “false news” as he foretold a global flood for 100 years before the rain started. Notably he was the only one who built a boat! Also worth noting, he was the only one who survived!

This morning we read of the resurrection of Jesus. In the brief 15 verses that Xiao read for us you will note there were two very different accounts of what happened that first Easter morning. One account said Jesus rose from the dead and was very much alive. The second account said the body of Jesus was stolen and he was very much dead. Both could not be right.

Who should you believe?

Let’s look at the two accounts and see which one holds up as being true, and which one was fake news.

Account #1:

The first account comes to us from two women, identified as Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. A few verses earlier we read that the other Mary was the mother of James and Joseph (or Joses), and these women cared for the needs of Jesus and his disciples as they travelled and ministered throughout Galilee.

These women who were faithful to follow Jesus throughout his life were also there at his death and burial. They knew where the tomb was for they were there watching as Jesus was taken from the cross, wrapped in burial clothes and laid in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. They knew exactly where they were going that Sunday morning, the day after the Jewish Sabbath.

The first thing they tell us is that there was a great earthquake. That is an interesting detail that could be verified or denied by anyone in Jerusalem. Interestingly, no one ever denied that happened.

The women concluded that the earthquake was the result of an angel moving the great stone away from the entrance of the tomb.

Pause with me a moment and take a look at that angel described here. He is tasked with the job of removing the stone that sealed Jesus in the tomb. I wonder if the angels knew all of God's plan, of if they were horrified when they saw Jesus, their Lord, beaten and nailed to a cross. You can almost see God having to hold the angels back as they wanted to go rescue Jesus, minister to him as they did after his 40 days of fasting in the wilderness. They wanted to fight for him, but the Father said, "No."

And so the angels watched the unthinkable happen – they watched the Son of God die.

But early Sunday morning God called out to an angel – "I have a special task for you. Go move the stone from the tomb where Jesus' body is laid. Today Jesus rises from the dead!"

In a flash that angel was down to the tomb, and with great relish he pushed that stone aside, with almost a little too much enthusiasm as he set off an earthquake! Oops! But the angel then sits on the top of that great stone and waited for the women to come. Can you see the big grin on that angel's face! He couldn't wait to tell those women what had happened.

Meanwhile, what about the guards that the chief priests had set to watch the tomb? Where were they? They had fainted for fear – they shook and became as dead men. They too saw the angel and it nearly scared them to death!

You get what this means, don't you? The Marys had to walk around the Roman guards to get to the tomb. They were not much of a threat at this point, but they were there.

We are told that the angel spoke to these women, saying:

"Do not be afraid, for I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come see the place where he lay."

Note that the angel invites the women to look and see for themselves that the body of Jesus was gone. He was no longer in that tomb. The explanation given was simple: he is not in the place where we put dead people because he is alive!

Notice also that the angel said, "He is risen, just as he said!" Jesus had told his disciples many times that he would go to Jerusalem and there be arrested and killed, but would rise again on the third day. The disciples seemed to forget this, but these women, who were there also listening to Jesus, maybe they remembered? The angel was counting on the fact that they did!

The angel is not done. He gives a message to the women: Go tell the disciples the good news that Jesus is alive, and will meet them back in Galilee.

These women are given the greatest challenge given to any of Jesus' followers to this point. They were to tell the others about the incredible, unbelievable, amazing, wonderful news that Jesus was no longer dead, but he had risen!

Now if ever there were people getting “set up” to be accused of spreading “fake news” it was these women. Who would believe them? They were not even recognized as disciples, because they were women. And according to Jewish custom, the testimony of a woman counted for nothing. They could not be a witness in court. And now this angel says, “You are God’s first witnesses to the greatest news of all time: Jesus is alive!”

Now if this was fake news, you would think that the person responsible for it would have known better than to choose women for the first witnesses! The story has already lost credibility in the eyes of the Jewish people because women cannot be God’s witnesses – can they?

The story continues. The women started back to the disciples to tell them the good news, and what happens?

Jesus meets them. The living, breathing, death conquering Jesus came to those faithful women and revealed himself to them. What a beautiful scene. Women who had been faithful to Jesus during his ministry became the first witnesses of his resurrection glory. God is so gracious.

How do these women respond to Jesus? They clasp his feet and worship him. They did not worship the angel. They knew better than that. But they will worship Jesus, for He is worthy of our worship. He is God. As Thomas will declare when he finally sees the risen Christ, “My Lord and my God!” This is who Jesus truly is.

This is the story the women tell about what happened that first Easter morning.

Account #2:

The second account comes from the soldiers. They let us in on a little back-room discussions and deals that I am sure the religious leaders would have preferred be kept silent.

Verse 11 tells us that it was when the women were on their way back to the disciples that the soldiers finally moved and did something. Now one might expect the soldiers to follow the women and discover the hiding place of the disciples, but that is not what they do.

Instead, we are told they went into the city and told the chief priests “everything that had happened.”

I had not noticed that statement before. It means that the first eyewitnesses of the resurrection – the Roman soldiers – told what they had seen to the chief priests. They told about the angel, and the stone rolling away, and I wonder if they saw Jesus walk out of that tomb? Whatever they did see, they told the chief priests. Just chew on that for a bit.

Then the chief priests met with the elders, the soldiers tell us, and they devise a plan. The plan was simple: lie.

The soldiers were given a story to tell, a story of how the disciples came in the night and while the soldiers slept they stole the body of Jesus. The soldiers would be paid well to tell this lie, and they would be protected by the religious leaders if they got in trouble from their superiors.

Two things come from this little ruse.

First, it was clear the body was gone. The women did not go to the wrong tomb, as some claim, because the chief priests could easily show them where the right tomb was and denounce the story of Jesus' resurrection. And as someone recently noted, these early leaders were not primitive. They would have sophisticated ways to search out details and find out the things people thought were hidden. But they could not find Jesus... that was clear, so they needed to create an alternate story.

Second, the chief priests are desperate. They were willing to put their reputations on the line, along with a great deal of cash, to hide the truth. They needed to stop the story before it got out, so they devised a story and a plan to silence the truth.

One of the reasons the chief priests are so desperate is the fact that they were the ones who insisted on the death of Jesus. They were the ones who stirred up the crowds to cry, "Crucify him!" at Jesus' trial. It was the chief priests who forced the hand of Pilate so that he felt he had no other option but to hand Jesus over to be crucified. It was their doing that saw an innocent man die.

And if Jesus was truly alive, they had made a terrible mistake. God alone could raise the dead, or rise from the dead. Either way, they had judged Jesus wrong. They said he spoke blasphemy because he claimed to be God. Maybe he was telling the truth...

So a story was created and circulated "to this day" that Jesus did not rise from the dead.

Two stories. Two very different stories about what happened that first Easter morning. One story comes from faithful followers of Jesus, the other from his enemies. One story says he is alive, one story says he is still dead. One story is unbelievable in many ways – angels, resurrection of the dead, meeting the presumed dead person who is now very much alive.

The other story is plausible, the body was stolen, if you can figure out how a bunch of fishermen outsmarted the Roman soldiers or worse, can you explain how Roman soldiers failed their assignment (guarding the tomb) and lived to tell about it?

Two stories about what happened that first Easter morning. Which one will you believe?

If you believe the women's story, which, as unbelievable as it is seems most plausible, what will you do about it?

You see, the story of Easter is more than a happy story of Jesus coming back to life to greet his followers. Far more than that happened that day.

Jesus' resurrection was the guarantee that the sacrifice was accepted by God. What sacrifice, you ask? Jesus was declared the Lamb of God which would take away the sin of the world at the beginning of his ministry. For years the Jewish people sacrificed lambs to seek God's forgiveness for their sin and to pay the price that sin incurred: the wages of sin is death. The lamb was slain so that the person offering the lamb could live.

Jesus came as the perfect sacrifice, the Lamb of God, who gave his life once for the salvation of all people. Jesus was the perfect God/man. As God his life was worth the lives of all who ever lived or would ever live on this planet. As man he could die.

And as Jesus told his disciples, "The Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many."
(Mark 10:45)

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." That includes you and me. But we know that. We know in our hearts that we do wrong, live selfishly, hurt others, and fall short in so many ways. But the good news of Easter is, Jesus gave his life so we can be forgiven and we can be given eternal life as we put our faith in him and what he did for us.

Easter is about Jesus conquering sin and death and offering to us a most incredible gift: forgiveness and a new life. The empty tomb says that Jesus' offer is for real. His victory can be our victory as we put our lives in his hands.

As our verse of the month says:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead!" (1 Peter 1:3)

So this morning, you have a choice: will you believe the story that says Jesus is still dead and his body was stolen, or will you believe the story that says Jesus is alive?

If Jesus is alive, as he promised he would be on the third day after his death, then all the rest of his promises are also true, the greatest of which is that we can be saved from our sins through faith in him.

I chose to believe that Jesus is alive! My greatest reason for this is because I too have met the risen Christ. No, not physically as Mary and Mary did, but I met him at an altar as I received him into my life as Lord and Saviour. And as the song declares, "he walks with me and he talks with me along life's narrow way. He lives, salvation to impart. You ask me how I know he lives? He lives within my heart!" May that be your story as well!