THE PROOF OF THE RESURRECTION

Matthew 28:1-15

*[show pic of Garden Tomb]* Today Christians all over the world, across all denominational lines, celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The words spoken by the angel resound with us: “He is not here – for He is risen!” The resurrection is everything to us! It is the fulcrum of our faith! The Apostle Paul declares in 1 Corinthians 15: “For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.” Paul seems to think that the resurrection of Jesus is pretty important. In fact it is one of the basic tenets of the Christian faith that Paul mentions at the beginning of 1 Corinthians 15. N.T. Wright said, “The miracle of the resurrection [of Jesus Christ] is the absolute center of all historic Christianity.”

So the resurrection of Jesus Christ is fundamentally important to us Christians, to our faith and to our hope of achieving eternal life. It should come as no surprise then that one of the key areas Christianity is attacked is the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Many skeptics through the centuries have attempted to explain away the resurrection. I won’t take our time this morning to go thru all the ridiculous theories that they’ve come up with to explain it away. Instead we are going to look at what God’s holy word has to say about it. Is there any proof of the resurrection? Absolutely!

To set the stage – you all know the story – *[turn slide show paintings]* Jesus was crucified. He was pronounced dead by His Roman executioners. When He died the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. There was an earthquake. Tombs were opened. Bodies of dead saints were raised and appeared to many people in the city of Jerusalem. Joseph of Arimathea, a rich man, a disciple of Jesus, a member of the Sanhedrin (Luke’s acct), asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Pilate granted it to him. Joseph took Jesus’ body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb that had been cut into the rock. Finally, to seal the tomb, he rolled a very large stone (Mark’s acct) against the entrance of the tomb. The chief priests and the Pharisees approached Pilate and they requested that a Roman guard be stationed at the tomb’s entrance to secure it. The reason why they did this is that they were afraid that Jesus’ disciples would come and steal Jesus’ body from the tomb and then claim that He rose from the dead (this was based on Jesus’ own prediction that he would rise from the dead on the third day). Pilate ordered the tomb to be secured by the Roman guard (not just one guard but a group of guards, perhaps as many as 12) and they set a seal on the tomb.

READ Matthew 28:1

Why did the women go to the tomb? To prepare the body for burial with spices (Mark’s and Luke’s accts). This work had been interrupted by the Sabbath. Mark mentions a third woman who goes to the tomb, her name is Salome. “The other Mary” is the mother of James the less, identified in the list of disciples as “James the son of Alphaeus.” According to Mark’s acct these women as they were on their way to the tomb were wondering who would roll the very large stone away from the entrance of the tomb for them.

Where are the disciples? They’re somewhere in the vicinity of Jerusalem hiding out. Matthew 26:56 tells us that after Jesus was arrested the disciples left him and fled. Peter subsequently denies Jesus three times, Judas apparently feels remorse for having betrayed Jesus and goes and hangs himself. Only John is present at the crucifixion. The disciples are afraid. They’re confused. They’re totally shaken by what has transpired – their Master is dead! Didn’t they know that Jesus was going to rise from the dead? He had told them He would, right? Apparently not. Every time Jesus mentioned to His disciples that He had to die but would rise again on the third day, they acted confused. Back in John Chapter 2 when Jesus predicted his death and resurrection the disciple didn’t totally understand. John tells us in that chapter: “When therefore He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.” But until His actual resurrection took place they didn’t fully comprehend it. John 20:9 says, “they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise from the dead.” So the bottom line is Jesus’ own disciples, the 11 that remain, are not expecting His resurrection. Maybe they should be, but they’re not. Ironically, the Pharisees have a much better understanding of what Jesus had said about His resurrection than Jesus’ own disciples did.

READ Matthew 28:2-4 [Note that NASB says, “Behold, a severe earthquake had occurred” meaning what happens here is past tense]

Notice the angel is sitting on the stone, v 2, which has been rolled back from the entrance of the tomb. This is what the Roman guards witnessed. Matthew tells us that these tough, battle-tested, hardened Roman soldiers “trembled” – they were terrified when they saw the angel. As a result they fell to the ground “like dead men.” So by the time the women arrive at the tomb they notice that the very large stone has been rolled away from the entrance and an angel is now inside the tomb (Mark’s and Luke’s accts).

READ Matthew 28:5-6

The angel explains to the women what has happened, that Jesus has risen. Mark and Luke mention the women entering the tomb. There are varying accts as to the number of angels (1 or 2) and his appearance (“man” or a “young man”, in dazzling apparel – READ description of angel in Matthew 28:3. In the Bible brilliant light is a characteristic of heavenly beings. The angel said, “He has risen as He said” – five times in Matthew’s gospel Jesus predicted His resurrection (12:40, 16:21, 17:9, 17:23, 26:32).

READ Matthew 28:7-8

“Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee,” v 7 – this is where He had told His disciples He was going to go after His resurrection (Matthew 26:32). So the angel’s message is “See, go, and tell!”

V 8, “So they departed quickly.” Mark says the women fled trembling and astonished.

Before we move on to verse 9 what proof do we have up to this point of the resurrection of Jesus (thru v 8)? We have the verbal testimony by the angel to that fact. We have an earthquake, the stone is rolled back, the tomb is empty, linen wrappings and face cloth lying where the body had been… but where’s Jesus’ body? As of right now all the evidence of Jesus’ resurrection is circumstantial.

READ Matthew 28:9-11

So now we see Jesus. He appears to the women as they are on their way back to tell the disciples what they had seen. Just for the record this is the first of ten appearances (as recorded in N.T.) that Jesus will make following His resurrection and before He ascends back into heaven. OK, so you want proof of Jesus’ bodily resurrection? What better proof than Jesus, the one who has been pronounced dead by the Romans, now making an appearance to people most of whom knew Him very well. He appears to… Mary Magdalene at the tomb (Mark 16:9); two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24); Peter (Luke 24:34); ten of the 11 disciples, Thomas absent (Luke 24); all 11 disciple, Thomas present 8 days later (John 20); seven disciples by the shore of the Sea of Galilee (John 21); more than 500 disciples at one time probably on a mountain in Galilee (Paul’s acct in 1 Cor 15:6); James (Paul’s acct in 1 Cor 15:7); to the 11 apostles just before He ascended back into heaven (Acts 1). So over 500 people see the resurrected Lord, they interact with Him. If you are going to deny the resurrection of Jesus then you will have to counter, completely dismiss the eyewitness accounts of all these people.

Skeptics will argue that these eyewitnesses to the resurrected Jesus were either all (1) lying, (2) mistaken, fooled by an imposter, (3) dreaming, (4) hallucinating, (5) wishful thinking --- bunk! These people knew that this was really Jesus! How? Because they knew Jesus. This wasn’t just some ghost, or an imposter or an illusion or a figment of their imagination. This was, in fact, Jesus! So you want proof of the resurrection? How about eyewitness accounts by over 500 of His own followers? That should be more than enough to convince anyone, but there’s even more proof – and this evidence is rendered unwillingly, unintentionally by His enemies.

READ Matthew 28:11

It’s early morning, just starting to get light and the Roman guards have awakened from their terrified state and having assessed the situation now a group of them head into Jerusalem to the chief priests. Why do the guards go to them? Because back in Chapter 27 Pilate had placed the guards under the charge of the chief priests. The guards tell them everything they saw – the earthquake, the angel, how he rolled the stone back and sat on it, how they were terrified and fell to the ground, the empty grave. They tell the chief priests all that had actually happened, what they had witnessed with their own eyes. Notice the chief priests never go and check it out for themselves. They believe the guards.

READ Matthew 28:12-15

So the Jewish religious leaders have a problem, an embarrassing situation! They’ve just been presented a mountain of evidence that supports Jesus’ claim that He would be resurrected on the third day. And, despite their best efforts, the very thing they hoped to prevent from happening has happened! Please understand this: these Roman soldiers had literally guarded this tomb with their lives (if they fail in their duty they will face execution). They saw an angel, saw him single-handedly roll the very large stone away, saw that there was no longer a body in the tomb. And the religious leaders knew that when Jesus had been arrested how His disciples had scattered, run away in fear. So there’s no way that this bunch of cowards would all of a sudden muster up the courage it would take to confront a contingent of Roman soldiers and attempt to steal Jesus’ body. They also know what Jesus had claimed. So what’s their reaction? Do they repent and believe? Here’s their opportunity to do so. Now faced with this evidence they can either admit their error (“we were wrong about Jesus, He really is the Messiah, and He did rise from the dead”) OR they can cover up the evidence and save face with the people and propagate a lie. So they convene a meeting of the Sanhedrin to discuss the situation. And the result is that they pass a resolution, they render a decision on the matter – (1) pay off the soldiers to lie, bribe them; (2) spread this lie among the people; “His disciples stole His body while we were asleep”; (3) satisfy Pilate, protect the soldiers, assure that they will not be punished for what happened, losing the body.

Well the soldiers don’t have much choice. If they don’t go along with the Sanhedrin’s resolution they will all be executed. So they go along with it, take the money and go out and begin spreading the lie. Matthew says that the people believed it. Some 25-30 years later when Matthew is writing his gospel account this very same lie is what is being said by the Jews to explain away the resurrection of Jesus. Justin Martyr writing in about 165 A.D. said that this was still the common theory among the Jews. And if you go to Israel and talk to the orthodox Jews about Jesus’ resurrection they will probably stand by this same story.

The apostasy of the nation is final. The Jews are not the least bit interested in the truth. Theirs is a willful rejection of Jesus Christ, no matter the evidence. I can’t help but recall what Jesus said in the story of Lazarus and the rich man. In his conversation with father Abraham the rich man says, “If someone goes to my brothers from the dead, they will repent.” But Abraham replies, “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.” How prophetic were those words. These Jews did not believe in Jesus even after He rose from the dead and after they had been presented with strong evidence supporting that fact.

The attempt by the Jews to explain away the resurrection with an obviously ridiculous story that makes no sense. The fact that they would go to such lengths to cover up the truth is yet another proof of the resurrection. There are so many holes in their story that one hardly knows where to begin…

* How would soldiers know what happened if they were asleep?
* How do cowardly disciples suddenly summon up courage?
* Fact is the disciples were not even expecting the resurrection
* If disciples stole body would they take the time to unwrap the body and then place wrappings neatly where the body lay?
* Several Roman soldiers, rotating their watch, under sentence of death, fail in their responsibility, fall asleep?
* Post resurrection courage of Jesus’ followers – would they be willing to suffer persecution and even die for a hoax?
* Since when do you bribe someone to tell the truth? No, you only bribe someone to keep quiet or to spread a lie.

Any explanation other than that Jesus was actually resurrected is completely absurd and flies in the face of the evidence.

So what is our response to the resurrection? Romans 10:9 says, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”

“See, Go, Tell.” If we have encountered personally our resurrected Lord then we must go and tell what we’ve seen and heard. To close, then, let’s proclaim with our mouths and hearts this morning that Jesus Christ is indeed risen! He IS alive!