

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI

“Grave Robber”

Rev. David K. Groth
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“The next day, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, ‘Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was alive, ‘After three days I will rise.’ Therefore, order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, ‘He has risen from the dead,’ and the last fraud will be worse than the first.’ Pilate said to them, ‘you have a guard of soldiers. Go, and make it as secure as you can.’ So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting the guard” (Mt. 27:62-65).

Grave robbers have been around since the dawn of time. Most of the tombs in Egypt’s Valley of the Kings were plundered within a hundred years of their sealing. Most of the Aztec and Mayan tombs were also emptied out. Normally grave robbers go after the valuables, but sometimes, their aim is to take bodies. There was a time in our own country when the fresh, shallow graves of the poor were dug up and the corpses shipped to medical schools for their anatomy labs. It was a lucrative albeit grisly business.

Crooks once tried to steal the body of Abraham Lincoln with the idea of holding it for ransom. Eleven years after his death, they managed to saw off the bottom portion of Lincoln’s sarcophagus before being apprehended. When Lincoln was reburied, they placed the coffin in a ten-foot-deep vault and filled the vault with concrete and no one has disturbed the grave since. Grave robbers have always been around, as have the extra measures to thwart them.

And so it was 2,000 years ago. A rich man named Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple of Jesus, asked Pilate for permission to take the body of Jesus for burial. Pilate consented. So, Joseph, with the help of Nicodemus, took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud, and placed the body of Jesus in Joseph’s own new tomb, a small cavern hewn out of a nearby hill. Just as the sun was setting, they rolled what was probably a great disk-shaped stone into a groove carved in front of the entrance to the tomb.

Now it’s Saturday morning, the Sabbath. No one is working, shops are all closed. The city is mostly still, except for a group of distinguished religious leaders, chief priests and Pharisees resolutely winding their way through the city streets to the praetorium, the palace of Pontius Pilate. They march right into Pilate’s office, and he is not pleased to see them. The day before they all but blackmailed Pilate. He can still hear their words, “Everyone who makes himself out to be a king opposes Caesar. If you release this man, you are no friend of Caesar!”

Today, they’ve come with another demand. They know Pilate has already had it up to here with them. So, they don’t send in one; they go in as a group in all their finery. I imagine them bowing, shuffling: “Excellency, you may have heard that imposter said something about rising from the dead on the third day. That’s silly of course, but Excellency, what if his crazy disciples steal the body in the middle of the night and then claim he is alive? That would make things *very* complicated for us – and for you, Excellency. So, may we respectfully suggest you assign a unit of soldiers to *guard* the tomb? Three days, that’s all we need. Just three days.”

Pilate is exasperated. “You have a guard of soldiers. Go and make it as secure as you can.” “Go” is the usual way of translating the Greek, but it doesn’t convey Pilate’s irritation. The word here is what Jesus used when He said, “Be gone Satan” (Mt. 4:10). “You have your guards. Now be gone” snarls Pilate. “Make it as secure as you can.” I think those are the last words we hear out of his mouth. Unaware, Pilate has fully played his part in salvation history.

The religious authorities quickly post a detachment of armed guards at the tomb of Jesus. They also seal it. This is probably a wax seal to ensure that any attempt to open the tomb would be detectable. It sends the message, “This is our affair. Don’t mess with it. Keep your hands off.” It’s like stringing police tape around a crime scene.

These old men, working so hard on the Sabbath, doing everything they can to see this thing through. They are covering all the bases. They are trying to account for even the worst-case scenario. Jesus is finally dead, and by golly they’re going to make sure he stays that way. If they can just get past the third day, they’ll be in the clear.

Next day, the third day, very early, before dawn, the women head for the tomb. “And behold, there was a *“seismos”* “*megas*”, a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and *sat on it*.” I love the fact the angel just sits on the stone, as if saying, “So I broke the seal. Whatcha’ going to do about it?”

The guards are not going to do anything about it, because they’re on the dirt, having fainted or collapsed in fear. But to the women, the angel says, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, *as he said he would*.”

Please notice: Despite every human precaution against it, Jesus rose from the dead, as he said he would. Despite arresting and condemning Him, flogging Him to within inches of His life, and then crucifying Him until dead . . . despite the plunge of a spear into his torso to make sure He is extra dead, irrevocably dead, despite all the witnesses of His death, despite the stone in front of His tomb and the wax seal, despite the detachment of armed guards, despite the fact that dead people usually stay dead, nothing and no one could keep the Son of God from rising.

The opponents of Jesus held all the cards of earthly power, but they could not contain the Son of God. All they can do is invent a little cover story saying the disciples came by night and stole the body away while the guards were sleeping. But that story soon becomes irrelevant, because, to their great vexation, Jesus keeps appearing in the flesh, first to the women, then repeatedly to the disciples, then to the travelers on the road to Emmaus, and then the real clincher, "to more than five hundred at the same time." You can't keep eyewitnesses of something like that from talking about it, a lot, and like they mean it.

You know, there are still many who oppose Jesus, and they still hold most of the cards of earthly power and are still trying to thwart Jesus and His will. (In governments. In legislation. Through news outlets. In academia. In the fine arts.) Despite all the opposition, here we are, 2000 years later, celebrating the resurrection of Jesus. Why? Because the Son of God still cannot be contained. Because Jesus rose from the dead, and this news is still true, still good.

The religious authorities in Pilate's office were concerned about men stealing the body of Jesus. They had it all wrong. Men were not going to steal the body of Jesus. Jesus is going to steal the bodies of men . . . and women, and children, right out of the grip of death. He created us out of the dust. He's going to recreate us out of the dust. He is going to resurrect us, and glorify us, even as *He* was resurrected and glorified. They were worried about Jesus' disciples. It won't be the disciples who rob the tombs. It will be Jesus, and He's not looking for gold or jewels, but for you and me. On the Last Day, He will raise the dead and bring the dead in Christ home.

The simple message is because Christ is risen, death is defeated, and all God's promises find their fulfillment in Him, in Jesus. Way back in the Old Testament, Job knew it would happen. "I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God" (19:25).

Isaiah saw it this way too, "Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint" (Is. 40:30-31). How can it be? Our Creator will have done His creative work.

Jesus promises to rob your grave too. Four times in John chapter 6 alone: Verse 39, Jesus said, "Now this is the will of the one who sent me – that I should not lose one person of every one he has given me, but raise them all up at the last day."

Verse 40. "For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."

Verse 44, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day."

Verse 54, "The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."

At risk of redundancy Jesus drives the point home. He is going to resurrect us on the Last Day. This will be a face to face resurrection, so He can wipe away our tears, so our bodies can be glorified, so we can eat the best of meats and drink the finest of wines, so we can sing and dance and laugh and run and explore the far reaches of Paradise without growing weary.

In John chapter 11, Jesus said to Martha, "Your brother [Lazarus] will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."

So, just a heads up: One day Jesus is going to plunder your tomb! Don't worry about the weight of the vault cap or the lid of the casket being locked. It's no trouble. Not for Him. "In my Father's house there are many rooms . . . I am going there to prepare a place for you. And I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (Jn. 14:2).

One day, in a sudden way Jesus is going bust open your casket and empty it out, and no one can stop the Son of God from doing it. "Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed" (1 Cor. 15:51).

Jesus is going to snatch your body, not to hold it ransom, but because He has already ransomed it. He will do this for the same reasons he died for you, because He loves you, and desires you to be with Him in Paradise, and because the Father did not send Him into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him (Jn. 3:16-17).

Those old Chief Priests and Pharisees probably lost some sleep worrying the disciples would rob the body of Jesus. The disciples would not have been able to do that, not when they're hiding behind locked doors for fear. Jesus, however, He knows how to rob graves. He made it look so easy when He called Lazarus out of the tomb and it'll be easy for Him when He calls you out of the tomb. He is the death of death. He is the Resurrection and the Life.