

## ***Stolen By Night***

Text: Matthew 27: 57-66

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**A sign on the front of a famous church, the possibility of a stolen body, and an affirmation of Easter faith: these are the steps I invite us to this morning.**

**Let's start with the sign.** If it's true as has been told that a picture is worth a thousand words, then we have a running start today because I've had a photograph I took of that



sign scanned into your bulletin. I must admit I found it very odd, ironic, curious, even entertaining which is why I memorialized it with my camera. "Please: No Explanations Inside the Church."

It's affixed to the front entry of the Church of All Nations just outside of the city of Jerusalem. It is also known as the Basilica of the Agony, located at the base of the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, next to the Garden of Gethsemane. It commemorates a section of bedrock on which Jesus is said to have prayed before his arrest.<sup>1</sup>

Though owned by the Roman Catholic Church, it's called the Church of All Nations because a number of countries financed the construction - Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, England, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Mexico, Poland, Spain and the United States of America being among them.

It amps up the wondering even more just how and why, with such diverse and varied international roots, and broadly ecumenical in appeal, there would be such a prohibition on explaining anything! Goodness, in a church built on a rock in the garden where Jesus prayed, one would hope that explanations would be encouraged!

Of course, I am poking fun here just a little bit. I understand that without such measure of control any number of tour guides speaking dozens of languages would fill the place with impassioned babel! And I'm poking fun because a fair criticism of the church – in every flavor, time and place – has been that it has been a deliverer of answers and not as much an encourager of questions.

**But even such a well-posted sign doesn't stop earnest seekers.** In fact, apropos to this season of Eastertide, lots of conversations and wondering have come to play over time, and a variety of explanations about what really happened that first Easter have come to the fore. There are actually five theories<sup>2</sup> on what could have happened to Jesus – as alternatives to the resurrection.

First is the stolen body theory. This is the oldest alternative explanation. It's seeded in our scripture passage today, Matthew's report that Pilate ordered that the tomb be securely guarded for fear that the body would be stolen. Such potential theft would have been either to protect Jesus' body from desecration or to create the impression that he was resurrected. But either way, you can imagine that whoever discovered an empty tomb *could have* assumed that he had risen from the dead, never considering that the body *could have* been stolen.

Second is the wrong tomb theory. This one posits that because the burial of Jesus was emotionally laden, and it took place in the twilight, those who buried him were confused – in fact, so confused that when they went to the tomb on the third day, they went back to the wrong place. And so then, again, imagine, when the women got to the tomb, which was empty, they turned to the gardener who said "he is not here." So they ran to tell the others, never figuring out they were looking in the wrong place!

Third is a variation on this second one and suggests that it was the wrong tomb all right, but for a different reason. It maintains that the burial was in an active area for gardening and that one of the gardeners was concerned that curiosity seekers would trample his seedlings underfoot. And so he moved the body to another gravesite. This is the earliest non-Christian explanation of what happened. And Tertullian, church father of the second century, once believed it himself!

Fourth is the swoon theory. In this hypothesis Jesus only appeared to die. He swooned into what seemed an apparent death. Then, after his burial, the cool of the tomb and the healing effect of the spices revived him. Once he was revived, he simply left the tomb. Those who advance this theory cite as evidence that there are actual historic records of victims being taken down from a cross and surviving.

Last but not least is the hallucination theory which maintains that the various post-Easter appearances of Jesus were merely episodes of profound wishful thinking – that he died, and never rose, and that any who thought that they saw him were lost to their own confusion.

**Please: No Explanations Inside the Church!** In spite of such a sign these conversations have been long held! It's good to wonder, okay to question, healthy to ask! And, at the end of the day, it comes down to each of us.

Here's what I believe. I believe that the resurrection really happened, and that it was as real as the day is bright.

It's a metaphor, yes – but it's not only a metaphor. We simply cannot let it go that easily. I trust the Gospels on this, and I am glad that we have four differing accounts to keep us from idealizing any single one of them or from becoming lost in our own insistence, denial or certitude. By that you can surmise that I am not a literalist! I take

this core mystery far too seriously for that. And I trust the words of Paul on this, too: "If Jesus is not raised, then our faith is in vain."

I also believe that the essence of the resurrection of Jesus is not about his body; rather, it's about what happens to the lives of real people who encounter him. The evidence is irrefutable: people who are apprehended by the living spirit of Jesus were and are profoundly changed.

He appeared to the women first, early in the early light of day; and then to a handful of the disciples; and then to those along the road to Emmaus; and then to ten of them gathered around Thomas; and then, according to Paul, he appeared to as many as 500 others. And in every case he had an inexplicable effect on all them that compelled and propelled them to different lives from then on.

I believe this because I have had my own thin-place moments – mystical, spirit-filled, powerful, transforming. These have been non-rational in essence, that is they transcend what we think we know. (Please notice I didn't say irrational!) They have been ineffable – that is, impossible to put into language. And they have shaped my life in ways that astound and surprise me yet.

As for the tomb of Jesus or what really happened I rest my trust in this, something we are told in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures: "nothing is impossible for God."

**But more important now, what do you think?** How do you explain it? Are you intrigued by some of the clever and alternate views that have come to pass, or do you need no more to believe? I'll leave you to wonder that through. And I'll do that in Easter's yes to life, and with the fullness of the blessing of Christ! Amen!

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<sup>1</sup> Google search "Church of all Nations" for more discussion on this important holy site.

<sup>2</sup> Paul L. Maier. In The Fullness of Time: A Historian Looks at Christmas, Easter, and the Early Church. Harper and Row, 1991, pp. 189-196.