

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

When Jesus was risen from the dead, an angel came to the tomb to roll the stone away. There was a great earthquake, and the guard posted at the tomb shook with great fear and “became like dead men.” (cf. Matthew 28:4) They fainted for dread and fell asleep.

After the angel and the women interact, he tells them to tell the disciples that Jesus had risen, just as He said He would. Jesus meets them on the way and tells them the same thing. Here are the first witnesses of the Resurrection. They have seen the negative evidence that Jesus is no longer dead: the empty tomb. They have seen the positive evidence that Jesus is no longer dead: Jesus Himself, alive and scarred.

The women go and find the disciples, but their message isn’t really all that they were told. “They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him.” (John 20:2) Peter and John run to the tomb and see it just as the women had told them.

Peter and John leave, returning to their own homes. One might wonder what they were thinking, especially since they have yet to be told. However, John is said to have believed once he saw the empty tomb. What did he believe? Well, maybe he believed in the resurrection and did not really understand what it all meant; maybe he simply believed what the women told them: that someone stole the body, and that they didn’t know where they put it, but he didn’t yet believe that Jesus rose. (cf. John 20:1-9)

The women stayed behind. The angel meets them again. Then Jesus shows up again. He tells Mary Magdalene to tell the disciples that He is risen.

While all of this is going on, the guards awaken:

Now while [the women] were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened. When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, saying, “Tell them, ‘His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.’” And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will appease him and make you secure.” So they took the money and did as they were instructed; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day. (Matthew 28:11-15)

Falling asleep on the job is bad enough for a guard. To say, then, that while you slept, someone came and stole that which you were guarding was borderline treasonous. It was a dangerous thing to admit it to the governor, but the price was right, and the assurance of appeasement and security sweet enough.

So the report was made, “The disciples stole the body.” And like the chief priests were able to convince the crowds to shout for Jesus’ crucifixion, they were also able to convince many that His disciples stole His body.

It sounds like something out of today’s headlines, doesn’t it? “The accounts of Jesus of Nazareth rising from the dead are fake news. What really happened was that his disciples stole his body.” And like misled little sheep, the people soak it up.

Is it any wonder, then, that the evening of the Resurrection, 10 of Jesus disciples are in the upper room with the doors lock, cowering in fear? That morning, things were beginning to look up. They heard about the empty tomb, two of them saw the empty tomb, and surely Mary Magdalene or one of the other women had told them by now that Jesus had risen and that they saw Him. By sunset, they were regarded as grave robbers. Who wouldn’t be afraid?

So, Jesus appears in the midst of them, and gives them peace. He shows them His hands and side. He gives them peace again, and they are glad. He breathes on them and gives them the authority to forgive sins in His stead, sending them out as sheep among wolves.

Who knows where Thomas is in all of this? He's likely just as afraid, if not more, than the others and hiding by himself somewhere. In a moment of bravery, the others find him and tell him that they have seen Jesus, just as the women had. Thomas wants more. He also wants to touch Jesus and feel His wounds—prove to himself (and the others) that this Jesus is who He really says He is.

A week later, He gets the chance. He's with the others this time, again behind locked doors, probably fearing for their lives again. And Jesus appears to them again and gives them peace. Then He reaches for Thomas and plunges his hand into His side. "Do not be unbelieving, but believing."

"My Lord and my God!"

So, this whole fake news business is nothing new. Those in power have been using the media to control people for as long as there was news to be told. And the people, expecting the news to be trustworthy, rarely know what not to regard as true.

So it is that to this day, the report of grave-robbing disciples abides. Other fake news also makes the rounds. Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not God. The miracles of Jesus didn't happen because the miraculous cannot happen. Jesus was a crazy man who claimed to be God. Jesus wasn't even a real person. These, among other things, are what you have to contend with beyond these walls. In fact, you'll be accused of things much like the disciples were, not the least of which is being backwards, old-fashioned, out-of-touch, and even dangerous.

But remember the truth: Christ is risen!

It is the risen Christ who appeared to the women. It is the risen Christ who appeared to the disciples. It is the risen Christ into whom Thomas' hand was thrust. It is the risen Christ who appeared to the disciples on the Emmaus road, to seven disciples again on the Sea of Tiberias, to over 500 disciples, and to Paul on the Damascus road. These all have witnessed the resurrection, and they all testify to it. They are all witnesses for you.

And what more do they tell you? That which Jesus told them before He was taken into heaven. "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20) Hear His promise again: "I am with you always."

You see, Thomas and the disciples are the perfect representations of you. It's a wonder the doors here aren't locked for fear of the masses of unbelievers out there. Who wouldn't be afraid when threats are made against your sanity and even your very life? But, these are things which you were warned against, and things that you, at one time, vowed to endure, by the grace of God, rather than to fall away from the faith.

But it goes beyond that. What is your life like beyond these walls? Are you closed in at your own homes? When you do go out and encounter people, do you speak about your faith, your God, your Savior and theirs, or are you afraid for fear of being condemned? For the disciples, the walls were genuine, brick and mortar obstacles. Those walls have become more psychological for you.

Take heart, dear hearers, for your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ does not abandon you to your fears. He comes to you here behind these closed doors just as certainly as He appeared to Thomas. He breathes on you, gives you the Spirit, forgives your sins, and grants you peace. You have a peace that surpasses all human understanding that is able to quash all human fear. Your God is man like you, descended to earth for you, gave His life for your ransom, rose from the dead to give you victory over death, and ascended into heaven with the promise to return to bring you to Himself in eternity.

Like Thomas, He takes your hand to thrust it toward His own flesh and blood. And, you take that body and eat it as He bids you to do. You take that blood and drink it as He bids you to do. And as you believe, you receive the Savior's body and blood for your forgiveness, life, and salvation.

Your sins are forgiven, your faith is strengthened, and you are reminded of the God and Lord who has the whole world in His hands. He even has the power over life and death, having freed you from slavery to death and hell. Your God and Christ is in control. It's a wonder, then, that Christians, who should be the most emboldened and joyful people in the world, are some of the most unhappiest and afraid, at least as far as it appears in western civilization.

Therefore take for your example, those disciples and Thomas. Following their meeting with the resurrected Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit coming upon them at Pentecost, they went into that world with a message that could bring life to those who heard it, and would bring death to them who told it, spare John. And they did it anyway, knowing the peril, because in the end the peril didn't matter, as even St. Paul, a later addition to that crew, wrote,

For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. (Philippians 1:19-23)

Peter and Paul, John and Thomas, Andrew, Jude, and James all spoke with a confidence that is yours—Jesus Christ—a confidence which sustained them in the face of any and every danger.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35-39)

For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? This is He who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth. For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness on earth: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one. If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater; for this is the witness of God which He has testified of His Son. He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; he who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of His Son. (1 John 5:4-10)

"[T]hese are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name."

Nothing can separate you from the love of Jesus Christ, your Savior, who gave Himself for you, sacrifice, body and blood, resurrection, ascension, and all. By faith in Him, you overcome the world, because this world is only temporary. And He is here, now, for you, flesh and blood like yours, with His Spirit and breath, in His Word and Sacraments, to strengthen your faith, to persuade you that He is in control and with you always and nothing nor no one can separate you from Him, to give you life even in the face of death, even as He has in these means forgiven you for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.