

The Empty Sepulchre of Jesus

By Geo. C.

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THE EMPTY SEPULCHRE OF JESUS

THERE was no small stir in Jerusalem on the third morning after His crucifixion. Elders and priests were in close consultation; for the report brought by the Roman soldiers from the sepulchre had been the source of more than ordinary uneasiness. The body of Jesus gone! Could it be possible? Alas! for them it was but too true! What, then, could be done in the matter? Was Jesus risen, and their worst fears realized? No! No! They would never allow their proud hearts to bow to such an unwelcome fact. *Risen?* NEVER! But His *body* was missing from the sepulchre. What could be said?

With the arch-deceiver at their side, himself as much foiled and disappointed as they, an explanation is soon arrived at. The soldiers must be bribed, their lives protected, and a report set afloat through the city, as a fitting answer to all enquirers!

Now let us remember that eternal issues are at stake in this question, and let us calmly and carefully consider what their report was worth. For "If Christ be not raised . . . ye are yet in your sins," says the apostle (1 Cor. xv. 17).

Here it is then, "*His disciples came by night, and stole Him away while we slept*" (Matt. xxviii. 13).

Now, upon the face of it, if this story had been true, another

thing must be taken along with it, viz., that of all the dwellers in Jerusalem at the time, *none knew so well as the disciples* that Jesus was still dead, and that He was a dead "Deceiver." Had He not repeatedly told them that He should rise again from the dead the third day? (see Matt. xvii. 9; xxvi. 32; Mark ix. 31; Luke xviii. 33). Indeed, this fact had become so notorious that the Lord's enemies, whose perceptions were quickened by malice and fear, seem to have laid hold of it more firmly than His attached disciples had done. None, therefore, we repeat, knew so well as His disciples that He had dashed all their hopes as to His Messiahship, and entirely for-

feited their confidence in His truthfulness. What, then, could have followed but the effectual scattering of this feeble few had it been so? Was it not so when Theudas was slain (Acts v. 36, 37), and when Judas of Galilee was cut off? But what do we find in the case of the disciples? Why, never before the cross had the Lord such bold and persistent followers as He had after. The handful of men, who fled for fear from the side of their living Master, were afterwards prepared to go to prison and to death for Him; and to go joyfully. And all this for whom? For a dead imposter? Yes, even so, if they were but midnight body-snatchers and their Master not risen from

the dead. But let us look at this story more closely.

“His disciples came by night, and stole Him away” (Matt. xxviii. 13). Alas, for these heads of the nation! Their very determination to keep the body of Jesus in the tomb until after the third day turned out to be one of the strongest links in the chain of testimony against them. Pilate seems to have fallen in with their wishes by granting a special guard of soldiers to watch the tomb, and added further, “Make it as sure as ye can.” This they certainly did; and it is easy to picture their self-satisfied faces as they look again and again at the huge stone at the door, at the secure fastening, and the official

seal ! Who dare tamper with it ? Surrounded as it was with their military watch, who *could* ? All that was now left would be to wait quietly until the third day, and then to open the sepulchre and reveal the dead body of Jesus. This would be the crowning day of their hatred and pride !

But had these precautions not been taken, there might have been at first, perhaps, some *appearance* of truth in this concocted story.

Here was a "great stone"—so heavy, indeed, that the devoted women (who had doubtless seen it) despaired of being able, by their combined strength, to roll it away. What, then, must the difficulty have been when, in addition to the usual fastening,

it was securely and officially sealed? For we may rest assured that, when these chief priests had to their own satisfaction "made the sepulchre sure," by no ordinary wrench would any one be able to cast the stone aside and enter. And yet, to their own showing, all this was done without even waking the Roman guards, who, instead of watching, lay sleeping on the spot! Was it credible?

But look at the rest of the story. "While we slept." Now it is well known that for a man in the Roman Army to fall asleep while on guard was to incur the penalty of death; so that it was a rare occurrence for any soldier on watch to do it. But here was a number of them, with more

than ordinary charges of vigilance, and yet they all go fast to sleep ! Indeed, so soundly do they slumber that a sealed sepulchre could be broken into, the ponderous stone rolled away, and a dead body carried safely out without their being awakened. Neither trampling of footsteps, nor the wrenching of official fastenings, could arouse these sound sleepers. And yet they could actually tell who it was that came and stole away the body !

Was a more clumsy, threadbare lie ever told ? Well might the chief priests have deemed it necessary to pay " large money " to the soldiers to adopt and repeat such a story. *Yet this was the only way the Lord's absence from*

the tomb could be accounted for by them.

No wonder, then, that all the enemies of Christ should be astir in Jerusalem, as miracle after miracle was performed in the name and power of the risen Jesus.

But could they not stamp out this new doctrine? Well, at any rate they would try. A hot zealot was soon found in the person of a young man of promise and energy—Saul of Tarsus. He would carry their cause to certain victory. Exceedingly mad against the poor followers of the despised Nazarene, he set to His work in real earnest. He had undertaken to superintend the stoning of Stephen; and, having made havoc of the disciples in Jerusalem, he

was now determined to do the same in Damascus.

But even the hottest enemy to the truth of the resurrection is to become one of its boldest witnesses. On the road thither he is suddenly arrested by the voice of the ascended Jesus. The glorified One speaks to him, "I am Jesus Whom thou persecutest"; and the champion persecutor is turned forthwith into a willing servant, and "Jesus and the resurrection" becomes his lifelong theme.

What a testimony was this! Writing to the Corinthians afterwards (1 Cor. xv. 5), and speaking of the various witnesses of the resurrection, he says, "He was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: after that, He was seen

of above five hundred brethren at once ; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. After that, He was seen of James ; then of all the apostles. And last of all He was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time." And who shall dare to gainsay the witness which he bore, or question the motives which actuated him in bearing it ?

Was it for personal or pecuniary gain he did it ? Listen to his words as they come from the walls of a foreign prison, a place he reached, moreover, because of this very testimony—" I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ " (Phil. iii. 8).

Did an ambitious desire for worldly glory influence him? He was accounted the very "filth of the world, and . . . the offscouring of all things," and well he knew it! (1 Cor. iv. 13).

Was it for social or religious applause? His confession of Christ simply meant the sacrifice of every religious friend he had! New companions he found, it is true, but they were among those he once so bitterly hated, the poor and despised among men.

Had he remained the fierce persecutor of the humble followers of the "Nazarene," the learned, the religious, and respectable in Jerusalem would have honoured and applauded him still; but by becoming a bold witness of

Jesus and the resurrection he is imprisoned here, half murdered there, hated everywhere. Read that long catalogue of ills in 2 Corinthians xi. 23-28, and you will see the recompense Paul got for bearing testimony to a risen Saviour. Nor was life itself as dear to him as the joy of finishing his course of labour and suffering in the interests of the One Who had awakened his sleepy conscience and won his rebel heart.

God has taken great care, then, that there should be an abundant witness to the truth of His resurrection. Angels and men, friend and foe alike, are called in to give their testimony. And even those who denied it at the beginning, and those who wilfully do

so still, are certainly divested of every tittle of proof to the contrary.

Reader, do you believe that the glory of the Father visited that dark sepulchre and raised up Jesus from the dead? Do you believe that the highest place in heaven is now occupied by that very Man—that God has not only raised Him, but made Him Lord of all? Believe it or not, it is so, and we would earnestly call upon you to bow to Him now. If you remain unsaved, you must, sooner or later, bow before a throne of judgment and be damned. Thank God, you may bow before a throne of grace and be saved. Oh, turn to Him now in true repentance! “Whoso-

ever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved " (Rom. x. 13).

If God, in righteousness, forsook Him on the cross as a Sin-bearer, in righteousness He has glorified Him as the Sin-purger ; i.e., as having done the work of sin-purging (Heb. i. 3). And He is equally righteous in clearing from all charge of sin the guiltiest sinner who believes in Jesus (Rom. iii. 25). But BEWARE OF INDECISION. Your eternity may hang upon this moment. The risen One is coming again, and coming quickly. Bow to the Man of power now, and you will find Him the most blessed of friends for ever.

GEO. C.