

## Stealing Jesus

[Matthew 28:1-17](#)

Easter Sunday

Dr. M. Craig Barnes

Sunday, April 15, 2001

[Real Audio \(2 MB\)](#)

This morning I would like to speak to those of you who consider yourselves to be on the fringes of faith. This includes those who come to church religiously but still have some doubts, and those who do not come to church so often but still have some faith. I think that pretty much accounts for everyone, for there is a believer and an unbeliever living in all of us. Especially at Easter.

What if you saw the resurrection of Jesus? What if you didn't have to rely on church tradition or ancient documents for the historicity of this day? If you were an eyewitness to Easter, would it be easier to believe? Well, Matthew tells us that the guards at the tomb saw everything: "Suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men" (28:2-4). So not only did they see the resurrection, it terrified them.

You would think that after seeing something so overwhelming, these guards would get down on their knees and say, "My God, we were wrong! We just crucified the Savior." But that's not what happened. Instead we are told that the guards went and told the chief priests all that they had seen when Jesus rose from the dead. And the priests offered them "a large sum of money" if they would only say that his disciples came and stole the body. So the guards took the money and told the lie.

What? These men were eyewitnesses to the resurrection, but still chose to put their faith in money? Yes. So apparently seeing is not believing. We actually don't believe what we see. No, we see what we have already chosen to believe.

Everybody is tempted to believe in some myth - - some storyline for how they will find happiness. Like the guards, your myth may be "If only I could get a large sum of money, I'll be okay." Or maybe the myth claims if only you could get married, or if only you could get a job you would be okay. I am amazed at the sturdiness of these myths. In spite of constantly failing to make us happy, people still consistently put their faith in them. It just takes a slight alteration for you to start to hear, "If only you could get a little more money, or if only you could marry someone else, or if only you could get a different job, then you would finally be okay." It doesn't matter what we see about others being unhappy with all these things you want. Nor does it matter what we see about Jesus in the lives of those who are learning to be content in all circumstances. It doesn't matter what we see at all. We still cling to the mythology we have already chosen to believe. So all we can really see is the illusion it offers.

The resurrection was terrifying to the guards not because of the earthquake or lightning but because it challenged their cherished mythology. The same thing is true for us. In spite of all our talk about modern scientific commitments, when it comes to things that really matter, things of the heart and soul, evidence is beside the point. We see only what we have already chosen to believe. Even if the risen Jesus were to wake you up with fire from heaven, it would shake you up for a day, but tomorrow you would still chase the same myths you always have. That's because a life is defined not by what you see, but by what you believe.

Okay, so seeing isn't about believing, but about knowing the truth? What if you did all the hard theological work, and didn't accept any of these social mythologies about money and relationships making you happy. What if you sorted through all the world's religions and philosophies, or went to a seminary, monastery, or at least the library and devoted yourself to knowledge? And at the end of all this searching you became absolutely certain that the church's teachings about Jesus were true. Would you believe then? Not necessarily.

When the guards came and told the chief priests everything that happened in the tomb, we are not told that these most learned religious leaders of the day doubted the news was true. What they doubted was that it should be believed. They knew it was true! That is why they invented the story about Jesus' body being stolen. But still they doubted. So just as seeing isn't believing, neither is knowing the same thing as believing.

Now we are getting to the doubts of those of us who hang around churches. We know the creeds, and the stories, and the hymns. We know that it was truly the Son of God we crucified last Friday and is risen today. But still we have a hard time believing what we know to be true.

Some doubt that it makes any difference to their lives. They know Jesus is the savior, but still they doubt he will save them from the mess they've made of life. Others doubt that they are worthy of the love of God. They know about grace, but still doubt they are good enough to be loved. (As if that has anything to do with it.) By contrast, still others of us, like the high priest, doubt they really need Jesus. They think they are good people who act like they can save themselves with hard work. So even we who know so much still have our doubts.

The guards had too much fear to believe, fear that could not be vanquished by what they saw. And the high priests had too much doubt to believe, doubt that could not be resolved by what they knew to be true. Well, if faith is not found by seeing the evidence, nor by knowing the truth, how do we find it?

Fortunately, we have some more characters in the story. We are also told about the women at the tomb who, like the soldiers, were filled with fear when they saw the angel descend like lightning and roll back the stone. And we are told about the disciples, some of whom, like the high priests, still had their doubts even when they saw the risen Jesus. But the thing that distinguished the women and the disciples is that they worshiped in spite of their fears and doubts.

When the women saw Jesus, we are told that they fell at Jesus' feet in worship. When the eleven disciples saw Jesus in Galilee they too worshiped him, even though some of them doubted. What makes this text even more fascinating is that Jesus is about to give these doubting disciples the great commission to take the Gospel all over the world and make disciples of all nations. So Jesus is trusting the future of his church to disciples who still have doubt and fear. Why? Because Jesus knows they are going to be okay if they just keep worshiping.

That is how faith is nurtured in you as well. Apparently, Jesus isn't too worried about our fears and doubts, as long as we continue to worship. Because when we worship, we lose ourselves at the feet of Jesus. We lose our bravado as well as our fears, our certainties as well as our doubts.

Jesus is not impressed by our heroism or our certainty, and he is not dismayed by our fear and our doubt. What matters to Jesus are our choices. Will you choose to believe, to trust, and to love this Savior you do not understand? Because that is what faith is -- a choice. It is a choice to adore Christ in spite of our fears and doubts. And we can learn to make that choice only in worship.

As you choose to believe, you will discover that you are also joining the first disciples in choosing to accept your mission in life as well. Do you see? Your whole understanding of life's mission is dependent on how you choose to respond to the risen Christ. So there is a lot at stake this morning.

I am not telling you not to be afraid because Jesus will help your mythological dreams come true. Nor am I telling you not to doubt because all this resurrection business can be explained. No, I am telling you that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead and that is news worthy of fear and doubt. You'll have to change every other belief, including your beliefs about your purpose in life, if you choose to accept this one belief.

Easter is not just about springtime, new growth, sap rising in the trees, renewal and love being stronger than death. Really, does any of that change your life? Was it the message of springtime and love being stronger than death that allowed a small band of frightened, doubting disciples to fulfill their mission and shake the foundations of the Roman Empire? No. It was the proclamation that Jesus has risen from the

dead, and in him, you too can find the new life that you are desperately craving.

How will you ever choose to believe in this hope that is greater than your fears and doubts? Only by throwing yourselves at his feet. Only by worship. Which means that worshipping Jesus is not safe business. Like an earthquake, it will shake apart your old mythologies, and it will force you to seek the truth honestly until you eventually come to doubt your doubts.

Along the way, as you keep encountering the risen Jesus in worship, you'll stop caring so much about your fears and doubts. That's because in worship, in Christ, you get focused on making a world of difference with your life.

O God, we just have this one life, and we would love for it to be well lived and to make some difference in the world. So in spite of our fears and doubts, we choose to worship, asking that at the feet of Jesus you would transform us into the people you created us to be from the beginning. Amen.