Case of the Missing Body

Summary

A resurrection cold case, built the way a detective would build it: on physical obstacles, missing evidence, and witnesses who had every reason to stay quiet and didn't.

- The large sealed stone and the Roman military discipline that made a sleeping guard implausible.
- The absence of any body ever produced by Jewish or Roman authorities.
- Witnesses including Mary Magdalene and, per Paul, up to 500 people at once.
- The apostles' sudden, dangerous public preaching of the resurrection soon after.
- The conclusion that the resurrection is the only explanation the evidence actually supports.

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It could have been a mystery for Sherlock Holmes to solve. The Jewish religious leaders, the Roman authorities and even the disciples were all asking themselves: "Why was the body of Yah'shua the Messiah missing?"

It was bad news for the Roman civil and Jewish religious authorities who desperately wanted to show that Yah'shua was dead and buried. Neither group wanted the prophesied resurrection story to surface unchallenged. Possession of the body of the Messiah was the trump card that could totally debunk the claim.

Ironically, the precautions the Jews and Romans took to prevent the Messiah's body from being stolen, served to frustrate their major objective of disproving the resurrection, by actually demonstrating that the resurrection was the only explanation of the missing body! Both the burial site conditions and the official sealing of the tomb did as well.

There were also many witnesses to the resurrection of the Messiah. Let's examine each briefly.

For starters, all four Gospel writers mentioned that the entrance to the Messiah's tomb was blocked by a large stone. Historians and archaeologists give an estimate of the stone's probable size as between one and one half, and two tons. The ramp on which the stone would have stood, was slightly inclined toward the opening. To close the entrance, the stone would be rolled down the ramp in front of the door - gravity would do the rest.

Now let's consider the Roman guards. The chief priests and Pharisees asked Pontius Pilate for military guards to be posted at the tomb so the Messiah's body could not be stolen *(Matt. 27:62-66).*

It is estimated that a Roman guard unit consisted of between 8 to 16 soldiers. They were part of a well-trained fighting machine. Once posted, no one would dare attempt to remove the stone or even come near the entrance.

But while the Roman contingent was ON GUARD, an angel materialized in their midst *(Matt. 28:2-4).* The angel caused an earthquake that rolled back the stone from the entrance - three days after the burial.

Some of the frightened guards ran to the religious leaders and reported what had happened. What the chief priests heard, perhaps bolstered by an on-site inspection, convinced them the matter had to be hushed up quickly *(vv. 11-15).*

The religious leaders' first cover-up effort was to attempt bribing of the guards. They then devised a spurious story to explain the missing body: "You are to say, `His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep'" *(v. 13).*

The concocted story about a shift of the Roman guards falling asleep and the disciples moving the nearly two ton stone without waking them, must have caused many a chuckle in Jerusalem!

Two of several breaches of Roman military discipline that demanded the death penalty, were leaving a night watch and deserting one's post. Falling asleep on one's post was certainly not to be taken lightly! Execution of those guilty was often horrible, to make them examples to other soldiers. Such a penalty would surely have kept them awake - and certainly would have reduced their enthusiasm for telling their superiors that they had fallen asleep on the job!

The warden at the Philippi jail for example, was ready to commit suicide when he realized that Paul and Silas had escaped from their chains *(Acts 16:25-28).* The tomb guards would have had similar fears, which makes the idea of their having fallen asleep, ludicrous. The suggestion that the massive stone could have been moved without waking them is even more absurd.

Pilate did more than simply post guards. He also ordered that an official seal be put on the tomb's entrance stone itself *(Matt. 27:66). (We have something similar today, when police place a yellow tape, marking off a designated crime area.)* The Roman guards would have stretched a cord across the rock blocking the entrance. The cord would be fastened at each end with sealing clay, and the clay packs would have been stamped with the official signet of the Roman governor.

The Roman seal was a public verification that the Messiah's body was indeed sealed in the tomb. Tampering with the official seal was to incur the fury of the Roman governor - and it meant automatic execution.

The disciples had displayed cowardice at Yah'shua's trial and dejected indifference afterward. Would they suddenly have been willing to defy Roman authority, fight the guards off, then move the stone, remove the body without being seen, and then dispose of the body in some manner that none of the Roman authorities or the Jewish religious leaders could ever find it? Hardly!

Yet the body was found to be missing. Where was it? Why was it never produced to counter the apostles' claim of the resurrection? After all, the body would certainly have put a stop to the resurrection claim once and for all, by those that wanted it hushed up - that is why they went to such lengths to guard the tomb in the first place!

In his first sermon in Jerusalem, just weeks after Yah'shua's death and burial, Peter spoke openly and passionately about Messiah's resurrection *(Acts 2:24,32).* However, no one produced a body, or even stepped forward to verbally dispute the claim! It would have been simple to contradict Peter's insistence that Yah'shua had risen - one public display of the body by the Jews or the Romans would have destroyed

all credibility to the apostles' testimony. A short walk to the tomb to view the corpse would have embarrassed them into silence. No attempt to exhume the body for the purpose of discrediting the resurrection story was ever made - because every one living there at the time, accepted the fact that the tomb was indeed empty!

Consider the prominent Jewish leader, Gamaliel, a member of the Sanhedrin. He was willing to concede that the apostles were doing the work of Yahweh in proclaiming Yah'shua's resurrection *(Acts 5:29-39)*. He would never have done so if he or the Sanhedrin *(who had violently opposed the Messiah while He was alive)* had any knowledge of the Messiah's dead body.

During the many years that the apostolic Church was headquartered in Jerusalem, not one party came forward to say he had seen the Messiah's body. There was no denial, official or otherwise from the Roman government.

Besides the embarrassingly empty tomb, there were the many witnesses that had seen the risen Messiah. Yah'shua appeared to people on a number of occasions during those 40 days after He arose *(Acts 1:3).*

There were appearances to one or two disciples, or to large groups, as much as 500 at one time, mentioned by Paul *(1 Cor. 15:6).* Most interesting is that Yah'shua did not appear to the male disciples first. He chose to appear to Mary Magdalene first, while she was at the tomb with several other women *(John 20:1-18; Matt. 28:1; Luke 24:1,10,11).*

In those times women were not considered to be good witnesses in legal cases. Mary especially would have been suspect, as she was once known as an evil *(demon possessed)* party *(Luke 8:2)*. Yet each of the Gospel writers acknowledge her as one of the first witnesses. Suppose the Gospel writers had tried to fabricate a resurrection story. They certainly would not have included Mary Magdalene as a witness, much less as a prime first witness of the event.

A most convincing proof that the Messiah was resurrected is the apostles' sudden bold preaching of the event. The book of Acts alone, shows the apostles proclaiming this message many times in the face of harsh opposition, life-threatening beatings, arrest, threat of imprisonment and death.

Why would they suddenly change, and put their lives on the line to preach a resurrection story if they knew it was a lie? They would not have!

In the final analysis, none of the arguments drummed up against Yah'shua the Messiah's resurrection hold up under even the slightest scrutiny.

All the facts, as the Gospel writers present them, argue for a miracle. Three days after He was dead and buried, Yah'shua was resurrected and glorified by Yahweh the Father, just like He said He would be *(Matt. 12:40, 28:6).*

Our faith, the substance of things HOPED for, is rooted in that resurrection. Yah'shua's rising from the dead is a witness to us; evidence that we too will be resurrected by our Father in a future resurrection to eternal life! *(1 Cor. 15:12-22, 51-55).*

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