

The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 29 March 2026. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced and see the context for yourself. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.

Guarding a Dead Man

Matthew 27:62-66

In the year 1915, in the town of Blackstown, South Carolina, a 30-year-old African-American woman named **Essie Dunbar**, who had bravely battled epilepsy from her childhood, dropped into bed one evening, after a particularly trying day. Essie took her medication regularly, and did her best to avoid anything that might trigger a seizure; however, that day she had had a mountain of assignments at work: and when she arrived home, she went straight to bed, and forgot to take her medication. Well, in the middle of the night, she went into a massive seizure; and she rang a bell to alert her neighbours that she was in trouble. The neighbours ran to her house, only to find her unconscious; and she was rushed to the hospital, where the doctor declared her to be dead. Since it was the middle of the summer, and the heat was intense, it was determined that they needed to bury her quickly; and so, the funeral was set for 11:00 that morning, and the news was sent out to friends and family.

Now, Essie's sister, who lived in the town of Allendale, did everything she could to make it to Blackstown for the funeral. However, her train was delayed; and consequently, she missed the funeral. She showed up just after they had lowered the coffin into the ground; and she pleaded and cried for them to open the casket one more time, so that she could say goodbye to her sister. Reluctantly, they opened the coffin—and got the shock of their lives. Essie sat up in her coffin; and, being the cheerful, smiley person that she had always been, the first thing she did was to smile. Needless to say, utter panic ensued! Thinking that they were seeing a ghost, people screamed and ran away in terror; and the sudden shock and movement of people caused some of the ministers who were standing around the casket to lose their footing, and fall into the hole. Essie herself was now confused and terrified; and she scrambled out of the coffin, and ran back to her own house. As she ran through town, other people who had heard of her “death” ran away in terror when they saw *her* running around. Essie's sister caught up with her at her home, and helped to piece together what had happened. The two sisters went to church together the next Sunday; and a few people still panicked and ran away. As it turned out, Essie lived for 47 more years; and to her dying day in 1962, many people were afraid to go near her. Some thought that her resurrection (which was merely a restoration of consciousness) was a miracle, while others thought that she was a spirit walking around.

So, what is the point of this story? The point is that from time to time there are people who appear to have died, when they really didn't die; and they later return to consciousness. In Essie's case, she had been in a deep coma, which caused the appearance of death; but when they opened the coffin, and the cooler air hit her, she revived. Now, over the years, many critics of the Bible have taken cases such as Essie's, and used them as “evidence” to support the idea that Jesus never really died, but only went into a

“swoon,” from which He later revived in the cool air of the tomb. However, as we will see this morning, the circumstances surrounding Jesus’ death cannot allow for such a possibility. Jesus *really* died, and *really* was buried, with a two-ton rock and a dispatch of soldiers to seal Him in. Jesus died, and was buried; and His empty tomb is the ultimate, infallible proof of His resurrection. And if Jesus really be risen, it *changes everything!* The title of this message is ***Guarding a Dead Man.***

Read Matthew 27:62-66.

I. The Pharisees’ fear (vv. 62-63)

My friends, there is something that makes the Christian faith unique: and that is *the resurrection of its Founder*. No other religion claims that its founder arose bodily from the dead. Muhammed, for example, died on 8 June, A.D. 632; and to this day, multitudes of Muslims from all over the world come to visit his tomb in Medina. In contrast, Jesus has no tomb to visit, because He is alive! Hundreds of witnesses confirmed that they saw Jesus after His resurrection; and the authors of the New Testament spent the rest of their lives proclaiming to a hostile world that Jesus is alive—with nothing to gain by doing so, except brutal martyrdom. If Jesus had *not* risen from the grave, then there would have been no reason (no *sane* reason, anyway) for Jesus’ followers to dream up such an absurd story. (And no one would have believed them, even if they had!) The Christian faith is not based on philosophy: it is based on *history*. It is based on the historical event of the *death and resurrection* of Jesus Christ. Without Christ’s death and resurrection, there would be no Christianity! The redemption of men’s souls rests on Jesus’ death on the cross for our sins, and His resurrection.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-8.

In a moment, we will focus on the conference between the Pharisees and Pilate, which we read about a few minutes ago; but first, there is a scenario that I would like to pose to you. Suppose that a guy named “Joe” were to start writing books on matters of morality and ethics; and as Joe’s following grew, he began to engage in speaking tours all around Ireland. But then, suppose that Joe were to begin to tell his fans that “Very soon, I will die a brutal death; but don’t worry, because three days later, I will come back to life again. Not only that, but your soul’s destiny will depend on my death and resurrection.” What do you think would happen to Joe’s followers? Would they stick around? Of course not! In fact, most of them would call for him to be committed to an institution. And if, perchance, he did happen to meet with an untimely death, whatever handful of followers he might still have had would retreat into the shadows, and never show their faces again. Who would even try to fake Joe’s resurrection?

Well, guess what? That is exactly what Jesus claimed about Himself, many times during His ministry. From the earliest days of His ministry, He proclaimed that He would soon die, be buried, and rise again the third day; and as time went on, He got more explicit in the details. Not only did He say that He would die, but He claimed that He would die by the most horrible death imaginable—crucifixion! We’ve examined these claims several times before in our study of **Matthew**; but let’s remind ourselves of those claims once again.

Read John 2:18-21.

Read Matthew 16:21-23 / 17:22-23 / 12:39-40.

Throughout the three years of His ministry, Jesus had, by His divine words and miracles, shown that He is God and Messiah; and He had made an amazing transformation in His followers’ lives. Yet, sad to say, even Jesus’ closest and dearest disciples couldn’t grasp what Jesus was trying to tell them when He spoke of His coming death and resurrection. Though they were saved by simple faith in Jesus, they couldn’t bring themselves to believe that their beloved Master would die a criminal’s death, and physically come back to life. They believed that Jesus was speaking true words; but in their minds, they apparently *allegorised* Jesus’ words, and assumed that they had a figurative or spiritual meaning. Yet, ironically, Jesus’ arch-enemies, the Pharisees, *did* take Jesus’ words literally! Jesus’ claim that He would die and rise again the third day was not given by private revelation to His disciples. Jesus had said these things *publicly*. This saying was widely known: and the Pharisees were now taking it very seriously. As soon as Jesus was dead, they, being the good citizens that they were, went straight to Pilate, and expressed their “concern” that Jesus’ disciples might steal Jesus’ body, and claim that He had risen from the dead. “Therefore,” they said, “we must set soldiers to guard the tomb until the third day, so that this deception won’t take place.”

Now, at this point, I’m sure that Pilate was both aggravated, and at the same time amused, that the Pharisees would request that he send his soldiers to **guard a dead man!** Why were they so fearful? Did they *really* think that Jesus’ disciples, who had run away from their Master in sheer cowardice, would have the chutzpah to steal the body of a condemned “criminal,” and claim that He had risen? Did they *really* think that the disciples would have something to gain by doing such an insane thing? *Or*, did they secretly fear that Jesus of Nazareth *really might* rise from the dead? I believe it was the latter! Clearly, many of them *did* secretly fear that Jesus would rise from the dead—which implies that they had a certain level of “belief”!

Now, how can we be sure that these men actually feared the possibility of Jesus’ resurrection? Because of what John tells us in **John 12**. Remember what we read last week, in **John 12:42?** In that verse, John said that there were many of the “*chief rulers*” who believed on

Jesus; yet, because they feared what their colleagues would think of them, they would not confess Jesus' name. Let that sink in, folks! John said that there were "**many**" chief men who believed that Jesus is the Messiah. Not few, but "**many**"! Yet, where were these "**many**" men on the night of Jesus' trial? By comparing Scripture with Scripture, we may safely conclude that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathaea were not present during Jesus' trial; but of the Sanhedrin members who *were* present, "**all condemned him to be guilty of death.**" The vote was unanimous. But what about all those chief rulers who "**believed**" on Him? Were *they* all absent from the council meeting, too? No! Clearly, only *two* men were not present that evening—and they were the two men who *truly* believed on Jesus' name! All the other council members who "believed" on Jesus joined in *condemning* Jesus to death!

But how can this be? How could people who believed on Jesus condemn Him to death? It's simple: they had only a *head* belief, not a *heart* belief. The Bible says, "***That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.***" A person with head belief admits, in *theory*, that Jesus is the Christ; but a person with heart belief actually confesses His name, and *commits his life* to Jesus, to let Him do with it as He pleases.

Perhaps *you* would say, "Oh, yes, I believe that Jesus died on the cross for our sins; and I believe that Jesus changes lives." Yet, you yourself have never personally submitted your life to Him, and let *Him* come into your life, and be your Lord and Saviour. You may *say* you "believe" on Jesus; but you don't really. You're on the *outside* of "the faith," looking *in* with a certain admiration: yet, you are not willing to walk through the Door of Jesus Christ. Folks, that kind of "belief" is no better than the "belief" of the Sanhedrin members who *crucified Jesus*. When the line was drawn in the sand, and they had to choose, they chose to please their friends, and join them in *murdering* Jesus. Why? Because their faith in Jesus was never real. It seems that even Pilate himself had a secret fear that Jesus might rise again; and if he did have such a fear, it would imply *a certain level of "belief."* Yet, Pilate played his part in crucifying the Lord of glory. Folks, make sure your faith in Jesus is real! Be very sure that you are anchored to the Rock of Jesus Christ, by faith in Him!

Now, before we move on, there is a warning that I would give to believers. Christian, avoid the pitfall of allegorising or "spiritualising" God's words, when God has given no indication that we should take them figuratively! The disciples, of all people, should have taken Jesus at His word when He told them that He would be crucified, and after three days rise again. Even Jesus' *enemies* took Jesus literally when He said that "***After three days I will rise again***"; yet, the disciples, who were listening to their own "reason," did *not* take Jesus literally: and as the result, their faith was nearly crushed during the three days when Jesus was in the tomb.

Now, perhaps you fancy that you would never allegorise God’s words—and especially not in regard to the resurrection. If so, let’s see what Paul had to say about a situation that arose in the church of Ephesus, after he had left it under the pastoral care of Timothy.

Read 1 Timothy 1:1-4, 18-20.

Read 2 Timothy 2:15-19.

What was this situation in the church of Ephesus? What had Hymenaeus, Alexander, and Philetus done to become the object of such a dire warning from the Apostle Paul? The situation is that these men were voicing heretical, Gnostic beliefs in the church: and these false beliefs were actually *“overthrowing the faith”* of some of the members. That word *“overthrow”* implies that these members *did have* a faith to *“overthrow.”* These people were, apparently, true believers; but their faith had been greatly upset and shaken. What, then, was the false teaching that was causing the big upset? It was the teaching that the resurrection is *“past already.”* Now, what could *that* mean? There is only one thing it *could* mean: in some way, Hymenaeus, Alexander, and Philetus were **denying that there will be a literal resurrection of the body**. Apparently, they were allegorising the doctrine of the resurrection, and saying that God didn’t mean it literally. Evidently, they said something like this: “Well, *Paul* said, in his letter to us a couple years ago, that God has *‘Quickened us together with Christ...and hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ.’* So, what this means is that we’ve *already* been resurrected, and there is no other kind of resurrection coming! When you believed on Jesus, you *were* resurrected to a new life in Christ; so stop believing in that ‘pie in the sky’ stuff about being bodily resurrected, and being caught up to Heaven in a ‘rapture.’ We’re already in ‘heaven’ right now! Heaven is *in us*. After all, Paul himself said that we’ve been made to *‘sit together in heavenly places in Christ.’*”

Folks, we may not know exactly what these men were teaching; but we can safely assume that it was something along this line. Obviously, they had been influenced by pagan Gnostic theology, which taught that human flesh is evil, and which denied the future resurrection of the body. However, do not think for one minute that this is an ancient belief, and therefore irrelevant to us today. Ancient Gnosticism is *very* much alive today, and is being repackaged in many different forms. One of the ways it is being repackaged is through a theology called **Preterism**. (Preterism was first taught by a Jesuit Catholic priest named Luis Alcazar in the 1500’s; but in recent years, it has been spreading like wildfire.) In a nutshell, Preterism teaches that all the end-times prophecies were fulfilled in the year 70 A.D., when the Temple was destroyed. They deny that there will be a literal Rapture of the saints to Heaven, or a literal return of Christ to earth, or a literal 1,000-year Kingdom, or a new heaven and a new earth; and instead, they teach that Christ “returned” in some figurative way in A.D. 70, when

Jerusalem was destroyed. (Literally everything in the book of **Revelation** is, according to Preterism, an allegory, and not a description of literal, future events.) They deny that a literal Kingdom of Christ on earth is coming, and say instead that the “Kingdom” is in our hearts right now. They also say that “Heaven” is in our hearts right now. They say that “Jesus didn’t go to *prepare* a place for you; He came to *make you* a place.” In other words, “All that stuff you’ve heard about believers’ going to Heaven one day to be with the Lord is rubbish! Jesus came back to make *you* His dwelling place, when He came to live in your heart.”

Now, this raises an obvious question: if Jesus isn’t coming back to earth, and if we are in the “kingdom” already, and if there is no city of Heaven to look forward to (at least, not anytime soon), then what about the *resurrection of the body*? Is that figurative, too? Believe it or not, there are now many Preterists who believe that even the resurrection of the body is figurative, and that when a Christian dies, that is the end of his existence! And what about Hell? Is *that* figurative, too? According to some Preterists, yes! This past week, I read an article on a Preterist blog; and in this article, the author recalled how, as a child growing up in a Preterist church, he was taught that “end-times theology” is “hogwash” (“all that talk about the Rapture and the Antichrist”). However, he proposed that even the meaning of “Heaven” and “Hell” should be re-thought. After all, if all biblical prophecies were fulfilled in A.D. 70, then the “destruction” that Jesus foretold must have been fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and not in some “otherworldly torture chamber.” He concluded his article by saying that perhaps his denomination hasn’t “been preterist enough.” (In other words, maybe there’s not even a real Heaven for believers to look forward to, or a Hell for sinners to flee from.)

Brethren, do you see the danger that ensues when you start allegorising Scripture because it doesn’t conform to our “reason”? The Apostles were saved men; but their faith was severely shaken because they had failed to take Jesus’ word literally. The resurrection of Christ is the bedrock of everything we believe! Without it, we would have no hope. Cling to the promises of Scripture, Christian; and do not let *anyone* rob you of your hope in Christ!

Read 1 Corinthians 15:12-19.

II. The Pharisees’ foolishness (vv. 64-65)

(Read Matthew 27:57-65 again.) Over the centuries, those who deny the Lord Jesus Christ have come up with many lying theories to explain away His resurrection. The oldest lie of all was the claim that **Jesus’ disciples came by night and stole His body**. This theory stuck for a while; however, there are some serious logical problems with this claim. First of all, if you are going to claim that someone stole Jesus’ body, then *you are automatically admitting that the tomb was, indeed, empty!* And if the tomb were empty, the next question is, “*How* was it

emptied?” After all, the very reason that Pilate ordered for the tomb to be guarded by soldiers was to *prevent* people from stealing the body! How could anyone possibly have sneaked past disciplined, heavily armed Roman soldiers, who were standing right next to the tomb? How could anyone have moved a two-ton rock, which was firmly ensconced in a “niche” in the pavement, without the soldiers’ seeing and hearing it? Furthermore, why would the soldiers have dared let themselves fall asleep? They knew very well that the penalty for falling asleep at their post was death! And even if they *did* fall asleep, how could they later say that they had “seen” Jesus’ disciples steal away the body? Also, why was there never any official claim, by the authorities, that they had seen or caught the grave-stealers? They couldn’t make such a claim, because it didn’t happen! Last, and not least, how could the body stealers have removed Jesus’ grave clothes, and left them in the tomb? Jesus’ body was tightly wound with cloth strips, according to the custom; and between those strips was layer after layer of myrrh—100 pounds of it, to be exact. In three days’ time, it would have dried, and become virtual cement! It would have been impossible to remove the clothing without breaking it to pieces. It certainly could *not* have been left in a neat pile, as many eyewitnesses claimed to have seen.

Another theory that people have dreamed up to explain away the resurrection is the **swoon theory**. According to this theory, Jesus didn’t really die, but fell into a swoon, or coma; and later, the cool air of the tomb, and the smell of the spices, revived Him. However, this, too, is utter folly. To begin with, there is absolutely no question that Jesus had died!

Read John 19:32-35.

Folks, John was not a physician: he was a fisherman. Yet, this fisherman affirms that he saw blood, followed by water, coming from the wound in Jesus’ side. Any modern pathologist knows that when blood comes out first from a wound, followed by water, it means that the person has already died from massive blood clotting of the main arteries.¹ Jesus *was* dead. How could anyone expect otherwise? Crucifixion was unbelievably brutal; and even if Jesus were still alive at the time of His embalmment, being packed under 100 pounds of myrrh would surely have finished Him off! How could He possibly have broken through the cloth, and stood up, if He were an ordinary man? And most importantly—*how could He have moved the two-ton rock?* And even if, by some unbelievable stroke of luck, the door had somehow been opened for Him, who would have felt inspired to worship the extremely weak, broken, bloodied, anaemic shell of a man that appeared to them? They wouldn’t have! They would have pitied Him, perhaps—but not worshipped Him! In fact, they would have run in terror from him—just as Essie’s friends ran away. (And Essie’s body wasn’t even torn to shreds by a cat-o-nine tails.) Furthermore, there is absolutely no record of any other grave marker for Jesus of Nazareth than the one described in the Bible. (Frankly, it’s hard to believe that the 18th-century rationalists who came up with the “swoon theory” would have proposed such an absurd explanation of Jesus’ resurrection. It isn’t “rational” at all!)

Now, I wish I could say that there were no other foolish explanations of Jesus' resurrection to have to answer; but there are. Some say that **the witnesses of Jesus' resurrection were "hallucinating"**—that they only *thought* they saw Jesus. But how could that possibly be? First of all, *none* of Jesus' followers (with the possible exception of Mary of Bethany) even *believed* that Jesus would die and rise again. No one was *expecting* to see Him alive again! Why, then, would anyone have had a "hallucination" of Jesus' appearance? And how could *hundreds* of people have hallucinated at once? As we saw in **1 Corinthians 15**, more than 500 brethren saw Him at the same time! The "hallucination" idea makes no sense whatsoever. Lastly, there is the "**wrong tomb**" theory. According to this theory, the women mistakenly went to the wrong tomb; and they found it open and empty, because there was never a body in it. Again, this idea is utter foolishness. **Matthew, Mark, and Luke** all record that the two Marys stood by the door of the tomb while Jesus' body was being prepared, and intently watched as His body was laid out. They could not possibly have mistaken where He was laid!

It is the height of foolishness to believe any of these theories; and it was the height of foolishness for the Pharisees to try to prevent Jesus' resurrection. Little did they know that by sealing the tomb, they would help to *establish* the validity of Christ's resurrection! Everyone knew that the tomb had been sealed with a Roman seal, and guarded by Roman soldiers. No one would dare touch that seal! And even if Jesus' disciples did get such an insane notion into their heads, what possible motivation would they have had for doing so? Modern scoffers would reply, "Because they wanted to set up a new religion, to make gain for themselves." Seriously? They had *nothing* to gain except rejection, and a brutal death. The reason that the disciples, and the hundreds of other believers, went throughout the Roman Empire, and all the way to India, and deep into Africa, to preach a risen Jesus, was that they *had seen Him* with their eyes. They knew that Jesus is alive; and they knew that Jesus has the power to save!

Conclusion: As we close this morning, I would ask, "Do you have a *head* faith in Jesus, or a *heart* faith?" A head faith is not enough. You *must* believe on Jesus with your *heart*. Repent of your sin, place your full trust in Christ, and let Him come in, and begin the "good work" that He desires to do in you! If you are saved already, I would close this message by saying: "*Always* believe God's words!" Don't listen to those who allegorise away the Scriptures. Study Scripture word-by-word, chapter by chapter, book by book, *in context*; take it historically, and literally (unless context clearly determines a figurative meaning); and most of all, *obey* God's Word, and live your life by continual, unwavering faith in the risen Jesus!

¹ Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (United States: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972), p. 207.