

The seal on the tomb

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Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0 : 00] So welcome everybody to our evening service for Sunday the 8th of November. This is a service of Calvary Evangelical Church, a church of about 70 or 80 people that meets in Brighton on the south coast of England.

Of course at the moment we're not meeting, we are having to have our services in this virtual way. But nonetheless you're welcome and if you've not joined us before we pray that you will find something that is useful and helpful to you this evening.

My name is Steve Ellacott and I'm one of the deacons of the church. In our evening services we've been working through Matthew and currently we're looking at the issues surrounding the crucifixion and the resurrection.

Although we would rather meet face to face, we are thankful for this technology that enables us to come together in one spirit, even though we are separated in body.

And so we want to come together and sing praises to God. Let's sing Psalm 96 from our hymn books, a version of Psalm 96. Come with all joy and sing to God.

[1 : 17] Come with all joy to sing to God.

A saving rock, the living Lord. In glad thanksgiving, seek His faithful.

God bless you.

God bless you.

God bless you. He shaped the islands by His hands. Come near to worship, come with faith.

[3 : 06] Bow down to God who gives us breath. God is our shepherd, God alone.

We are His people, all His own. But if you hear His voice today, do not reject what He will say.

When Israel wandered from God's path, they suffered forty years of wrath.

That generation went astray. They did not want to know His way.

They put their Saviour to the test and saw His power but lost their rest.

[4 : 32] So now let's come before God in prayer. Our Father in heaven, we do come to you to sing with joy, though we come at a time when joy is in short supply.

As the months of this pandemic drag on, we are forced to confess that we are weary of it and come to you to pray for an end. Yet we acknowledge that you are the Sovereign One who holds all the nations as a drop in the bucket.

We want to find joy and confidence as we listen to your word this evening. We want to build on the teachings of the Lord Jesus so that the storm will not wash us away and that we will be doers and not merely hearers of His word.

Yet we do live in this world and cannot be immune to its suffering. We pray for safety for medical staff and others fighting the disease in the front line.

We pray for the politicians and scientists who need to decide the best course of action. Even though they mostly do not ask for it, we pray that they might receive wisdom and insight from you.

[5 : 39] We pray for that great nation of the United States of America at this time of political turmoil. We ask that restraint might be exercised on all sides.

We pray that the rule of law and democratic institutions should not be undermined so that the citizens of that nation and indeed of the world might live in peace. Now as a church, we want to thank you for upholding us through these last few difficult weeks.

We ask that you will lead us into new paths, not perhaps the ones we'd anticipated, but ways that will bring us into a deeper trust. We pray particularly for our pastor Philip, suddenly deprived of the support of his two fellow elders.

We pray that the rest of us will be willing to give what help we can, but that above all, you provide the help of your spirit. We pray that you will grant us individually health in mind, body and in spirit.

For we acknowledge that your ways are higher than ours and we want to echo those words of our Lord. Nevertheless, your will be done. So Father, we come to you now as your people to give you the praise and thankfulness you deserve.

[6 : 56] May each one of us be found praising you for the gift of your son, whose message of love rings out across the lands, even in dark and difficult times. We ask this in the name of Jesus.

Amen. Now, before we turn to the scriptures and our passage in Matthew this evening, we will sing a song about the scriptures, number 548, how sure the scriptures are.

God's vital urgent word, as true as steel and far more sharp than any sword.

So deep and fine At his control They pierce where soul and spirit join They test each human

thought, Refining like a fire They measure what we ought to do and to desire For God knows all

Exposed it lies before his eyes To whom we call Let those who hear his voice

Confronting them today Reject the tempting choice Of doubting or delay For God speaks still His

word is clear So let us hear And do his will So let us turn now To the scriptures Our set passage for

this evening Is Matthew chapter 27 Verses 62 to 66 In order to get the whole thread Of this issue of

the guard Set by the Jewish leaders We need to read through Into chapter 28 So we'll read up to

verse 15 Of chapter 28 Now we pick up the narrative

[10 : 08] At the point where Jesus Has been crucified And Joseph of Arimathea Has asked Pilate

for the body And has been granted permission To bury Jesus So Joseph buries Jesus In his own

tomb Tomb that had never been occupied It had just been recently Hewn out of the rock And

Joseph seals the tomb With a large stone And now we pick up our reading In Matthew 27 verse 62

The next day The one after preparation day The chief priests And the Pharisees Went to Pilate Sir

they said We remember That while he was still alive That deceiver said After three days I will rise

again So give the order For the tomb To be made secure Until the third day Otherwise his disciples

May come and steal the body And tell the people That he has been raised From the dead This last

deception

Will be worse than the first Take a guard Pilate answered Go make the tomb As secure as you

know how So they went And made the tomb secure By putting a seal On the stone And posting the

guard After the Sabbath At dawn On the first day of the week Mary Magdalene And the other Mary

Went to look at the tomb There was a violent earthquake For an angel of the Lord Came down from

heaven And going to the tomb Rolled back the stone And sat on it His appearance Was like

lightning And his clothes Were white as snow The guards Were so afraid of him That they shook

And became like dead men The angel said To the women Do not be afraid For I know That you are

looking For Jesus Who was crucified He is not here He has risen Just as he said Come and see the

place Where he lay Then go quickly And tell his disciples He has risen from the dead And is going

ahead of you Into Galilee There you will see him Now I have told you

So the women Hurried away from the tomb Afraid yet filled with joy And ran to tell his disciples

Suddenly Jesus met them Greetings he said They came to him Clapped his feet And worshipped

him Then Jesus said to them Do not be afraid Go and tell my brothers To go to Galilee There they

will see me While the women Were on their way Some of the guards Went into the city And

reported to the chief priests Everything that had happened When the chief priests Had met with the

elders And devised a plan They gave the soldiers A large sum of money Telling them You are to

say His disciples Came during the night And stole him away While we were asleep If this report

Gets to the governor We will satisfy him And keep you out of trouble So the soldiers Took the

money And did as they were instructed And this story Has been widely circulated Among the Jews

To this very day So let's now turn

And think about this seal That the Jewish leaders Put on the tomb So there are moments in history

When the world is changed forever Maybe this Covid pandemic Will prove to be one of them Or

maybe not Perhaps the disease Will die down And things will go back To much the same way As

they were before While we are in the midst Of the crisis It is difficult to know One can only try And

manage the situation As seems best at the time Generally speaking We dislike change Because it

always involves Struggle and conflict The status quo Might not be ideal But it is what we know We

only opt for change When our situation Is sufficiently unpleasant That it seems We have no choice

Change implies A loss of control And that is something To be feared It is an interesting observation

That as the Covid pandemic

Drags on Everyone's view Of what we regarded As firm and certain Becomes strained Conspiracy

theories Are rife Even respectable Scientific and political Opinion is divided And cannot give us

Definitive answers The scientists Are doing their best But they are limited By the lack Of reliable data A scientific method Depends on empirical Verification Repeatable experiments The epidemic models Have too many unknowns They have too many Unverified assumptions About human behaviour Not enough data About the mechanisms Of viral transmission Exponential models In particular Are very sensitive A small change In one parameter Can lead to A large difference In the predicted outcome And human behaviour Is notoriously unpredictable Because it is Self-modifying The very activity Of collecting The statistics And drawing the graphs Will change Human response [15 : 12] The fact that Florence Nightingale One of the founders Of medical statistics Understood very well A graph or a pie chart Can change the world But by how much And in what direction Who can tell An event like a pandemic Is essentially a one-off It isn't repeatable You can study it Scientifically But really only After it's happened That will give you Some help in the future But the next virus Will most likely be different That's why it takes So long to produce A vaccine One's reaction To a one-off event Is largely determined By what you consider To be plausible The epidemiologists Were prepared For a flu-type virus But that was not What we got A virus that is Practically harmless To children But deadly for the elderly Which needs a whole Strategic rethink You just have to Muddle through And make it up As you go along As you try To stay in control

Saying in control Is exactly what The chief priests And Pharisees Were doing In our passage Of scripture today On the face of it They had won Jesus had been executed And his followers scattered For they were played By a nagging doubt That the crisis Was not really over These Jewish leaders Seemed to have picked up What the disciples Themselves had not Verse 63 That Jesus had actually Claimed he would be Raised in three days Their response Was conditioned By the assumption That there was No possibility That Jesus Would actually be raised Lazarus and a widow's Son and a young girl Might have been Reported raised But they had apparently Died of some disease Perhaps they were Not really dead Just comatose Jesus by contrast Had been crucified And then run through With the sword Blood loss Would soon kill him Even if no vital organ Was damaged If there was to be

A claim to resurrection It had to be faked As far as these Jewish leaders Were concerned And so they planned On that assumption And set a guard The plan was That a fraud Would be rendered Impossible But the law Of unintended consequences Meant that the cover story Became untenable These guards Would in fact To be the only Eyewitnesses To the resurrection Who were not Also disciples And that put them In a very difficult position As we read In chapter 28 11 to 15 The Jewish leaders Had no option But to stick To their cover story But it's just Not plausible For a soldier In Roman times To be asleep On sentry duty Would likely result Not just in dismissal But severe punishment Probably some Re-execution And even if they Had all nodded off How is it possible That the disciples Could have unsealed The tomb And stolen the body Without waking them To get the guards

To support this claim Would indeed Need a very large bribe Chapter 28 Verse 12 And the promise Of political protection Verse 28 14 If the story Were actually true Would the sentries Not simply have been punished But the Jewish leaders Could not allow Even the remotest chance That as the soldiers Died protesting Their innocence They might be believed A cover up Was the only option The guard had been set So that if a fraud Were to be perpetrated The chief priest Could simply scotch it By producing the corpse But that was exactly What they were unable to do And in case you thought This whole thing Was just a tissue Of lies dreamed up By Matthew He points out In chapter 28 Verse 15 That the story Was common knowledge By the time He wrote his gospel The day the world changed As it happens The Jewish fears

Were quite right The crisis Was indeed not over They would not be able To contain it And stay in control There was a moment At which history Would change forever Perhaps the most important Pivotal moment In the whole history Of our species Forward or not The events of the next few days Are destined to change The world irrevocably Tom Holland Has pointed out And so well demonstrated In his book Dominion That our western civilization Is the product Of Christianity And this is the civilization That has come To dominate the world And thereby Hangs a problem For all of us Christians or not Because if the Jews Were right And the resurrection Was a scam Then 2000 years Of history Is based on a lie The values of freedom And human dignity That are so dear To the western mind Will be proven fraudulent If Christianity Is a lie

[20 : 16] Then western civilization Is a lie too And like all our Lies Will start to fall apart Under the weight Of its own contradictions As the Jewish leaders Found A lie However convenient Cannot be

convincingly Sustained And is that Not exactly What we are seeing In the world Around us One cannot Maintain western values Without the moral force Of Christianity To sustain them Because they don't Make sense In a Darwinian world The apex predator Is king Blessed are the meek Is a fundamentally Christian idea And in a world Of survival Of the fittest Not a very plausible one The idea Of protecting the weak Of the dignity Of all humans Irrespective of race Or sex Or social status Is a fundamentally Christian idea Otherwise As George Orwell Saw so clearly All animals

Are equal But some Are more equal Than others Self-contradiction Rules Once we Start Moving away From the idea That the resurrection Really happened Our western values No longer Really make sense Christian ethics Ethics depends On the idea Of individual Accountability The view That the actions Of every single Human Are significant And that every Single human Is responsible For those actions If Christianity Is a scam And a deceit As the Jewish Leaders claimed Then that claim Of accountability Is self-contradicting So it's careful That we look At this charge Ask the question That the leaders That Jewish leaders Ask Is the gospel A scam For our society As a whole And for each Of us as individuals The question Raised by the Sealed tomb Is crucial Without the Resurrection Christianity Is a scam Indeed Without the Resurrection Christianity Makes no sense At all As Paul wrote For what I Received I passed On to you As of first Importance That Christ Died for our Sins According to The scripture That he was Buried That he was Raised On the third Day According to The scriptures If there is No resurrection Of the dead Then not even Christ has Been raised And if Christ Has not been Raised Our preaching Is useless And so is Your faith If only for This life We have hope In Christ We are to be Pitied more Than all men It was reported Recently that A church of England Representative At the Vatican Did not believe In a Literal Resurrection He claimed That the Deceived Disciples Merely felt That Jesus Had been Resurrected But this Is nonsense In the Strictest Meaning Of that Word It ignores Both the Existing Records And the Fact that The apostles And other Disciples Were prepared To go To their Deaths Proclaiming That Jesus Died And rose From the Dead Scammers Are in it For the Money Or the Power That they Get What Scammer Would die To protect Their own Lie There'd Just be No point In it Nowadays Few Historical Scholars Are prepared To deny That Jesus Of Nazareth Existed And that He died By crucifixion The historical Evidence for That is Too strong But if He was Not Also Resurrected Then Paul Had it Right Us Christians Are all People Most to Be Pitied And our Western Civilization No longer Makes Sense Not just Because we Back the Wrong Horse But because We're in The grip Of a Delusion Which totally Skews Our whole View of Reality If Christ Is not Raised We are Victims Indeed Of the

Ultimate Conspiracy Theory But what Ultimately Is the Argument Against the Resurrection It's a Simple one It is that It didn't Happen Because it's Impossible That has Been the Argument Of skeptics For 2000 Years It was Essentially The argument Of the Jewish Leaders In spite Of the Report Of their Own Soldiers It was The same Argument That the Greek Philosophers Had in Acts 17 Verse 32 And of course It is The argument Of the Scientific Skeptics Today Of course We never Start from The position Of neutrality Everyone Has a Vested Interest In being Proved Right For the Jewish Leaders Jesus Was a Real Threat To Their Spiritual Authority Hence Their Determination To get Rid Of him But to Argue That any Raw Event Is Impossible Particularly On Scientific Grounds Is a Dangerous Place To Start By the

[25 : 20] Standards Of Nineteenth Century Physics Quantum Theory Is Impossible Yet Lasers Which Depend On Quantum Theory Are Now Part Of Everyday Experience Quantum Theory Still Is All Man As Scientific Mathematical And Philosophical Questions But Physicists Were Obligated To Accept It On The Basis Of Hard Evidence Most People Do Not Understand The Mathematics Of Shredding Of Shredding Equation That Doesn't Stop Them Using A CD Player We Need To Remember That There's A World Of Difference Between Asserting Something Is Impossible And Asserting That Something Is Contrary To Everyday Experience And Therefore Should Be Subjected To Radical Doubt Things That Are Contrary To Everyday Experience Should Indeed Be Subjected To Radical Doubt And Examine Very Closely But That Doesn't Mean They Don't Happen One

Of The Problems With The Covid Test And Trace System Is That We All Learn To Treat Cold Calls From Unknown Numbers With Suspicion Often We Don't Even Answer The Phone Or We Answer But Put It Down Immediately So The Genuine Caller Finds It Very Difficult To Convince The Heerer That They Are Genuine We Find It Simpler Just To Reject All Such Calls As Fraud In It Of Most Of The Time We Would Be Right But Unfortunately In Doing That We Miss Out On Some Important

Information This Is Why The Gospel Writers And The Apostles Put So Much Emphasis On The Evidence For The Resurrection There Really Are Only Three Possible Options!
 But As We Noted Fraud Is Not Really Plausible There Was A Guard Set On The Tomb And The Witnesses Were Prepared To Die For What They Claimed To Have Seen Hardly The Actions Of Scammers And Fraudsters Lawyers Have Pointed Out That The Very Differences Of The Eyewitnesses Counts Are Evidence Of Their Veracity For A Real Event Witnesses See And Recall Things From Different Perspectives And Their Narratives Differ In Small Details If This Was A Fraud And The Perpetrators Of It Would Have Agreed A Common Narrative Delusion Is Of Course A More Difficult Hypothesis To Reject Yet The Diversity Of The Reports The Fact That The Appearances Of Jesus Were Unexpected In Some Cases Met Indeed With Scepticism Argue Against The Subsequent Behaviour Of The Apostles Was Not Delusionable It Didn't Give Any Indication Of Being Mad Or Disturbed In Mind It Shows None Of The Paranoia Associated With Conspiracy Theories No What We Have Here Is A Real Account Of The Day That The World Changed The Resurrection Did Indeed Change The Whole World View Of The Early! Questions From That Moment The Real World Was A Different Place From How They Previously Conceived It In The Light Of The Resurrection All Jesus' Teaching Made Sense Before That Most Of It Seemed Obscure Real Real which we have heard which we have seen with our eyes which we have looked at and our hands have touched this we proclaim concerning the word of life the life appeared we have seen it and testify to it and we proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the father and has appeared to us we proclaim to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us and our fellowship is with the father and with his son jesus christ not a scam not a delusion not even a useful spiritual story but a myth ultimately what we have is carefully documented eyewitness accounts of an actual event this is what the gospel writers and apostles claim to be reporting you can reject it as impossible but the evidence is there a raw fact a fact that changed history and has changed individual lives from the life of the apostle peter who first denied christ but soon would become bold in proclaiming the resurrection and it's changed individual lives up to this present day not every piece of news is fake skepticism can be a useful tool but it can only take you so far in the end you have to believe something to make sense of the world at all who will you believe the jewish leaders who were desperate to maintain the status quo or matthew whose very life was turned upside down and turned around by what he saw and heard so let us finish our time together with a song of praise we'll sing charles wesley's great hymn 458 in our hymn books christ the lord is risen today of course we usually sing this song at easter it is appropriate also for remembrance sunday when we remember those who died because the song reminds us vain the stone the watch the seal christ has burst the gates of hell death in vain forbids him rise christ has opened paradise lives again our glorious king where oh death is now your sting once he died our souls to save where's your victory boasting grave hallelujah christ the lord is written today christ the lord is written today hallelujah all creation join to say hallelujah hallelujah raise your joys and triumphs high hallelujah hallelujah
 [32 : 35] till you hence and earth reply hallelujah hallelujah love's redeeming work is done hallelujah hallelujah hallelujah hallelujah hallelujah hallelujah hallelujah hallelujah hallelujah hallelujah The light returns at last Hallelujah Fame the stone, the watch, the seal
 Hallelujah Christ has burst the gates of hell Hallelujah Death in vain forbids him rise Hallelujah Christ has opened paradise Hallelujah Lives again our glorious King! Hallelujah Where, O death, is now your sting?
 Hallelujah Once he died our souls to say Hallelujah Where's your victory boasting grave?
 Hallelujah Hallelujah So we know where Christ has led Hallelujah Following our exalted head
 Hallelujah Made like him, like him we rise Hallelujah As across the grave the skies Hallelujah Hail the Lord of earth and heaven
 Hallelujah Praise to you by both begin Hallelujah Every knee to you shall bow Hallelujah Hallelujah Ridden Christ Triumphant now Hallelujah Hallelujah