



When Bribes Didn't Work

Matthew 28:11-15

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The title of my message today is, "When Bribes Didn't Work." And I know you want to get to the grift and corruption, but first, let's take a look at some New Testament jailers.

We begin in Acts 12:

[King Herod had some who belonged to the church arrested], intending to persecute them. ² He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. ³ When he saw that this met with approval among the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also...⁴ After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each.

That's a total of 16 soldiers to guard one man!

^{4b} Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.

⁵ So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

⁶ The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance.

⁷ Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.

⁸ Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him. ⁹ Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had

no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰ They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

¹¹ Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen."

¹² When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. ¹³ Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. ¹⁴ When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"

¹⁵ "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."

¹⁶ But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. ¹⁷ Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this," he said, and then he left for another place.

Last Sunday was the first Sunday after Easter, and it's unofficially known as "Holy Hilarity Sunday." In many churches, the service is light; it may even include jokes because with the resurrection of Christ, we see that the devil's plot to kill Jesus has failed, so the joke's on him.

This would've been a good story for Holy Hilarity Sunday because it's one of the funniest stories in the Bible. However, I wanted to preach a message tied to last Monday's eclipse.

What makes this story so funny is the fact that the church was earnestly praying for Peter's release. That's when Peter comes knocking on the door of the very house where they're having a prayer meeting for Peter's release, they refuse to believe it—even though the answer to their prayers was literally on their doorstep.

Somehow, despite their lack of faith, God answered their prayers. I wonder: has God ever answered your prayers despite your lack of faith? I suspect it's happened more than once in your lifetime.

Sadly, life sometimes kicks you in the gut in the middle of a belly laugh, and that's exactly what happens in Acts 12. Notice what happens in the next verse:

¹⁸ In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. ¹⁹ After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.

Talk about a gut-wrenching turn of events! In verse 16, you're laughing. All is right with the world. Peter is safe and sound. But then on the heels of that joyous verse, 16 prison guards are put to death because Peter had escaped. Of course, you and I know that there's nothing those guards could have done to prevent the angel from releasing Peter from his

chains. And the scriptures don't say it, but I believe that the news of their execution cut to the heart of the church members.

Did our prayers bring about the execution of 16 Roman guards?

Luke was careful to include that sad postscript to the story. And the reason why I believe that it cut to the heart of the church is because of another story just four chapters later.

In Acts 16, Paul and Silas are arrested and thrown into prison for throwing the city of Philippi "into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for the Romans to accept or practice" (vs. 20-21). Luke is again careful to tell us that—

—the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. ²⁴ When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose.

²⁷ The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

I'm convinced that Paul and Silas refused to flee because they'd heard about the execution of the 16 jailers and they didn't want to be responsible for the death of another because of their flight to freedom. But there's more to the story:

²⁹ The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

³¹ They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." ³² Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. ³³ At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. ³⁴ The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.

Not only was the life of the jailer spared; he and his entire household became Christians and were baptized. And one of these days, you and I will sit down with that Philippian jailer on the banks of the River of Life and he will testify to the grace of God which not only spared his life, but also saved his soul.

But I know what you're thinking: you're asking yourself, "What about the bribe?"

"Where's the bribe?"

To answer that question, we must turn to Matthew's gospel, chapter 28. Later on that first Resurrection Morning—

¹¹ While the women were on their way [to tell the disciples that Jesus had risen from the grave], some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. ¹² When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, ¹³ telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.'" ¹⁴ If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out

of trouble.”¹⁵ 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.

I have a question for the chief priests and elders who devised this plan: Why would anyone believe that the disciples had stolen the body of Jesus? If the disciples had stolen the body, the guards would have been executed for dereliction of duty. That's what happened throughout the book of Acts. If your prisoner escapes, you die. That's why the Philippian jailer was so quick to draw his sword. The fact that the guards were alive was proof that the body of Jesus had not been stolen by the disciples.

Besides, there's no way that the guards would ever admit to falling asleep on the job.

Notice that Matthew tells us that the guards reported to the chief priests “everything that happened.” That doesn't mean they actually witnessed the resurrection of Jesus; but they did witness the earthquake, the rolling of the stone, the angel, and the empty tomb. In other words, the guards believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Remember, it was a guard standing at the foot of the cross when Jesus died who declared, “Surely this was the Son of God.”

How do we even have this story? No disciples were there to overhear their report. The only plausible solution is that one—if not several—of the guards became believers and joined the early church. Then they were able to tell Matthew and others about the bribes. And much to the chagrin of the chief priests, clearly the guards did not spread the “fake news” that the body of Jesus was stolen because clearly they're the ones who told about the bribe. If they spread the fake news, they must've done it with a wink of their eye.

It seems as though the guards even tried to convince the chief priests and elders of the resurrection, but they refused to believe, probably because it would have completely disrupted everything that they stood for.

The chief priests and the elders of the law did their best to deny the resurrection. But to no avail. Even the guards whom they bribed as co-conspirators joined the church and undermined the lie. On the other hand, Paul tells us that there are over 500 people who witnessed the risen Christ. And to this day, we profess “that which Paul received and passed on to us as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time” (1 Corinthians 15:3-6a).

So thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (vs. 57-58).