

The Tomb is Empty

Easter Sunday

Matthew 28:1-11

Perhaps no other question carries such eternal freight than this: **Is the tomb of Jesus empty?** The answer to that question has impacted the lives and eternities of countless men and women for the last two thousand years.

Main Idea: The resurrection of Jesus was a historically verifiable event which vindicated his glory as the Son of God and secured salvation for all who believe.

The resurrection of Jesus is both historical event and a doctrine. That is, 1) Jesus' resurrection is something that occurred historically and 2) is the means by which he guaranteed our final redemption.

Objections Answered

Historically, there have been numerous attempts to deny the resurrection of Jesus. These various attempts are made precisely because the faith of the disciples, the many accounts of Jesus appearing after his death, and the extraordinary spread of Christianity demand an explanation. The following are the most prominent attempts to explain away the empty tomb:

1. Jesus did not actually die on the cross.

This has been referred to as "The Swoon Theory." The proponents of this theory hold that Jesus did not actually die on the cross but merely slipped into unconsciousness. He later revived after being placed in the tomb and then exited, thus leaving the impression that he had been raised.

- We must remember that the Romans were experts in killing. The details of Jesus' crucifixion complete with a spear thrust to the upper thorax make it inconceivable that he would have then been taken from the cross alive.

2. The disciples went to the wrong tomb.

This theory holds that the resurrection of Jesus was simply a matter of mistaken location. The followers of Jesus simply went to the wrong tomb. When they saw Jesus' body was not there they leapt to the conclusion that he had been raised.

- This theory falls far short of credibility not least of all because the tomb of Jesus was well known. It has been donated by a wealthy man and subsequently guarded by Roman soldiers. To accept the wrong tomb theory one would have to believe that all of Jesus' many followers made the same error.

3. The disciples stole the body of Jesus.

So committed to portraying Jesus as the Divine Messiah whose promise to be raised was true, the disciples stole the body of Jesus, thus leaving the tomb empty.

- There are at least two gaping holes in this theory. First, the disciples would have had to somehow overpower the Roman soldiers posted at the tomb to prevent this very thing from happening. Keep in mind that the disciples, far from conspiring to steal the corpse of Jesus were hiding from the Jewish and Roman authorities. Second, this theory assumes that the disciples would have all been willing to endure imprisonment, torture and finally gruesome deaths for something they knew was a lie.

4. The resurrection appearances of Jesus were actually mass hallucinations.

The early followers of Jesus and the many others who reported seeing the risen Jesus were all delusional.

- How can one possibly explain that hundreds and probably thousands of people had eye-witness experiences with the risen Jesus? For forty days he appeared numerous times to many people. In those

times he ate with, was touched by, and generally fellowshipped with his followers. To suggest that hundreds and perhaps thousands of people were imagining these things for forty days stretches the bounds of credulity to the breaking point.

- Also, keep in mind that all the Jewish religious authorities would have had to do was produce the corpse of Jesus to prove that what they had experienced was not genuine. Indeed, producing the dead body of Jesus would have stamped out Christianity before the church ever had a chance to be established.

5. The resurrection of Jesus was a legend that developed after the passage of time.

This theory holds that the disciples and early followers of Jesus did not believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Only generations later did stories of the resurrection of Jesus gain popularity.

- New Testament scholar N.T. Wright, perhaps the world's most effective apologist for the resurrection of Jesus, utterly dismantles this objection by proving from both the New Testament and early Christian history that Christianity was, from the beginning, a faith based on the resurrection of Jesus. Christianity, from the beginning, was neither comprehensible nor sustainable apart from genuine confidence in the empty tomb.

Let's be reasonable.

The only reasonable explanation for the many post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, the faith of the disciples, the nature of the gospel accounts, and the remarkable spread of Christianity is that Jesus' tomb is empty. It must be kept in mind that none of the followers of Jesus were expecting the resurrection. Part of the sad irony of the gospel accounts is that Jesus' followers never truly grasped or believed what he said about either his death or resurrection. The resurrection was not some sort of massively conceived wish fulfillment. As N.T. Wright aptly observes:

The early Christians did not invent the empty tomb and the 'meetings' or 'sightings' of the risen Jesus...Nobody was expecting this kind of thing...nobody would have invented it...To suggest otherwise is to stop doing history and to enter into a fantasy world of our own. (Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 707)

Because Jesus has risen...

1. He has authority over life and death.

John 10:18 – “No one takes [my life] from Me, but I lay it down on my own. I have the right to lay it down, and I have the right to take it up again.”

1 Corinthians 15:55-57 – “Death where is your sting?”

2. He has authority over all creation.

Matthew 28:18 – “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.”

Romans 8:18-25 – “The creation waits in eager longing...”

3. He has authority over you and me.

- He is our Lord and worthy of our full allegiance.

- He loves us and saves us entirely by grace.

- He is our final Judge so we must be ready to meet Him.

Romans 10:9-13