

Question: Are there not some alternative explanations of the empty tomb of Jesus besides the claim that he actually rose from the dead?

After Jesus died, his body was taken down from the cross by Joseph of Arimathea and laid in his own tomb newly-cut out of a rock. A stone was then rolled over the entrance. Because the Pharisees remembered that Jesus had predicted he would rise in three days and to be sure that his disciples did not steal the body, claiming that he had been resurrected, they requested that the Roman governor make the tomb as secure as possible. The stone was sealed over the entrance and guards were placed there to protect the site (Matthew 27:57-66). Yet, on the third day, the first day of the week, some women who had come to the tomb “found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus” (Luke 24:2-3 NIV). The great question that has remained throughout the centuries since then is how to explain the empty tomb.

Did the enemies of Jesus steal his body? They never claimed to have stolen it. What would they hope to accomplish by doing that? If they had stolen it, why did they not produce the body and discredit the claims of the early church and immediately stop the spread of Christianity throughout the world?

Some skeptics have suggested that Jesus was not really dead when he was placed in the tomb and that perhaps he revived after several hours in the cool tomb. Is this probable? Upon being told of a preacher who said that Jesus only swooned on the cross, some unknown person commented: “Beat your preacher with a cat-of-nine-tails with 39 heavy strokes, nail him to a cross; hang him in the sun for six hours; run a spear through his side, put him in an airless tomb for 36 hours and see what happens.”

Did the early disciples steal the body of Jesus and then make up the story of the resurrection? A simple reading of the story makes this also seem highly improbable. The resurrection of Jesus was not an idea that was first concocted by his disciples after his death. The gospel stories report several times that Jesus himself told his disciples he would be killed and then raised up on the third day (Matthew 16:21; Mark 9:31; Luke 24:7). Even while attempting to produce evidence against Jesus, his enemies acknowledged this. They said, “Sir, we

remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise again’” (Matt. 27:63). His disciples had been very troubled by these predictions and had refused to believe he would die, much less that he would be resurrected (Matthew 16:21; Mark 9:31-34). When Jesus was arrested, his disciples fled in fear as he had told them they would (Matt. 26:31; Mark 14:50). They felt that all their hopes had been dashed (Luke 24:21). Only after Jesus had been resurrected, the disciples remember his predictions and believe in his resurrection (Luke 24:6-8; John 2:22). Even after Jesus had been resurrected, the disciples were found behind locked doors for fear of the Jews (John 20:19). If these disciples had actually stolen the body of Jesus and had concocted the resurrection story, how does one explain the conviction and authority with which they proclaimed the resurrection in later years? Would a person really believe that they risked their lives and the lives of family and friends for something they knew was a lie?

The importance of the resurrection of Jesus to the Christian story cannot be overstated. By his death on the cross, he became a substitute for us to atone for our sins. Thus, he demonstrated that God is both just in that he punished sin and that he became the justifier of those who place their faith in Jesus (Romans 3:21-26). The New Testament letter to the Romans also says that it was by his resurrection from the dead that Jesus was declared to be son of God with power (Romans 1:4). Apart from his resurrection, Jesus remains just another dead martyr. In this case, his death was meaningless.

If Jesus was not raised from the dead, how can we explain the impact of the resurrection story upon our world for over 2,000 years? In every nation on earth, even in the face of threats of prison and death, groups of Christians gather every Sunday—the first day of the week—to celebrate and proclaim the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. They often repeat, “He is risen indeed.”

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