

Series: Live Like You're Dying

March 31: The Tomb Is Empty: Believe It (John 19:41-20:9)

Intro: Easter is for some people simply the celebration of springtime and the expression of the hope of new life and new beginnings. Life is full of new beginnings, but that is not the summation of the Easter holiday. Easter is more than that.

Some people hear the Easter story of the resurrection of Jesus and say to themselves, and maybe to others, "Dead men don't rise." That is their position. There is no resurrection in their minds, and that includes the resurrection of Jesus.

The heart of the Easter celebration for Christians is the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from the dead. It is the culmination of the 72 hours that changed the world forever.

Two disciples raced to the tomb when the women reported it empty: John and Peter. John was faster—he got there first but did not enter. Peter, slower but bolder, arrived, passed by John, and charged right in. John entered, too, then, and gave the most detailed description we have of the empty tomb.

These two disciples exited the tomb in different moods. Peter was perplexed. John believed. John believed in the resurrection without any understanding of how it fit into the ancient Scriptures. None of the disciples at that time saw the prediction of the Messiah's death and resurrection in the Old Testament books they studied. But John believed in the resurrection of Jesus anyway.

These two attitudes, Peter's perplexity and John's faith, summarize how people view the empty tomb. How do you see it?

I do not know if Gordon's Calvary or the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is the actual spot where Jesus was crucified, or some other site never identified. Nor do I have any inside information on the placement of the Garden Tomb. But I do know that the cross and the tomb are close together, as John indicates twice in 19:41-42. I do know that Jesus was crucified outside the Old City walls and that it was a place where people passed by.

The old churches that capture the sites of the birth and death of Jesus are very dark and poorly lit. Both his purported birthplace and his burial tomb are underground in caves in the earth.

**(Go through four photos: GordonsCalvary, GardenTomb, GardenerTomb, HolySepulchreChurch)**

We could think of the death and resurrection of Jesus as if we were CSIs looking for evidence. This is a cold case, but we have considerable historical record. You could, indeed, take a lifetime studying this amazing story. Many of us have invested our lives in considering the evidence for the resurrection and then trying to adjust our lives to the new reality that emerges.

**I. JESUS' TOMB WAS OPEN:** *Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance* (John 20:1). This OPEN TOMB is at the center of the key event in the history of the human race.

**A. Three FACTS are agreed upon even among skeptics.**

1. Most all parties agree that Jesus was crucified outside the city walls of Jerusalem. This fact is recorded both in Christian and nonchristian literature, and it is memorialized in art and carvings from ancient times. There is virtual consensus here. The historical record indicates that the soldiers took care to make sure that Jesus was dead. They examined his body before they broke his legs. Seeing he was dead, and for good measure, a soldier thrust a spear into his side and saw blood and water flowing from his side (John 19:33-35). John insisted this was a true account (v35).

2. Most all agree that his body was placed in a tomb not far away. It was the day of Preparation for Passover. The Jews did not want a dead body hanging on a cross right next to the Holy City on their highest and holiest day. They took his body down from the cross before nightfall and placed it in a convenient tomb nearby. This also is recorded in both Christian and nonchristian sources. Almost everyone concedes that Jesus was crucified and buried.

3. Also note this: Most all agree that on the first day of the week, Sunday in our reckoning, the tomb of Jesus was discovered empty. Gary Habermas estimates that 75% of the critics of the resurrection of Jesus still believe that the tomb was found empty. The stone was rolled away and the grave was opened.

**B. The evidence for this empty tomb is threefold:**

1. **Jerusalem:** The church, which from the very first sermons preached the resurrection of Jesus, sprang up immediately in Jerusalem. This birth of a church that declared the tomb was empty is well attested. This

would never have been the case had the grave not been opened. Christianity would not have been born nor thrived in the very place where its founder remained buried.

2. **Enemies:** This open grave was acknowledged by the enemies of Jesus. The immediate response upon hearing of the empty tomb was to say, “The disciples stole the body” (Matt. 28:13). This explanation for the open tomb was circulated for many years in Jerusalem and beyond.

3. **Women:** the women are memorialized as the first and chief witnesses to the empty tomb. In fact, Mary Magdalene is the only person who is recorded to have been at the cross, at the burial, and at the empty tomb. She is the first witness.

Considering the status of women in the Jewish culture of the First Century, this would be unimaginable unless it was historical fact. Josephus declared that the testimony of women was inadmissible in court. The Talmud confirmed this. The testimony of women was not admissible in first century Judaism.

**II. SOMEBODY MOVED THE STONE:** *The stone had been removed from the entrance* (John 20:1).

A. The ENEMIES of Jesus did not move the stone. Pilate had the grave sealed on Saturday and a guard posted. The body of Jesus was not removed by hostile forces.

B. The DISCIPLES of Jesus did not move the stone. Although this is the first explanation set forward, it makes no sense.

1. These frightened disciples fled from Jesus and the soldiers at the garden. They all left him.

2. They did not believe that he would rise from the dead despite his allusions to it, which they could not process. They did not see it in Scripture, and they could not imagine it.

3. They had no motive to remove the body. What good was his body to them? What would they do with it? Why would they go out and preach that Jesus had risen from the dead when they themselves had removed his body from the grave? Why would they die for this assertion when they knew it to be a lie?

C. The ANGEL of the Lord moved the stone. Matthew records this plainly in Matt. 28:2. Angels are witnessed in all four gospel accounts of the empty tomb. God moved the stone. That is the best explanation as you will find.

**III. WHY DID GOD MOVE THE STONE?**

A. Jesus could pass through walls in his glorified body (John 20:26: *Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them....* He did not have to have the stone removed.

B. God the Father did not need the molecules from the dead body of Jesus of Nazareth to create his glorified body. God has no problem creating a glorified body for us even if our bodies have been incinerated. This body is buried corruptible, and it is raised incorruptible (I Corinthians 15:42). *It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body* (I Cor. 15:44).

C. Why an open tomb? The grave was open for us, not Jesus or God. John and Peter and Mary needed to look inside, and so do we.

D. Those who are “held in bondage by their fear of death” (Hebrew 2:15) must witness the defeat of death, the end of death, and the gift of life in Christ Jesus.

1. For so many people death is the ultimate reality. It seems to them to be the final destination and the end of their existence.

2. God highlights the victory over death by the opening of the tomb and the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus.

**IV. POST-RESURRECTION APPEARANCES OF JESUS:** *Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: ‘I have seen the Lord!’* (John 20:18).

A. Four gospels as well as Acts and Paul record post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. These written records of Christianity, including Galatians and I Corinthians, date back to just a few years after the resurrection.

B. Paul chronicles the post-resurrection appearances in I Corinthians 15 where he also gives the earliest written account that we have today of the gospel of Christ.

C. The greatest event in your life will be the encounter with the Risen Christ. He is not through with these post-Resurrection appearances. He still makes them. His Spirit bears witness with our spirits that we are the children of God.

“He walks with me, he talks with me, he tells me I am his own. The joy we share as we tarry there none other has ever known.”

\*\*\*You see the boss's car in the parking lot. The secretary tells you that she just spoke to him. You see the light under the door of his office. You take these evidences to know that he is actually in.

But you could confirm this in another way. You could go knock on his door and have a face-to-face conversation with him. Then, although the other evidences of the car and the secretary and the light would still be true, they are no longer needed.