

An Empty Tomb



So you're curious about this empty tomb, wondering did Jesus really rise from the dead.

Sounds pretty crazy, doesn't it? Death has hung over all humanity like a dark, ominous cloud. Not a single one of us has been able to avoid it or escape it. No person has been wise enough, powerful enough, wealthy enough, or influential enough to escape it. So why should we think Jesus of Nazareth would be any different? When He died on the cross on Friday, death had claimed yet another victim whom it would hold in its grasp forever.

But what about that empty tomb on the third day? Almost immediately stories circulated to try to explain it. That makes sense. All our experience tells us that dead people stay dead. They just do. So all these stories gave logical explanations for how Jesus could be dead yet the tomb be empty that Sunday morning.

It started with the Jewish religious authorities. They made the most logical claim—Jesus' disciples had stolen His body so they could say He rose again. Makes

sense, except for something they did the day before. On Saturday they remembered something Jesus had said before He died. He predicted He would be killed then rise to life again on the third day. Thinking how the disciples could steal Jesus' body from the tomb and make it look like His prediction came true, they went to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. He gave them permission to post guards at the tomb to prevent His disciples from stealing the body (Matthew 27:62-66).

Suddenly the story of Jesus' disciples stealing His body starts to look a little suspect. I mean c'mon, look at these guys! The night He was arrested one of them acted brave. Peter grabbed a sword and took a swing at one of the guys who had come to arrest Jesus. But then Jesus ordered him to put away his sword, and all of the other followers turned tail and ran (Mark 14:50). Only Peter and one other dared to follow—but they stayed at a distance. Under cover of darkness they went in among the guards to learn the results of Jesus' trial. But when servant girls started questioning Peter, he crumbled in fear, denied knowing Jesus three times, and ran away weeping.

No, Jesus' followers weren't brave enough to execute a daring grave robbery. They were terrified men. Sunday found them hiding behind locked doors for fear that the Jewish authorities would have them crucified too (John 20:19). We could hardly consider any of them good candidates to come and steal His body from under the noses of a squad of guards.

No, the story from the Jewish religious leaders just doesn't stand up. The Bible's description is much more reasonable. Sunday morning while those guards were watching the tomb there was a great earthquake and an angel came down and rolled the stone away from the entrance. There was nothing inside that tomb but empty grave clothes. When the guards saw the heavenly creature they collapsed and acted like dead men. Afterward they ran into the city and reported what happened to the Jewish authorities. Then the chief priests bribed them to spread the story that they had fallen asleep and Jesus' disciples had snuck past and stolen His body (Matthew 28:11-15). Now that sounds much more reasonable.

But there's another problem with the story the guards started spreading around. The Bible tells us Jesus' tomb wasn't completely empty. Yes, Jesus' body was missing, but the linen cloths that had been wrapped around His body were still lying there, along with the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head. It wasn't lying with the linen cloths but had been carefully folded up and laid in a place by itself (John 20:6-7). If Jesus' followers had actually stolen His body, why in the world would they take the time and trouble to unwrap Jesus' body with the guards waiting right outside? Seems to me it would have been quicker, easier, and smarter to carry Him out mummy style with His body nicely wrapped up. Would you want to go carrying around a three-day old corpse in your bare hands? Nasty! Only a resurrection is a good explanation for empty wrappings.

And one last point about this story. What would make the disciples want to steal the body and tell everyone He had risen? Okay, maybe they'd gain some popularity, but as soon as they started getting threatened, beaten, and imprisoned wouldn't they have realized keeping up the lie wasn't worth it? In the end, not a single one of these followers avoided being imprisoned, beaten, exiled or executed for their testimony. The only logical way to explain their willingness to stick to their story even to death was because they were completely convinced He was alive.

Alright, so is there some way for Jesus to still be dead, but His followers to think He was alive? Could those same Jewish leaders who had wanted Jesus dead have had His body removed? Maybe they wanted to prevent the tomb from becoming a shrine for people who considered Jesus a martyr for some cause. Maybe... But once the disciples started spreading the word that Jesus rose from the dead, all they would have had to do to stop them dead in their tracks was produce His dead body. "Hey, guys—look over here!" But that's something the Jewish leaders were never able to do.

So we're stuck with the same problem—Jesus is obviously dead, His tomb is empty, and His followers are willing to die because they're convinced they saw Him alive again. Is there any possible explanation for that? One story held that Jesus had a twin. One of them died on the cross, then the other stepped in and

posed as the risen Jesus. But this runs into the same trouble as we've seen before—the second twin would have had to sneak past the guards into the tomb—without an accomplice—unwrap his twin brother's body and sneak it out past the guards again. Hardly plausible.

A theory that makes more sense to me is comatose Jesus. Back in the days before embalming there were plenty stories of coffins being opened and scratch marks found on the lids. Obviously those poor people were buried alive—could the same thing have happened to Jesus? What if He didn't really die on the cross, but fell into a swoon or coma instead? His pulse was undetectable so the Roman soldiers declared Him dead, took Him down, and buried Him in the tomb. Then in the cool air of the tomb over the next two days He revived.

Hmm, that makes some sense. Of course you have to wonder how Jesus could have found the strength to unwrap Himself after the brutal flogging He had received from the Roman soldiers (take a look at John 11:44—when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead Lazarus was unable to get free from his wrappings without some help.) And how in the world could He have rolled that massive stone up hill in its groove from the inside of the tomb? If He was standing outside I might be able to see him pushing against its side—really putting His full weight into it. But when you're standing inside the tomb what kind of grip could you possibly get on a giant stone?

Oh—I almost forgot—there's an even bigger problem that completely blows this story away. Before Jesus was taken down from the cross, the Roman soldiers presumed He was dead. But they had to be sure. So one of them thrust his spear deep into Jesus' side, piercing His heart. Nope, there's no reviving after that.

It looks like there's no reasonable, "natural" explanation for Jesus' tomb. Well, there was one other story that went around in ancient times—I hesitate to even mention it. The gardener did it! No, seriously, the gardener! John tells us, "Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. So because of the Jewish day of

Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there” (John 19:41-42).

According to this story, when Jesus’ followers started to visit Jesus’ tomb they kept trampling the gardener’s lettuce—no, I’m not making this up—this story really did spread! This gardener moved the body so they’d leave his lettuce patch alone. Of course, they kept trampling his lettuce to visit the empty tomb so that didn’t work out so well. Come to think of it, why didn’t he just show them where he HAD buried Jesus’ body? Then Jesus’ followers would have gone to THAT tomb and left his lettuce alone.

When you go through all the “logical” explanations for the empty tomb, you are left with just one possibility. Maybe the disciples were right, Jesus really did rise from the grave.

Listen to the words of the Bible, “He presented Himself alive to them after His suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). He walked with them (Luke 24:13-27), urged them to feel His body to know He wasn’t a ghost (Luke 24:39), invited them to touch the wounds in His hands and side (John 20:26-27), and ate in front of them (Luke 24:41-42).

One of Jesus’ followers named Paul listed the many witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection: “He appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve. Then He appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then He appeared to James [Jesus’ brother], then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared also to me” (1 Corinthians 15:5-8)

Death had won every battle it fought—until Jesus Christ came along. How can you explain that? Look at the Bible. It claims that Jesus was no ordinary human. He was the only Son of God the Father, the Creator of the heavens and the earth and all that exists (John 1:1-3).

In fact, when God created this world death did not exist. He created mankind to live with Him forever. But when the first humans, Adam and Eve, ate from a tree God had forbidden them to eat (Genesis 2:15-17), their disobedience (Genesis 3:1-19) brought death upon God's creation, upon themselves, and upon all of us their descendants.

Not a single one of us can escape aging and death. But God didn't abandon us to death—right after Adam and Eve sinned God promised to send His Son to become one of us and save us from death and make eternal life with Him possible again (Genesis 3:15).

That's why we Christians are so big on Christmas. God's Son became human and was born of the Mary the Virgin in a manger in Bethlehem. He lived a life of perfect obedience to His Father's will, and showed His power over death by raising at least three people from the dead (Matthew 9:18-27; Luke 7:11-17; John 11:1-46). Then He went to the cross to suffer for our disobedience. There He poured Himself out to death and satisfied God's justice so that we don't have to be punished for all the times we fail God.

On the cross He prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). He died on that cross and was buried. Three days later He overpowered death, rose to life again, and promised to return to earth again to raise all the dead and give eternal life to all who believe in Him.

After the death of His friend Lazarus, Jesus gave a promise which is especially meaningful today when we Christians celebrate Jesus' return to life: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die" (John 11:25-26).