

The Case of the Empty Tomb

**Searching for
the truth
about the
resurrection
of Jesus**



Josh McDowell

The Case Of The Empty Tomb

A view of the theories against the resurrection of Jesus
Josh McDowell

"The resurrection of Jesus Christ is one of the most wicked vicious, heartless hoaxes ever foisted upon the minds of men, or it is the most fantastic fact of history."



Does It Matter?

A student at the university of Uruguay once said to me: "Why can't you refute Christianity?" I answered: "For a very simple reason. I am not able to explain away an event in history - the resurrection of Jesus Christ".

The resurrection issue takes the question "Is Christianity relevant?" out of the realm of personal opinion and forces it to be a question of history. Is there sufficient evidence to justify belief in the resurrection?

Here are some widely accepted historical facts about Jesus:

- Jesus of Nazareth was a Jewish teacher who claimed to be the "Christ" (or "Messiah") prophesied in the Jewish Scriptures.
- He was arrested, judged a political criminal and crucified.
- Three days after his death and burial, some women who went to the tomb found the body gone.
- His disciples claimed that God had raised him from the dead. They also claimed that he had appeared to them several times before rising into heaven.

From this foundation, Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire. It has continued to have great influence ever since.

Did the resurrection actually happen? Was the tomb of Jesus really empty? Controversy over these questions continues to rage even today.

“I Was There!”

The New Testament accounts (Gospels) of the resurrection were written soon after the event. They were being passed around within the lifetimes of those alive when it happened. These people could certainly confirm or deny the accuracy of these accounts.



Those who wrote the Gospels had either been witnesses themselves or told what they had learned from eyewitnesses of the actual events. In presenting their case, the writers had appealed to common knowledge concerning the facts of the resurrection.¹

They stuck to their story even when up against their fiercest opponents. Those who were hostile to the Christians would have made it hard for them to stray far from the facts.

1. 2 Peter 1:16; 1 John 1:1-3; Acts 2:22; 26:24-26

Can We Trust The Bible?

The New Testament is our main historical source for information on the resurrection. Because of this, many 19th century critics attacked the reliability of these documents.

F.C. Bauer assumed that the New Testament Scriptures were not written until late in the second century A.D. He concluded that the stories were based on myths or legends. These would have developed during the long gap between the lifetime of Jesus and the time the accounts were written down.

Dig proves him wrong

By the end of the 19th century, however, archaeological discoveries had confirmed the accuracy of the New Testament manuscripts. Discoveries were made of early papyri manuscripts dating from soon after the time of Christ. Bauer's assumptions were shown to be wrong.

These findings increased confidence amongst the experts that the Bible was reliable. William Albright, one of the world's top biblical archaeologists, said:

"We can already say emphatically that there is no longer any solid basis for dating any book of the New Testament after about A.D. 80"²

2. Albright, William. **Recent Discoveries in Biblical Lands**, New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1955, p. 136

24,000 Manuscript Copies

Coinciding with the papyri discoveries, a mass of other manuscripts came to light. (Over 24,000 copies of early New Testament manuscripts are known to be in existence today.)³ This motivated Sir Frederick Kenyon, one of the leading authorities on the reliability of ancient manuscripts, to write:

“The interval then between the dates of original composition and the earliest extant evidence becomes so small as to be in fact negligible, and the last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established.”⁴

Facts not fiction

The historian and Gospel writer Luke wrote of “carefully investigating” the facts about Jesus.⁵ Sir William Ramsay spent 15 years attempting to undermine Luke’s credentials as a historian. He finally concluded:

“Luke is a historian of the first rank ... this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians.”⁶

3. McDowell, Josh. **Evidence That Demands a Verdict**, Campus Crusade for Christ International, Arrowhead Springs, San Bernardino, Calif. 1973. P. 46
4. Kenyon, Frederick G. **The Bible and Archaeology**, New York: Harper & Row, 1940, P. 288
5. Luke 1:1-3
6. Ramsay, Sir W. M. **The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament**, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915, p. 222

Dead and Buried

The New Testament witnesses knew the circumstances of the resurrection very well. The body of Jesus, in accordance with the Jewish custom of burial, was wrapped in a linen cloth. About 100 pounds of aromatic spices, mixed together to form a gummy substance, were applied to the wrappings of cloth about the body.⁷

After the body was placed in a solid rock tomb,⁸ an extremely large stone was rolled against the entrance of the tomb.⁹ Large stones weighing approximately two tons were normally rolled (by means of levers) against the tomb entrance.

In the case of Jesus' burial, a Roman guard of disciplined fighting men was stationed to guard the tomb. Fear of punishment "produce flawless attention to duty, especially in the night watch."¹⁰

This guard fixed on the tomb the Roman seal. a stamp of Roman power and authority.¹¹ The seal was meant to prevent any attempt at vandalizing the tomb. Anyone trying to move the stone from the tomb's entrance would have broken the seal. Such disregard for Roman law would be severely punished.



7. John 19:39,40

8. Matthew 27:60

9. Mark 16:4

10. Currie, George. **The Military Discipline of the Romans from the Founding of the City to the Close of the Republic**. An abstract of a thesis published under the auspices of the Graduate Council of Indiana University, 1928, pp. 41-43

11. Robertson, A. T. Word **Pictures in the New Testament**, New York; R. R. Smith, Inc., 1931, p. 239

The Empty Tomb

But the tomb was empty.

The followers of Jesus said he had risen from the dead. Over a period of 40 days he proved to them that he was alive.¹² Paul (another New Testament writer) claims that Jesus appeared to more than 500 of his followers at one time. The majority of these witnesses were still alive at the time and could confirm what Paul wrote.¹³

The empty tomb was too well known to be denied. Paul Althus argues that:

"[the resurrection] could not have been maintained in Jerusalem for a single day, for a single hour, if the emptiness of the tomb had not been established as a fact for all concerned."¹⁴



12. Acts 1:3

13. 1 Corinthians 15: 3-8

14. Althus, Paul. **Die Wahrheit des kirchlichen Osterglaubens**, pp 22,25ff

How can we explain the empty tomb? Can it possibly be accounted for by a natural cause?

Christians believe, based on overwhelming historical evidence, that Jesus was bodily resurrected in time and space by the supernatural power of God. The difficulties of belief may be great, but the problems involved in unbelief present even greater difficulties.

The theories put forward to explain the resurrection from natural causes are weak. Far from proving the resurrection could not have happened, they actually help to build confidence in the truth of the resurrection.



The Wrong Tomb?

A theory put forward by Kirsopp Lake assumed that the women who reported the body gone mistakenly went to the wrong tomb.

If so, the disciples who went to check up on the women's statement must have also gone to the wrong tomb. However, the Jewish authorities would not have been mistaken about the location. After all, they had asked for a Roman guard at the tomb to prevent the body being stolen. Nor would the Roman guards have got it wrong, for they were there!

The Jewish authorities would have lost no time in producing the body from the proper tomb. This would have squashed for all time any rumour of a resurrection.

Another attempted explanation claims that the appearances of Jesus after the resurrection were either illusions or hallucinations. This view is unsupported by the psychological principles governing the appearances of hallucinations. And again, where was the actual body, and why wasn't it produced?



Was Jesus Really Dead?

Popularised by Venturini several centuries ago, and often quoted today, the swoon theory says that Jesus didn't really die. It is argued that he merely fainted from exhaustion and loss of blood. Everyone thought he was dead, but later he revived in the cool tomb and the disciples thought he had risen from the dead.

"It is impossible that a being who had stolen half-dead out of the sepulchre... could have given the impression that he was a Conqueror over death"

The sceptic David Frederick Strauss - himself certainly no believer in the resurrection - gave the deathblow to any thought that Jesus revived from a swoon:

"It is impossible that a being who had stolen half-dead out of the sepulchre, who crept about weak and ill, wanting medical treatment, who required bandaging, strengthening and indulgence, and who still at last yielded to his sufferings, could have given to the disciples the impression that he was a Conqueror over death and the grave, the Prince of Life, an impression which lay at the bottom of their future ministry. Such a resuscitation could only have weakened the impression which he had made upon them in life and in death, at the most could only have given it an elegiac voice, but could by no possibility have changed their sorrow into enthusiasm, have elevated their reverence into worship."¹⁵

15. Strauss, David Frederick. **The Life of Jesus for the People**, Vol. 1, 2nd ed. London: Williams and Norgate, 1879, p.412

Did Someone Steal The Body?

Could the disciples have stolen the body while the guard slept?¹⁶

After Jesus' arrest and execution the disciples were depressed and afraid. It is highly unlikely that, in such a mood, they would suddenly become so brave and daring as to face the soldiers at the tomb and steal the body. They would then have had to lie to the world about what they had done.

A leading lawyer, J. N. D. Anderson, said of such an idea that: "This would run totally contrary to all we know of them: their ethical teaching, the quality of their lives... Nor would it begin to explain their dramatic transformation from dejected and dispirited escapist into witnesses whom no opposition could muzzle."¹⁷

Could the Jewish, or Roman authorities have moved Jesus' body? If that had happened, they could have silenced the disciples immediately. All they had to say was: "Wait! We moved the body - Jesus didn't rise from the grave," If they knew where it was, why didn't they recover the corpse, put it on a cart, and wheel it through the centre of Jerusalem? Such an action would have destroyed Christianity - not in the cradle, but in the womb!



16. Matthew 28:1-5

17. Anderson, J. N. D. **Christianity: The Witness of History**, copyright Tyndale Press, 1970. Used by permission of Inter-Varsity Press, Downers Grove Ill., p. 92

Did It Really Happen?

“I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better and fuller evidence.”

Professor Thomas Arnold was headmaster of Rugby and author of a famous three-volume History of Rome. He knew very well the value of evidence in determining historical facts.

He said, “I have been used for many years to study the histories of other times, and to examine and weigh the evidence of those who have written about them, and I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better and fuller evidence of every sort, to the understanding of a fair inquirer, than the great sign which God hath given us that Christ died and rose again from the dead.”¹⁸

Dr. Paul L. Maier, professor of ancient history at Western Michigan University, concludes that: “If all the evidence is weighed carefully and fairly, it is indeed justifiable, according to the canons of historical research, to conclude that the tomb in which Jesus was buried was actually empty on the morning of the first Easter. And no shred of evidence has yet been discovered in literary sources, epigraphy or archaeology that would disprove this statement.”¹⁹

18. **Sermons on the Christian Life - Its Hopes, Its Fears and Its Close**, 6th edition, London 1859, p. 324

19. **Independent, Press-Telegram**, Long Beach, Calif., Saturday April 21, 1973

Changed Lives

But the most telling testimony of all must be the lives of those early Christians. We must ask ourselves: What caused them to go everywhere telling the message of the risen Christ?

No one would give his life
for what he knows is a lie.

Had there been any obvious benefits to them as a result of their efforts - such as prestige, wealth, or other material benefits - we might point to these as the reason for their actions. Their total allegiance to this "risen Christ" might be easily explained.

As a reward for their efforts, however, these early Christians were beaten, tortured, thrown to the lions, stoned to death, crucified. Every conceivable method was used to try and stop them from talking.

Yet they were the most peaceful of men. They did not physically force their beliefs on anyone. Rather, they gave their lives as the ultimate proof of their complete confidence in the truth of their message.

A believer in Jesus Christ today can have complete confidence, as did those first Christians. His or her faith is based, not on myth or legend, but on the solid historical fact of the risen Christ and the empty tomb.

Most important of all, the individual believer can experience the power of the risen Christ in his or her life today. First of all, he can know that his sins are forgiven.²⁰ Second, he can be assured of eternal life and his own resurrection from the grave.²¹ Third, he can be released from a meaningless and empty life and be transformed into a new creature in Jesus Christ.²²

What will you make of the empty tomb? What will your decision be?



20. 1 Corinthians 15:3

21. 1 Corinthians 15:19-26

22. John 10:10; 2 Corinthians 5:17

“Now if the rising of Christ from the dead is the very heart of our message, how can some of you deny that there is any resurrection? For if there is no such thing as the resurrection of the dead, then Christ was never raised. And if Christ was not raised then neither our preaching nor our faith has any meaning at all. Further, it would mean that we are lying in our witness for God, for we have given our solemn testimony that he did raise up Christ - and that is utterly false if it should be true that the dead do not, in fact, rise again! For if the dead do not rise neither did Christ rise, your faith is futile and your sins have never been forgiven. Moreover those who have died believing in Christ are utterly dead and gone. Truly, if our hope in Christ were limited to this life only we should, of all mankind, be the most pitied!

But the glorious fact is that Christ did rise from the dead: he has become the very first to rise of all who sleep the sleep of death.”

Written by Paul of Tarsus to the Christians at Corinth
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