

The Empty Grave:

The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus

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Personally, I am convinced that no body of men or women could persistently and successfully have preached in Jerusalem a doctrine involving the vacancy of that tomb, without the grave itself being physically vacant. The facts were too recent; the tomb too close to that seething centre of oriental life. Not all the make-believe in the world could have purchased the utter silence of antiquity or given to the records their impressive unanimity. Only the truth itself, in all its unavoidable simplicity, could have achieved that.¹

As we approach the four Gospels, we read the recorded testimony of the Four Evangelists concerning the *empty grave*. Just a perusal of these Gospels alerts us to the candor and credibility of these writers.² Their writings refute the legends invented by those who wish to deny the Resurrection of Jesus. Perhaps, unconsciously the men who wrote the Gospels anticipated arguments against the *empty tomb*. The Four Gospels as well as other New Testament writings do not read like fiction or myth or legend.

J. P. Moreland (born 1948, American philosopher, theologian, and Christian apologist), in his first defense for the Christian faith with Kei Neilson (atheist), tells the story of a young Jewish convert to Christianity. **This individual came to saving faith because of his reading the Gospel of Luke from the Greek New Testament.** What is significant about this story is that this young man was convinced of the truthfulness of Christianity because Luke's Gospel had a ring of truth. His expertise was in the field of myths. Yet, when he actually read from the "common" Greek, he came to the conclusion that the story of Jesus is real, not mythology. The following citation is taken from this debate:

One more point about the historicity of the New Testament, and then I'll sit down. In my doctoral program, I was walking into the library one day, and I ran across a student who was reading the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament. I went over to him and I said, "What in the world are you

¹ Frank Morison, *Who Moved the Stone* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1930, 1969), 175. Morrison (1881-1950) was an English journalist who set out to prove that the story of Christ's resurrection was nothing but a myth. However, his probings led him to the point where he placed his faith in the risen Christ. His name was Albert Henry Rose—he chose Frank Morison as a pseudonym.

²For an in-depth study, see Dallas Burdette, "The Credibility and Candor of the New Testament Writers" in Dallas Burdette, *Biblical Preaching and Teaching: Jesus and Our Privileges*, Volume 1 (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2009), 144-166.

doing?” And he said, “I have a master’s degree from Harvard in business, and I have a master’s from UCLA in classics, and an undergraduate degree in classics from Harvard. I’m finishing my Ph.D. degree from UCLA in classics, and I was reading the Greek New Testament here recently.”

He was Jewish, and he went on to say, “I became a committed follower of Jesus of Nazareth. And I just wanted to come over here to USC because I knew there were Christian graduates students studying philosophy.” I asked, “**How did you become a Christian?**” He said, “**Dr. Moreland, I have studied myth most of my education. I know the earmarks of myth; that’s all I study. My undergraduate training was in mythology; my graduate training has been in mythology. And I was practicing Koine Greek reading the Gospel of Luke, and I got halfway through it, and as a Jew, I said, ‘My God, this man really did these things. What am I going to do? This is history. It reads like history. It doesn’t read like myth. I know what myth tastes like because all I do is read it, and that is not myth.’**”³ (Emphasis mine)

His Death and His Burial

Before we explore the evidence for the *empty grave*, we need to reflect upon the fact that the body of Jesus was buried. One individual stands out in all four Gospels, namely Joseph of Arimathea (âr’î-mâ-thē’â). Luke records information about this man and his actions toward the dead body of Jesus. He pens the following account:

Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man,⁵¹ **who had not consented to their decision and action.** He came from the Judean town of Arimathea and he was waiting for the kingdom of God.⁵² Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus’ body.⁵³ **Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid.**⁵⁴ It was Preparation Day, and the Sabbath was about to begin.⁵⁵ **The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it.**⁵⁶ Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment. (Luke 23:50-56)

Luke describes Joseph as a “member of the Council” as well as a “good and upright man.” He also took the body and placed it in a tomb with the permission of Pilate. Even though he was a member of the Sanhedrin (săn’hē-drĭn), he still did not consent to their decision and action to Crucify Jesus. Also, the women who had travelled with Jesus from Galilee saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it. Mark, a co-laborer of Paul and Peter, adds further information about this individual. Mark states that Joseph was “a prominent member of the Council” and, at the same time, he was himself waiting for “the kingdom of God” (Mark 15:43). Matthew draws notice that he was “a disciple of Jesus” and “a rich man” (Matthew 27:57).

On the other hand, John inserts more supplementary information. He states that **Joseph was a secret disciple** of Jesus for fear of the Jews (John 19:38). But Joseph was not alone in this venture of the burial of Jesus. John tells us that Nicodemus (the man who earlier had visited Jesus) assisted in the burial (19:39). John gives a brief description concerning the tomb and the location: “At the place where Jesus was Crucified, there was **a garden**, and in the garden **a new**

³J. P. Moreland and Kai Nielsen, *Does God Exist: The Great Debate* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990), 60.

tomb, in which no one had ever been laid” (19:41). Mark adds some extra details about the tomb and the burial:

So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and **placed it in a tomb cut out of rock**. Then **he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb**.⁴⁷ Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid. (Mark 15:46-47)

His tomb was a tomb “cut out of rock.” Joseph also had a stone rolled against the entrance to protect the burial of the Messiah. Neither Luke nor John mentions the stone. On the other hand, Matthew refers to the stone as a “big stone” (Matthew 27:60). He, too, puts in information about Mary Magdalene and the other Mary as “sitting there opposite the tomb” (27:61). Luke’s account is also informative about the women and the tomb:

The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and **saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it**.⁵⁶ Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment. (Luke 23:55-56)

The following comments by Sparrow Simpson (1859-1952, English clergyman) are extremely helpful in correlating the data about the details surrounding the *empty grave*:

These indications of the exact locality of the grave, this naming of the witnesses, both the men and the women, are particularly suggestive of the attention directed to the actual place of our Lord’s burial in the earliest tradition. Every detail is carefully attested. The fact of the death is verified through the Roman magistrate himself, who did not yield up the body until after ascertaining not only that Christ was dead, but that he had been some while dead. **There are witnesses throughout. The attendance at the funeral is known. The burial is witnessed by those who knew Him.** Disciples note particularly not only where, but even how His Body was laid.

So vivid are the simple details that we can realize the scene for ourselves. All this is important in view of the modern theories, which assure us that everything was in confusion at the burial of Christ, that no one knew exactly in which grave among many the Body had been placed and that a very natural mistake of one burial-place for another led to the assertion that the grave was empty.

These painful perversions are only mentioned here to show that negative criticism is compelled to ignore the Gospel tradition and write a new account if it would give stability to its own theories. The concurrent testimony of the Four Evangelists, while revealing the affection which gathered at the Master’s grave, has unconsciously anticipated and refuted the legends invented in the nineteenth century.⁴ (Emphasis mine)

⁴W. J. Sparrow Simpson, *Our Lord’s Resurrection* (New York and Bombay: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1905), 83-84. The genesis of my essay is from his chapter entitled “The Empty Grave.” I am indebted to him for such an insightful essay.

Reflections on the Empty Grave

The Resurrection of Jesus is essential to the belief that the grave was vacated. If He had not risen, His disciples would not have found the grave empty. One of the earliest documents concerning the *empty grave* is found in Paul's Epistle to the Christians in Corinth (written about AD 55 from Ephesus):⁵

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that **he was buried**, that **he was raised** on the **third day** according to the Scriptures. (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

Paul said that Christ died, was buried, and was raised. He was conscious that the grave was empty on Sunday morning. About two years after writing First Corinthians, he wrote to the Christians in Rome (about AD 57 from Corinth) concerning Jesus' Resurrection: "If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in **his resurrection**" (Romans 6:5). Again, he asserts the *empty grave*. In six verses (1 Corinthians 15:3-8), he sets forth six appearances of the Risen Lord. This epitomized account of the witnesses reveals that it was not his intention to give a detail list of all those who witnessed the *empty tomb* or who had contact with the Risen Jesus. In this brief account, he limited himself to the positive evidence for the various manifestation of the Resurrected Christ.

Paul asserts that "last of all he appeared to me" (15:8). On the Day of Pentecost (fifty days after Jesus' Resurrection), Peter, who had actually visited the tomb and found it empty (Luke 24:10-12), testified to over three thousand concerning the *empty tomb* (Acts 2:41). In his discourse, he cited from Psalm 16:8-10 to prove that David (reigned from 1010-970 BC) had foretold the Resurrection of Jesus one thousand years earlier. Let us listen in on a short section of his speech:

Men of Israel, listen to this: **Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know.**

²³ This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. ²⁴ But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. ²⁵

David said about him: "**I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.** ²⁶ **Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will live in hope,** ²⁷ **because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay.**

²⁸ **You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.**"

²⁹ **Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day.** ³⁰ But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. ³¹ **Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay.** ³² **God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact.** (Acts 2:22-33)

⁵For an in-depth study of Paul's conversion to Jesus the Messiah, see Dallas Burdette, "Paul's Conversion: Apologetic for Christianity" in Dallas Burdette, *Biblical Preaching and Teaching: Jesus Our Privileges*, Volume 2, 92-120.

Peter, an eyewitness, said that Jesus “was not abandoned to the grave.” Paul, too, addressed this same issue to those in Pisidian Antioch. Luke reports a section of his speech concerning Jesus’ Resurrection, which Resurrection testifies to the *empty grave*:

For when David had served God’s purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed. ³⁷ But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay. (13:36-37)

Matthew, too, gives additional information about the reason assigned for the *empty grave* by the religious leaders concerning the guards’ report. He writes:

While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. ¹² When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, ¹³ telling them, “You are to say, ‘His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ ¹⁴ If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” ¹⁵ So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day. (Matthew 28:11-15)

Is this story about Jesus’ disciples stealing the body credible? No! Guards were placed at the tomb to prevent the body from being stolen by His disciples. For instance, Matthew reports the news about a secret meeting between the religious leaders and Pilate over the security of the tomb. Matthew unfolds this meeting as he brings his account of the life of Jesus to a close:

The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. ⁶³ “Sir,” they said, “we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise again.’” ⁶⁴ So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first.” ⁶⁵ “Take a guard,” Pilate answered. “Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how.” ⁶⁶ So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard. (27:62-66)

At the time of Matthew’s Gospel (probably written around AD 60), the story of His disciples having stolen the body was still prevalent after twenty or more years (depending on the date of Matthew’s Gospel). Also, the accusations against His disciples by the Jews take for granted that the grave was empty. The Christian explanation for the *empty grave* surrounded the Resurrection. On the other hand, the Jews’ answer maintained that His disciples stole the body. What about the story of the guards? The assumption lying behind the story of the guards meant that the grave was really vacant. **Believers as well as unbelievers testified to the emptiness of the grave.**

The “state of mind” of His disciples would go against the accusations by the Jews that the disciples stole the body. Following the Crucifixion and burial, we witness their discouragement and the incredulity with which they met the testimony of the women who testified that the grave is empty. **Just a perusal of written testimony from the Four Evangelists does not allow the theory that the disciples plotted to steal the body.** Even if the disciples wanted to remove the body, the guards would have prevented this action. Yet, we are confronted with the question:

who would have profited by stealing the body? The Sanhedrin wanted the body to stay in the grave. On the other hand, the disciples thought everything went down the drainpipe with the death of Jesus. Their hopes of the restoration of Israel were shattered.

The disciples were not looking for a resurrected Christ. On the morning of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and another Mary went to the grave to anoint the body of Jesus (see Mark 16:1-2), not to steal the body. Oskar Holtzmann's (1859-1934, German theologian and critic of the biblical account of the Resurrection) confession about the women and the empty tomb is quite revealing concerning the women not being able to anoint the body of Jesus: "And there is no reason to doubt that the women could not carry out their purpose, simply because they found the grave empty."⁶ Matthew gives the following account about the missing body:

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, **Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.**² There was a violent earthquake, for an **angel** of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, **rolled back the stone and sat on it.**³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow.⁴ The **guards** were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.⁵ The angel said to the women, "**Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.**"⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you." (Matthew 28:1-7)

Following this episode with an angel (28:2), these women met Jesus on their way to relate the message to His Apostles. In this meeting, Jesus told them not to be afraid (28:10) and to go tell His disciples to meet Him in Galilee (28:10). John, one of the Twelve, also gives additional proof that the disciples did not steal the body. After the women discovered the body gone, they returned to the city to inform Peter and John about the missing body. Even after the women had an earlier encounter with the Risen Lord, still this did not register with them concerning the missing body. We should listen in on the words of John concerning the bewilderment of the disciples about this news:

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.² **So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"**³ So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb.⁴ Both were running, but **the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.**⁵ He bent over and **looked in at the strips of linen lying there** but did not go in.⁶ Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. **He saw the strips of linen lying there,**⁷ as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. **The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen.**⁸ Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed.⁹ **(They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)** [John 20:1-9]

Apparently, at this time, the women did not know about the meeting of the religious leaders with Pilate concerning the security of the tomb (Matthew 27:62-66). Upon arrival of the

⁶Oskar Holtzmann, *The Life of Jesus*, translated by J. T. Bealby and Maurice A. Canney (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1905), 497.

women at the grave site, they saw the guards (Matthew 28:1-7). They must have assumed that the guards had removed the body. John writes:

So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “**They have taken the Lord out of the tomb**, and we don’t know where they have put him!” (John 20:2).

The point is, the grave was empty. **John places an emphasis upon the grave clothes without the presence of the body.** If the body had been stolen, one wonders why the body snatchers would have taken the time to unwrap the body. When John saw the linen clothes and did not see the body of Jesus, he believed.

Luke, a missionary with Paul, also relates this story with additional information concerning Peter’s response. For example, he calls attention to the *grave clothes* as well as Peter’s reaction to the *empty tomb*. He pens the following scenario: “Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, **he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves**, and he went away, **wondering to himself what had happened**” (Luke 24:12). Even after seeing this evidence, he simply went away “wondering to himself what had happened.” Luke also gives us more background about the absent body and their unbelief concerning the Resurrection. Once more, we should tune in our ears to Luke’s account of the two men (both were disciples of Christ) on the Emmaus Road:

Now that same day [day of His Resurrection] two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. ¹⁴ They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. ¹⁵ **As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them;** ¹⁶ but they were kept from recognizing him. ¹⁷ He asked them, **“What are you discussing together as you walk along?” They stood still, their faces downcast.** ¹⁸ One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, “Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?” ¹⁹ “What things?” he asked. “About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. ²⁰ **The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him;** ²¹ but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, **it is the third day since all this took place.** ²² In addition, **some of our women amazed us.** They went to the tomb early this morning ²³ **but didn’t find his body.** They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. ²⁴ **Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.**” (24:13-24)

Within this scenario, we do not witness collusion or conspiracy on the part of the disciples to steal the body. The *empty grave* shocked all of them. Following this encounter with Cleopas (klē’ō-pās) and another unnamed disciple, Jesus rebuked them for their unbelief in refusing to accept what the prophets had spoken concerning His Resurrection (24:25-27). We have ample testimony that His disciples investigated the *empty grave*.

CONCLUSION

The *empty grave* is demonstrated by the accumulative evidence of the various witnesses who visited the tomb. Yet, **the empty tomb did not create within them the belief that Jesus had actually risen from the grave to life.** Just a perusal of some of the witnesses verifies this conclusion. For example, the *empty grave* did not convince Mary Magdalene, the other women,

or Peter of the Resurrection. **The Resurrection (Easter faith) did not spring from the *empty grave*, but rather from the self-manifestation of the risen Lord, which manifestations occurred over a forty-day period following His Resurrection.**⁷ Luke, a physician and evangelist, wrote two books (Acts and Luke) addressed to the “most excellent Theophilus” concerning his findings about the historical Jesus:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³ Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4)

⁷For more in-depth studies of the Resurrection and the empty grave, I recommend William Milligan, *The Resurrection of Our Lord* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1881) and Thomas Sherlock, *The Trial of the Witnesses of the Resurrection of Jesus* (London: John Eliot, 1809). I have read both books very carefully and found these two books extremely informative.