

# THE EMPTY TOMB

## *Evaluating the Evidence for the Resurrection*

Jesus promised us in John 14:19: “Because I live, you also will live.” Christianity stands or falls on the validity of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Is there any good evidence for the resurrection? Or, are we required to just take a blind leap of faith? While Christians live by faith, it doesn’t necessarily follow that there are no facts to substantiate our faith. I believe there is solid evidence to support the historical event of the resurrection of Jesus and ground our faith.

“He is not here; he has risen, just as he said,” so said the angel to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary at the discovery of the empty tomb that first Easter morning (Matt. 28:6). Since the first century AD, Christians have believed that the tomb in which Jesus was buried was found vacant three days later, because He rose from the dead. Those who reject the resurrection of Christ have to explain why the tomb was empty. Let me address three of the most common explanations and you judge for yourself where the evidence seems to point.

First, the tomb was empty because the disciples stole the body. This was the first story told to account for the empty tomb (Matt. 28:12-15). This theory is weak. The tomb was well-guarded by the Romans to prohibit just such a theft from occurring (Matt. 27:62-66). During the time of Christ, the Roman empire was supreme because of its military dominance. A Roman guard unit was a four to sixteen men security force. It is highly doubtful that eleven disciples, who were scared and hiding from the authorities, over-powered trained soldiers.

It is postulated that maybe the soldiers fell asleep or left their post. A list of offenses which required the death penalty for Roman guards included desertion, losing one’s weapon, refusing to protect an officer, insulting a general, leaving the night watch and falling asleep. With a death penalty hanging over their heads, these soldiers did not fall asleep or leave their post, allowing the disciples to steal the body. The guards left the tomb because a violent earthquake took place; an angel rolled back the stone blocking the entrance (revealing an empty tomb) and frightened the guards with his appearance like lightning (Matt. 28:2-4).

Second, the tomb was empty because the disciples went to the wrong tomb. This theory presupposes that the disciples believed that Jesus rose from the dead because His tomb was empty, but they were simply confused and went to the wrong tomb. Hogwash. The Bible clearly states that Jesus was buried in a tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea. Pilate gave him Jesus’ body, and he laid it in his own tomb (Lk.23:50-53). Joseph knew where his own tomb was. Nicodemus, who accompanied Joseph, knew where the tomb was (Jn 19:38-40). “Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid” (Mk.15:47). The Roman guards knew which tomb to guard. Just about everybody and their mother knew where the tomb was. If the disciples went to the wrong tomb because the authorities moved Jesus’ body without their knowledge, all they had to do was produce the body, and Christianity would have died before birth.

Third, the tomb was empty because Jesus never actually died. This is known as the swoon theory, which is like going into a coma without finally dying. Muslims hold this view because it is taught in the Koran: “they did not kill him, neither did they crucify him, it only seemed to be so” (*Sura*, 4.156). This theory denies Jesus’ resurrection by denying His death on the cross. However, the soldiers thought He was dead (Jn.19:33), and, just to be certain, “one of the soldiers pierced Jesus’ side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water” (vs. 34). The “blood and water” is described by C. Truman Davis as “an escape of watery fluid from the sac surrounding the heart. We, therefore, have rather conclusive post-mortem evidence that [Christ] died, not the usual crucifixion death by suffocation, but of heart failure due to shock and constriction of the heart by fluid in the pericardium” (quoted in Josh McDowell, *The Resurrection Factor*, p. 48). Christ clearly died and, therefore, the empty tomb can not be explained away by saying Jesus swooned and then recovered. The only argument that adequately explains why the tomb was empty is that Jesus, indeed, rose from the dead on the third day.

Shortly after that first Easter the cowering disciples were willing to die for the message: “God has raised this Jesus to life” (Acts 2:32). The only plausible explanation for this radical transformation is “Then [Jesus] appeared to James, then to all the apostles” (1 Cor. 15:7). As a result of seeing the resurrected Savior, their fear subsided and from this point on they would be characterized by atypical boldness.

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