

Was The Tomb Really Empty?¹

“If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain” (1 Cor 15:14). For Christians, the resurrection of Jesus constitutes the cornerstone and foundation of the faith. Apart from the resurrection there is no gospel, no “good news,” no eternal hope. Yet the Bible assures us “that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures.”

We live in a world of skepticism and doubt. Modern people today routinely deny and reject the Christian claim that Jesus rose from the dead. But they should not doubt that claim because it is true.

The entire Christian faith hinges on the reality of one historical event—Jesus’ resurrection. He predicted his death and resurrection, he claimed to be the resurrecting and the life (Jn 11:25), and he announced that he would lay down his life and take it up again (Jn 10:18). Christians have good reasons to believe these claims.

Christians support the historicity, the “true fact” nature of the resurrection. The facts of the case are on our side. Belief in the resurrection of Jesus is both biblical and reasonable.

Many people don’t believe in Jesus’ resurrection because they don’t *want* to believe it. If it is true, the resurrection verifies Jesus’ claims. And if Jesus is whom he claims to be, then those who deny it are in serious trouble. People often deny the resurrection because they don’t want it to be true, not because it lacks historical evidence.

This morning I’d like to consider the question, Was the Tomb Really Empty?

¹ Some of this material from an article by Robert Stein, *JETS* 20:1 (Winter 1977). Edited/modified.

Arguments for the Resurrection of Christ

1. The most significant proof for the resurrection in the NT is the appearances of Jesus alive after his death. Jesus appeared after his death and burial to multitudes of people. Scripture records at least ten post-resurrection appearances to several hundred people altogether.

Acts 1:3 [Jesus] presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.

Let's look at a list of the people who saw Jesus after the resurrection:

- A. Mary Magdalene was the very first one to see Jesus after his resurrection (Jn 20:11-18).
- B. The women who came early to the tomb saw him (Mt 28:9-10).
- C. Peter saw Jesus shortly thereafter (Lk 24:34; 1 Cor 15:5)
- D. The eleven disciples saw him on multiple occasions (Jn 20:19-25)
- E. The two men on the road to Emmaus saw him (Lk 24:34).
- F. James, Jesus' brother, saw him at some point.
- G. Over 500 people saw Jesus on one occasion.
- H. Paul saw Jesus on the road to Damascus and several times after that.

What is the natural explanation of all of these appearance of Jesus after his death? According to multiple eyewitnesses who saw him at various times and places, Jesus rose from the dead. This is the uniform testimony of the eye witnesses.

Even secular, critical historians cannot deny the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was executed by the Romans around 33 AD. They also cannot deny that many people claimed that Jesus rose from the dead. These are some of the most well-attested facts of history.

2. A second argument that goes right along with the first is the witness of the empty tomb. How do we explain the empty tomb?

a. First, we should note that several people verified that the tomb was empty.

- i. Mary and the other women came to the tomb and found it empty.
- ii. Peter and John ran to the tomb and found it empty.
- iii. Even Jesus' enemies admitted that the tomb was empty; they did not deny that claim.

The Jewish leaders came up a fictional explanation of the empty tomb—they claimed that the disciples stole Jesus' body while the guards were sleeping. They would not have needed that explanation if the tomb were not empty.

b. Skeptics or critics have tried to explain the empty tomb in several ways.

- i. Perhaps the women went to the wrong tomb. In their confusion and emotional trauma, they forgot the location of the tomb where they had placed Jesus. They found a different tomb empty.

But remember that the women had already been to the tomb. They were there on Friday afternoon when they prepared Jesus' body for burial. They were unable to finish the job before the Sabbath began; that's why they had to come back to the tomb early on Sunday morning. The tomb was in a well-known location not far from the place of Jesus' crucifixion. So there's no way that they went to the wrong tomb.

- ii. Another potential, skeptics suggest, is that the disciples took the body of Jesus. The disciples knew that Jesus had promised to rise again, and when he did not, they stole his body and claimed that he had risen.

However, the disciples were not expecting the resurrection. They were surprised to find the tomb empty. They denied Jesus' resurrection and doubted it until it became undeniable. And almost all of the disciples were willing to suffer and die for their belief in Jesus' resurrection. If this were all an elaborate hoax, the disciples would not have been willing to die for a claim they knew was false.

- iii. Some skeptics claim that maybe Joseph of Arimathea stole the body of Jesus. He was a secret disciple, and Jesus was laid in Joseph's tomb, so maybe he was able to get in there and take the body.

That's an interesting theory, but it has no historical basis whatsoever. How did he get past the guards? How did he roll the stone away? There is simply no evidence of that and it's ridiculous on its face.

- iv. Maybe the gardener removed the body of Jesus and placed it elsewhere. For unknown reasons, the gardener removed the body and kept silent even after the story of the resurrection started circulating.

What about the guards and the large stone and the official seal? A lowly gardener would risk his life by fighting the guards, ripping open the seal, rolling the stone away, and taking Jesus' body—for no particular purpose? Sounds highly unlikely and unreasonable. And there's no evidence for that.

- c. How else can you explain these claims that Jesus rose again? Maybe there is some other explanation.

- ⊗ Perhaps the disciples *thought* they saw the risen Jesus, but they really did not. According to this view, the disciples had hallucinations or visions of Jesus after his death. The disciples imagined that they saw Jesus and that was enough for them to declare that Jesus was alive. It was a mass hallucination. They were seeing things; they were mentally deranged and deluded.

- ⊗ Perhaps the confused and emotionally distraught disciples mistook an unknown man for Jesus. One of them saw someone who they thought looked like Jesus; they mistook another person for him. They saw someone who looked like Jesus or whom they thought was Jesus, but he was not Jesus. It was all a simple case of mistaken identity.

You may remember that Jesus appeared to the eleven disciples after the resurrection and invited them to verify that it was actually him. Remember that Thomas was highly doubtful, yet he became convinced by the evidence. There could be no confusion about the identity of this man.

- ⊗ Or perhaps Jesus did not really die on the cross but merely “swooned.” He passed out; he was unconscious; he almost died, but revived in the cool of the tomb, pushed aside the stone, overcame the guards, and escaped.

However, you may recall that a Roman guard pierced Jesus’ heart with a spear. The Roman soldiers who took him off the cross were convinced he was dead. Several people handled the body of Jesus, and they were convinced that he was dead. The claim is that he revived, pushed away the stone, overcame the guards, and then ran away—after a severe flogging, crucifixion, and a spear through the heart? That is totally unbelievable and unreasonable.

All such attempts to explain the empty tomb are ridiculous and totally unrealistic. The only satisfactory explanation of the fact of the empty tomb is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Nothing else makes sense or has any evidence.

The easiest way to defeat Christianity before it got started would have been to display the dead body of Jesus after the claim that he had risen. But that’s the very thing that nobody did because nobody had the dead body of Jesus. The tomb was empty and nobody could produce the body because Jesus had risen and was no longer occupying the tomb.

3. Another argument in support of the resurrection is the existence of the Church. How do we explain the existence of the Church without the resurrection of Jesus?
 - a. Remember that after Jesus' death, the disciples were a dispirited, fearful group. They were not expecting Jesus to rise again. Thomas, in particular, was highly skeptical of any such claims. All the disciples were skeptical when they first heard that Jesus had risen. The only reason that Thomas and the others believed it was that they could not deny it once they saw Jesus for themselves. They verified these claims personally and experientially.
 - b. The church began with the preaching of Jesus' resurrection (Acts 2:24-32). The early Christians met together "with gladness" because of the resurrection. The very existence of the Church witnesses to the fact of the resurrection.
 - c. Along those same lines: How do we explain the conversion of Paul, the church's greatest missionary? His personal experience with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9) is the only explanation for the conversion of this passionate, hostile Jew into a fervent, faithful advocate of the church.

Without Jesus' resurrection, we would have neither the church nor its greatest advocate/proponent.
4. Jesus' resurrection is the central claim of the Christian faith. In 1 Cor 15:1-8, where Paul defines and explains the Christian gospel, he claims that Jesus rose from the dead and was seen multiple times by multitudes of people. The resurrection is always included when the apostles proclaim the Gospel. There could be no apostolic preaching of the Gospel of Jesus unless the tomb was in fact empty.

The Christian message is not merely a set of moral rules. The Gospel is not even the teachings of Christ. The Christian message pertains to the person and work of Christ. Christian faith is in Christ himself and what he did. If you take Jesus' resurrection out of Christianity, you no longer have the Christian faith.

5. The change in the day of worship strongly argues for the resurrection. Up until this time, the Jews worshipped on the Sabbath—Friday sundown to Saturday sundown. Yet we see that the day of worship was changed; Christians started meeting on Sunday, the first day of the week—not the Jewish Sabbath. Why did that change happen?

The resurrection happened on the first day of the week. In commemoration of that fact, the early Church started worshiping on Sunday (cf. Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2; Rev 1:10). Sunday became the Lord's Day. Only a monumental event like the resurrection could have changed the day of worship for a bunch of faithful Jews.

6. The earliest confession of the Christian message centers on the resurrection of Jesus. The oldest Christian tradition we possess that speaks of the resurrection is probably 1 Corinthians 15:3–7.

3 For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; 4 And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: 5 And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: 6 After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. 7 After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles.

It is virtually certain that Paul here is quoting a confession of the early Church. This confession specifically states that Christ died, was buried, and rose again. Paul likely received his information from the apostles themselves, and their information is, of course, first-hand.

Some think this confession of the church arose within months of Jesus' death and resurrection. It is likely to be the earliest expression of a Christian creed (i.e., statement of belief). And it clearly claims that many hundreds of people saw Jesus after the resurrection. And this is the oldest and most certain information available regarding these events. This information comes to us from multiple eyewitnesses who all say the same thing. Thus, the earliest records available, likely coming from mere months after the events happened, strongly claim that Jesus rose from the dead. That claim did not develop over time; it's not legendary/mythological. That claim is the earliest affirmation of the Christian faith, and it very likely stems from a time mere months after the events.

Early reporting means that there was no time for legends or myths to develop; the eyewitnesses were still living and could correct false accounts. The reports about Jesus' resurrection have all the marks of authenticity. Given the historical facts, the best explanation is that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified by the Roman authorities, buried in a borrowed tomb, and rose from the dead on the third day.

Several Arguments Regarding the Empty Tomb

1. The story of the empty tomb is found in all four gospels. The variation in the different narratives of the empty tomb argues that these accounts stem from separate and independent reports, all of which witness to the tomb's being empty. Eyewitnesses made these claims, and these claims were recorded not long after the historical events happened.
2. The fact that the first witnesses to the empty tomb were women argues for the historical accuracy of the report. The Jews typically did not put much stock in the witness of women. If the story of the resurrection were legendary, the creators of that legend never would have made women the first witnesses of that event. The fact that women were the first witnesses strongly suggests that this is not a legendary account; it's historically accurate.
3. The Jewish religious leaders did not refute the claim of his resurrection; they did not deny that the tomb was empty and that Jesus' body was missing. They sought to explain the empty tomb in other ways, but they did not dispute the claim that the tomb was empty.

4. The reference to Joseph of Arimathea indicates that the tomb in which Jesus was buried was well known (cf. Mark 15:43–46; Matt 27:57–60; Luke 23:50–53; John 19:38–42). It is simply unbelievable that the women or the disciples went to the wrong tomb. Did the angels go to the wrong tomb?

All of this goes to show that we have very good reasons to believe that Jesus rose from the dead. The Bible teaches it as a historical fact. Even sources outside the Bible point to the fact that Jesus rose from the dead. So the Bible, logic, and history all point to the fact that Jesus rose from the dead.

Question: If a skeptic is convinced from the historical record that Jesus really rose from the dead, does that make him a Christian? He cannot deny that the resurrection is a fact of history—is he now saved? No, belief *that* Jesus arose is not the same as belief *in* Jesus as one's Lord and Savior. Acknowledging the facts of history does not amount to saving faith. One may believe the facts without yielding to Christ as Lord (Rom 10:9). Even the demons believe the historical facts of the Gospel (James 2:19). One must believe in Christ (John 1:12) and trust in him as Lord and Savior to receive eternal life.

People often refuse to believe in Jesus even if they are convinced that he rose from the dead. They might deny that Jesus' resurrection verifies his claims to be the Messiah. They might claim that Jesus' resurrection was a fluke of nature. They might come up with all kinds of explanations for the resurrection without believing in Jesus for salvation.

A good question to ask is, "If Christianity were true, would you believe it?" Or, "If Jesus really rose from the dead, would you believe in him?"

The unbeliever denies the Gospel because he does not want to submit to Jesus as his Lord and Savior. He does not deny the Gospel because there is no evidence for Jesus' resurrection. He denies it, ultimately, because he hates God and wants to fulfill his own appetites without accountability.

I think it's important that we are assertive and confident in our proclamation that the Gospel is true. Jesus truly was crucified, buried, and resurrected. This is not merely religious language; it's not mythology or legend. It's not even a doubtful claim. We have very good reason to believe the true-fact nature of this historical event.

Today we are loudly proclaiming a fact of history—Jesus rose from the dead. The resurrection of Christ proves that Jesus is whom he claims to be.

Romans 1:4 *[Jesus is] declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead.*

Romans 4:25 *[Jesus] was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.*

Jesus' resurrection is the basis of our salvation. If he did not rise again, we are "of all men most miserable." But now Christ is risen from the dead (1 Cor 15:20), and he provides salvation to all those who believe in him.

The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation (Rom 1:16) and when we proclaim the good news, some will believe that Jesus rose again, and they will confess him as Lord and Savior.

What caused the tomb to be empty on that Sunday morning almost 2000 years ago? The simplest explanation is exactly what the Bible teaches—Christ has risen from the dead! The tomb could not hold him. Christ has risen indeed. And because he lives, all those who trust in the person and work of Christ alone for salvation shall live.