
the stone from the door, and sat on it." The Roman soldiers were so frightened that they fainted and then fled. The angel told the women Jesus "is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay" (Mt. 28:2-6).

The only other explanation for the empty tomb, offered by the Jews, was Jesus' disciples came by night and stole the body as the Roman soldiers slept. Matthew reports the Jews bribed the frightened guards to repeat this story and promised to intercede if Pilate heard of their dereliction of duty (Mt. 28:11-15).

But the Jews' explanation miserably fails. For the Romans to sleep on duty and/or flee their post would have brought a death sentence upon them. A few Jewish men would not have terrified them into deserting their post and death. Matthew's explanation accounts for their terror and willingness to face death rather than remain at the tomb.

Even if we assume all the Roman guards were asleep before the tomb, a band of disciples could not have stolen Jesus' body. To get to Jesus' entombed body, several strong men would have been needed to move the "exceeding great stone" from before the door. Such an effort would have made considerable noise and quickly awakened the Romans who would have arisen to fight not flee. But even if the disciples moved the stone and entered the tomb, how could they have remained quiet and taken time to remove linen wrappings and spices adhered to Jesus' body while armed Roman guards slept outside the tomb just steps away? Why would they have done so?

The Results of the Empty Tomb

The disciples of Jesus who saw and heard of the empty tomb did not immediately believe Jesus was resurrected. The women who first encountered the empty tomb and heard the angel announce Jesus was risen were amazed, astonished and frightened (Mk. 16:5-8; Lk. 24:5). One woman, Mary, even after this initially believed Jesus' body was taken. She wept "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him" and asked "tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away" (Jn. 20:2, 11-15).

The report of these women to the 11 apostles "seemed to them like idle tales, and they did not believe them" (Lk. 24:11). Peter and John raced to the empty tomb and saw the empty grave clothes and believed, but still did not understand (Jn. 20:3-10). That first day the disciples confirmed the tomb was empty by their visit but did not believe he was risen because "but Him they did not see" (Lk. 24:22-24).

This initial skepticism gave way as Jesus appeared to his disciples. Thomas was absent when

Jesus first appeared to his apostles and refused to believe. A week later Jesus again appeared and Thomas was present. Thomas declared, "My Lord and my God!" (Jn. 20:19-29). In 56 A.D., Paul wrote that Jesus had appeared to over 500 people most of them still alive (1 Cor. 15:6).

Fifty days later, the change in Jesus' disciples was dramatic. From fearfully hiding from the Jews behind shut doors (Jn. 20:19), the disciples boldly stood in the temple and publicly proclaimed the Jews "have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death (Jesus); whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it" (Acts 2:23-24). They kept proclaiming this message even under threat of imprisonment and death (Acts 4:17-21; 5:28-33, 40-41).

The explanation of the empty tomb was given by David over 1,000 years before. David said, "Moreover my flesh also will rest in hope. For You will not leave my soul in Hades, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption" (Psa. 16:9-10). Peter explained this promise of a resurrection before the corruption of the body could not be David because he was "dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day" (Acts 2:29). David's tomb was not empty and David's body still lay within. But Jesus' tomb was empty and his body was not there. David, "foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that 'His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption.' This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses" (Acts 2:31-32).

Both of these tombs lay within a short distance from where Peter stood in the temple. His audience could easily view the empty tomb firsthand and many had likely done so. They were convinced the tomb of Jesus was emptied by the power of God in resurrecting Jesus (Rom. 1:4). About 3,000 repented and were baptized to receive remission of sins and the promise to partake in the resurrection of life (Acts 2:37-41).

Jesus' tomb was emptied for you. God "has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Pet. 1:3). "But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ... Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming" (1 Cor. 15:20, 23). To share in this resurrection you must be "buried with Him through baptism into death... For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection" (Rom. 6:4-5).

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**"He is not here; for He is risen,
as He said. Come, see the
place where the Lord lay."**

Matthew 28:6

The Empty Tomb



Wayne Greeson

The Empty Tomb



The tomb was empty. It was located just a short walk outside the city walls of Jerusalem, the populous center of the Jewish people. Only hours before it held the body of Jesus of Nazareth. The Roman seal had been broken, the large stone that had blocked the entrance was rolled away and the Roman guard had fled in terror. Both Jesus' disciples and his enemies were agreed Jesus had died upon the cross, his body prepared for burial and placed in a new tomb.

Why on the third day was the tomb empty? What happened to the body of Jesus? Two possible explanations were given. Jesus' enemies, who had conspired to put him to death, claimed his disciples had stolen his body (Mt. 28:11-15). His disciples boldly declared a very different answer, Jesus had resurrected from the dead (Acts 2:24-32).

Human history hinges upon the answer to the empty tomb. If Jesus rose from the dead then his claim to be the Christ, the Son of God was vindicated and verified (Rom. 1:4). Further, his resurrection foreshadows the resurrection to life of all who believe and obey him (1 Cor. 15:23). How was the tomb emptied?

Jesus' Burial

No one doubted Jesus had died upon the cross. His death was a public execution by crucifixion. His disciples, his enemies, the Jewish leaders and all of Jerusalem who walked outside the city to Golgotha had witnessed his death. The Roman soldiers discharged their duty with efficiency making sure Jesus was dead even to the point that one soldier thrust a spear into the side of Jesus' lifeless body (Jn. 19:31-37).

As evening came, a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish council, Joseph of Arimathea, asked Pilate, the Roman governor, for Jesus' body that he might properly prepare and bury it. Joseph, a man of honorable character, was also a disciple of Jesus, albeit a secret disciple for fear of the Jews (Lk. 23:50-52; Jn. 19:38-38). Pilate was surprised Jesus was already dead. Before granting Joseph's request, he asked the centurion in charge of Jesus' execution and who had witnessed Jesus' death, whether Jesus was truly dead and the centurion confirmed it (Mk. 15:39, 44-45).

Nicodemus, another man of high rank and character, assisted Joseph in removing Jesus' body from the cross, wrapping it in a clean linen cloth and carry-

ing it to a new tomb. This was Joseph's own tomb, newly hewn out of rock, unused in a garden near Golgotha (Jn. 19:39-42; Mt. 27:59-60; Isa. 53:9). The hewn rock tomb precluded anyone from digging a back entrance into the tomb to steal the body. Only one body in the tomb avoided a mix-up or mistaken identity.

Following Jewish custom, the men wrapped the body with linen cloths and a mixture of spices and ointments, myrrh and aloes, weighing about 72 pounds as a preservative and a pleasing aroma (Jn. 19:39-40). The spices would adhere the linen to itself and to the body. When the tomb was discovered empty, these linen cloths were left lying and the cloth placed upon Jesus' head was lying separately rolled up like the ring of a turban without a head to support it (Lk. 24:12; Jn. 20:5-8). Why steal Jesus' body yet take the time to remove his grave clothes and leave them neatly lying in the tomb?

The men then "rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and departed." Two women, Mary Magdalene and Mary the Mother of Jesus, witnessed the preparation of Jesus' body and sealing of the tomb (Mt. 27:60-61; Lk. 23:54-56). The stone "was (so) exceeding great" that as the women returned a day later with Salome, they knew the three of them could not move the stone and they wondered, "Who will roll away the stone from the door of the tomb for us?" (Mk. 16:3-4). This stone presented yet another obstacle for any would be body thieves and an even greater obstacle to the claim Jesus' body was stolen.

The Tomb Secured

The next day was the Sabbath upon which no Jews would have traveled outside the city to the tomb or done any work violating the Sabbath (Lk. 23:56). Since the time of Nehemiah, the city gates of Jerusalem were closed on the Sabbath (Neh. 13:19; Jer. 17:21). The tomb in which the body of Jesus lay would have been undisturbed.

But the Jewish leaders sought to make sure Jesus' body was not going anywhere. They went to Pilate and said, "Sir, we remember, while he was still alive, how that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise.' Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples come by night and steal him away, and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead.' So the last deception will be worse than the first." Pilate gave them a guard and authority to seal the tomb "as sure as you can." They went and inspected the tomb, doubtless seeing the body of Jesus there, then they set a seal on the stone and left

Roman soldiers guarding the tomb (Mt. 27:63-66).

In seeking to secure the tomb, Jesus' enemies and murderers unwittingly helped to confirm Jesus' resurrection and deny their own claim the disciples stole the body. Their request to secure the tomb was based upon Jesus' claims "while he was still alive" that he would rise from the dead in three days. The resurrection claim was not a conspiratorial afterthought by his disciples, but made by Jesus prior to his death and well known even to his enemies. Further, their presence at the tomb and the seal and guard they left confirms Jesus was dead and his body was in the tomb.

The seal was likely a cord stretched across the large stone to the side of the tomb held at either end by wax imprinted with the Imperial Roman seal. It represented the Roman authority of the procurator Pilate. Anyone moving the stone and breaking the seal would break Roman law committing a high crime and incur the full wrath of the Rome.

To enforce the authority of the seal, Pilate gave the Jews a Roman guard of at least four soldiers, and likely more, sufficient to secure the body of Jesus in the tomb from thieves. The discipline of Roman soldiers was well known in the ancient world and the means by which Rome had conquered the world and held its empire. The armed and trained rough Roman soldiers would have had no fear of a band of Jews attacking them. They would have stood their ground and fought inflicting considerable casualties. Deserting their post or sleeping on night watch was punishable by death. Disciples who disbanded and fled at the arrest of Jesus in Gethsemane by a motley band would not have had any reason or courage to fight Roman soldiers to steal Jesus' body. If they did steal Jesus' body, as reported by the Jews, how did they get past the Roman guard?

The Tomb Emptied

Jesus' lifeless body lay wrapped in linen and 70 pounds of spices in a new rock hewn tomb closed by a large stone, inspected and secured by his enemies by a Roman seal and guarded by Roman soldiers. Yet at dawn Sunday morning, a group of women coming to further anoint Jesus' body and wondering how they were going to move the stone, found it rolled away, the seal broken, the guards gone and the tomb empty of Jesus' body (Mk. 16:1-8). In the place where Jesus had lain were his grave clothes (Lk. 24:12; Jn. 20:5-8).

The empty tomb was a fact never disputed by the Jews. Their accusation Jesus' disciples had taken the body verified the empty tomb. Anyone could quickly see for themselves by a short walk outside Jerusalem.

What had happened? The disciple Matthew said that an angel descended from heaven and "rolled back

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If you have any questions you may contact the author at:

Wayne Greeson
208 Regency Place
Connersville, IN 47331
waynegr@dslmyway.com