

WAS THE TOMB REALLY EMPTY?

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“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 foundation stone of faith. Apart from the resurrection there is no gospel, no “good news,” for apart from Easter there is no hope but, as witnessed to by the first disciples, only despair. Yet the resurrection turned fearful and despondent men into men of courage and confidence, men who believed that the resurrection not only verified all that Jesus had said and taught but assured them of the defeat of death and the guarantee that they would share in this great victory of their Lord (John 14:19).

Evangelical apologetics has sought to support the historicity, the “facticity,” of the resurrection by means of several arguments. The most important of these arguments in the NT is the resurrection appearances. (Note the pre-Pauline creedal formula in 1 Corinthians 15:3-11, especially vv 5-8.) Attempts to explain these appearances by means of apostolic fraud, hallucinations and visions, or parapsychology have never been convincing, and evangelicals have been quick to point out the inadequacy of such rationalistic attempts.¹

A second argument in support of the resurrection is the existence of the Church. How does one explain such a phenomenon as the Church? Apart from the resurrection it is perhaps conceivable that a “memorial society” might have arisen to commemorate the death of a much-loved teacher, but there certainly would not have been a Church meeting daily to celebrate the breaking of bread “with glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2:46). The very existence of the Church witnesses to the fact of the resurrection.

A third witness to the resurrection is the existential experience of the risen Christ in the heart of the believer. As one familiar hymn states it, “You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart.” To those who would minimize this argument and reject it as unscientific and subjective, the evangelical would point out that millions of Christians have for nearly two thousand years made this very claim. It is a simple fact that throughout the history of the Church the single most important witness to the resurrection of Jesus has been the witness of the risen Christ within the heart of the believer!

A fourth argument for the resurrection is the witness of the empty tomb. If every effect has a cause, how does one explain the empty tomb

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¹For a concise survey of some of these views see G. E. Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 136-142. For an older but still useful discussion of some of these theories see W. M. Smith, *Therefore Stand* (Boston: Wilde, 1945) 393-398.

(the effect) apart from the resurrection (the cause)? If one denies the resurrection, what other cause can one suggest to explain the empty tomb? Many scholars who do not believe in the resurrection have nevertheless felt compelled to explain this "effect" by means of a rationalistic cause. Some of these attempts are:

- the theory that the women went to the wrong tomb;²
- the theory that Joseph of Arimathea stole the body of Jesus;³
- the theory that Jesus did not really die on the cross but merely "swooned";⁴
- the theory that the disciples stole the body of Jesus;⁵
- the theory that the gardener of the tomb removed the body of Jesus and placed it elsewhere to protect his lettuce from the spectators.⁶

There have been other theories as well (such as the theory that the body of Jesus completely decomposed or "evanesced" within thirty-six hours!),⁷ but all such rationalistic attempts to explain the empty tomb have only served to confirm the conviction of the evangelical that the only satisfactory explanation of the fact of the empty tomb is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

This fourth witness to the resurrection has been challenged in recent years by the claim that the account of the empty tomb is a late tradition created by the early Church to help explain the resurrection appearances. According to this view it was the resurrection appearances that led to the view that the tomb must have been empty, not *vice versa*. The account of the empty tomb is therefore seen as completely secondary, an apologetic legend, unknown to Paul and of no significance

²See K. Lake, *The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (New York: Putnam, 1907) 251-252; P. Gardner-Smith, *The Narratives of the Resurrection* (London: Methuen, 1926) 134-139.

³See J. Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth* (Boston: Beacon, 1925) 357. Klausner was not by any means the first to suggest this explanation. As early as the eighteenth century K. F. Bahrdt portrayed Joseph of Arimathea as stealing the body of Jesus from the cave, but in Bahrdt's portrayal Jesus was revived and continued his ministry secretly via various "resurrection" appearances. So A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1966) 43-44. More recently G. Baldensperger, "Le tombeau vide," *RHPR* 12 (1932) 413-43; 13 (1933) 105-44; 14 (1934) 97-125 set forth a somewhat similar theory. According to Baldensperger, although Jesus was buried in a common grave by the Jews, Joseph of Arimathea received permission from Pilate to transfer the body and rebury it in his own tomb. The women, who had seen the first burial, however, returned to the original burial place and finding it empty assumed that Jesus was raised from the dead. Despite the later proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus and the empty tomb, they kept this secret until his death. Cf. also R. Pesch, "Zur Entstehung des Glaubens an die Auferstehung Jesu," *TQ* 153 (1973) 206.

⁴This theory is one of the oldest rationalistic explanations of the resurrection and was suggested already in the eighteenth century by K. F. Bahrdt and in the early nineteenth century by K. H. Venturini and H. E. G. Paulus. So Schweitzer, *Quest*, pp. 43-44, 46-47, 54-55.

⁵See Matthew 28:11-15.

⁶This rather strange "theory" is found in Tertullian, *De Spectaculis*, 30.

⁷So L. D. Weatherhead, *The Resurrection of Christ* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1959) 43-45.

in the apostolic preaching.⁸ It must be acknowledged that the main witness to the resurrection was the appearances of the risen Lord, not the empty tomb, for the empty tomb by itself did not lead to faith in the resurrection (cf. Luke 24:21-24; John 20:13). It was therefore primarily the positive witness of the resurrection appearances rather than the negative witness of the empty tomb that led to faith in the risen Lord. Yet even if the emptiness of the tomb does not prove that Jesus has risen, in conjunction with the other evidence it is nevertheless a witness to the resurrection.⁹ Furthermore, if the tomb was not empty, it would rule out the Christian claim that Jesus rose from the dead, for if someone in Jerusalem could have produced the body of Jesus, no manner of witness to the resurrection of Jesus would have been convincing.

There are, however, several powerful arguments that can be raised to support the fact that the Christian tradition of the empty tomb is very early and that the tomb in which the body of Jesus was placed was indeed empty. These are:

1. The story of the empty tomb is found in all four gospels and in at least three of the gospel strata: Mark, M (Matthew's special material), and John. The very variation in the different narratives of the empty tomb, which are in one sense embarrassing, argues that these accounts stem from separate and independent traditions, all of which witness to the tomb's being empty.

2. The presence of the various Semitisms and Semitic customs in the gospel accounts of the empty tomb indicates that these accounts were early and originated most probably in a Palestinian setting. (Cf. "on the first day of the week" [Mark 16:2]; "angel of the Lord" [Matt 28:2]; "Miriam" [Matt 28:1]; "[answering] said" [Matt 28:5]; "bowed their faces to the ground" [Luke 24:5]; etc.)¹⁰

3. Jewish belief in the resurrection necessitated an empty tomb. Whereas ideas of immortality among the Greeks and certain Jews were divorced from, and even antagonistic to, the idea of bodily resurrection, the Jews in Jerusalem, especially the Pharisees and those influenced by Pharisaic teaching, would associate the idea of a resurrection with the physical resurrection of the body. In Jerusalem, therefore, there could

⁸Cf. R. Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (New York: Harper, 1968) 290, who states, "The Story of the empty tomb is completely secondary.... The story is an apologetic legend as Mk. 16^b ... clearly shows. Paul knows nothing about the empty tomb." So also G. W. H. Lampe and D. M. MacKinnon, *The Resurrection* (London: Mowbray, 1966) 46-48; H.-W. Bartsch, *Das Auferstehungszeugnis* (Hamburg: Herbert Reich, 1965) 22; H. Grass, *Ostergeschehen und Osterberichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1962) 93. Yet P. Althaus, *Die Wahrheit des kirchlichen Osterglaubens* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1941) 26, has pointed out that if the story of the empty tomb arose as an apology for the resurrection, it is most strange that it does not serve this function in the accounts themselves (cf. Mark 16:8; Luke 24:22-24; John 20:11-15). In this regard see also X. Leon-Dufour, *Resurrection and the Message of Easter* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971) 210.

⁹So H. Schlier, *Über die Auferstehung Jesu Christi* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1968) 28; F. Mussner, *Die Auferstehung Jesu* (München: Kösel, 1969) 69; G. O'Collins, *The Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1973) 93.

¹⁰For a discussion of the Semitisms in the gospel accounts of the empty tomb see E. L. Bode, *The First Easter Morning* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1970) 6, 58, 71.

be no apostolic preaching of the resurrection of Jesus unless the tomb was in fact empty.¹¹ Furthermore, it is difficult to believe that the opponents of Jesus would not have investigated the place of burial to see if indeed the tomb was empty, for the display of the body of Jesus would be a simple way of refuting the claim of his resurrection.

4. The fact that the witnesses to the empty tomb were women whose witness was disallowed by the Jews makes an apologetic fabrication of the account unlikely. It is most difficult to understand why the Church would have created a legend of an empty tomb in which the chief witnesses were women, since women were invalid witnesses according to Jewish principles of evidence.¹² If the account of the empty tomb were simply a legend, why not make the witnesses men? It would appear more reasonable to conclude that the reason the Church did not make the witnesses to the empty tomb men was simply because the witnesses to the empty tomb on that Easter morning were in fact not men but women.

5. It is difficult to understand why a Jewish polemic against the empty tomb would have arisen if the account of the empty tomb had developed as late as the critics claim. Later there would have been no point in arguing against this "legend" since so many things could have happened in the intervening years to nullify its validity. The development of such a polemic and the fact that it admitted the emptiness of the tomb indicates that the account of the empty tomb had from the very beginning an important place in the early Church's proclamation of the resurrection.¹³

6. The reference to Joseph of Arimathea indicates that the tomb in which Jesus was buried was well known, for the name of Joseph of Arimathea is firmly fixed to the traditions of both how and where Jesus was buried (cf. Mark 15:43-46; Matt 27:57-60; Luke 23:50-53; John 19:38-42). The historicity of the empty tomb is supported by the fact that a specific tomb, which was known in Jerusalem as Joseph of Arimathea's tomb, was associated with the burial of Jesus. The fact that Joseph of Arimathea did not hold any particular position of authority or fame in

¹¹Cf. W. Pannenberg, "Did Jesus Really Rise from the Dead," *Dialog* 4 (1965) 134; O'Collins, *Resurrection*, p. 43; Bode, *First Easter*, p. 177; Althaus, *Wahrheit*, p. 26; W. Künneth, *The Theology of the Resurrection* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1965), p. 92 n. 52. The latter is an excellent concise summary of this argument.

It has been claimed that Mark 6:14, 16 refutes this claim, since some people thought Jesus might have been John the Baptist raised from the dead even though no claim was made that John's grave was empty. Yet such thinking in Tiberias by Herod Antipas, a patron of Hellenistic culture, was not possible with Pharisees in Jerusalem. For the Jew in Jerusalem, especially for a hostile and skeptical Pharisee, any claim of resurrection would require an empty tomb.

¹²C. F. D. Moule in his editor's introduction to *The Significance of the Message of the Resurrection for Faith in Jesus Christ* (London: SCM, 1968) 9 states that "it is difficult to explain how a story that [supposedly] grew up late and took shape merely in accord with the supposed demands of apologetic came to be framed in terms almost exclusively of women witnesses, who, as such, were notoriously invalid witnesses according to Jewish principles of evidence. The later and the more fictitious the story, the harder it is to explain why the apostles are not brought to the forefront as witnesses." See also Bode, *First Easter*, p. 158.

¹³Bode, *First Easter*, p. 163.

the early Church also argues in favor of the historicity of this tradition.¹⁴

7. The traditions of the empty tomb all place the incident as occurring on the first day of the week. What major event took place on this day that would cause so momentous a change in the religious life of the early Church as to explain why the day of worship was transferred from the Sabbath to Sunday? The only event (in the NT) associated with the first day of the week is the discovery of the empty tomb. The resurrection appearances, on the other hand, were associated with the "third day" (cf. Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:34; 14:58; 15:29; Matt 12:40; 27:63-64; Luke 13:32; 24:7, 21; John 2:19; 1 Cor 15:4). The empty tomb tradition, however, is dated on the first day of the week, and the practice of the early Church in worshipping on Sunday (cf. Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2; Rev 1:10) is best explained by the tradition that on the first day of the week the followers of Jesus discovered the empty tomb. It is also clear that while a resurrection on the first day of the week could take place on the "third day," since by Jewish reckoning any part of a day equaled one day, it is not so certain that, given a resurrection on the third day, the resurrection would have been dated on a Sunday apart from the existence of a first-day empty tomb tradition.¹⁵

8. The earliest tradition we possess that speaks of the resurrection is probably 1 Corinthians 15:3-4. It is a common consensus today among scholars that Paul here is quoting a confession of the early Church. This confession, which should probably be dated before A. D. 40,¹⁶ specifically states that Christ died and that he was buried. But what does "being buried" refer to? Some have argued that "he died" and "was buried" go together and that the latter phrase simply emphasizes the conclusive reality of Jesus' death.¹⁷ Yet is this all that the tradition is saying? The words "died," "buried," and "was raised" are unintelligible unless what "died and was buried" was in fact "raised." While Paul does not anywhere specifically state that the tomb was empty, it would appear that in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 this is clearly implied. For Paul as a Pharisee, and no doubt for the Jerusalem Church also (which had a strong Pharisaic element; cf. Acts 15:5), the death-burial-resurrection of Jesus would have demanded an empty tomb.

¹⁴So P. Benoit, *The Passion and Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Herder, 1970) 228-229; Bode, *First Easter*, p. 160. It is interesting to note that some scholars who believe that the story of the empty tomb is a late apologetical addition to the resurrection accounts maintain that Joseph of Arimathea is nevertheless somehow connected historically to the story of the burial. See Pesch, "Entstehung," p. 206.

¹⁵Bode, *First Easter*, argues this point in a most persuasive and convincing manner. For a summary of his argument see pp. 179-182.

¹⁶See R. H. Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives* (New York: Macmillan, 1971) 10, and Bode, *First Easter*, pp. 91-93, for a discussion of the date of this tradition.

¹⁷So H. Conzelmann, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 255; Fuller, *Formation*, pp. 15-16. For the opposing view see U. Wilckens, *Auferstehung* (Berlin: Kreuz, 1970) 20-22; A. Oepke, "egeirō," *TDNT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) II, 335. R. E. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1973), while denying on pp. 83-84 that the term "buried" implies that the tomb was empty, believes that the expression "raised on the third day" probably implies this. See p. 124.

In Romans 6:4 and Colossians 2:12 Paul uses the same expressions (“buried” and “raised”) that we find in 1 Corinthians 15:4. There is good reason to believe that the idea of being “buried” and “raised” with Christ in baptism as it is found in these two verses is traditional, for Paul introduces his discussion of this theme in Romans 6:3 with “Do you not know ...,” implying that what he is saying is established doctrine not only in his own churches but also in a church that he did not found—the church in Rome.¹⁸ It was traditional, therefore, to understand the baptism of the believer as in some way reflecting or re-enacting the resurrection of Jesus.¹⁹ If the believer was reminded in his baptism of the burial of his Lord, it seems most likely that he would compare his burial and resurrection with Jesus’ burial and resurrection. Furthermore, the burial of the believer while related to his “death” to sin is nevertheless distinct from that death (cf. Rom 6:4). As a result it would be likely that in the analogy the “burial” of Christ would be considered not simply as a synonym for the death of Christ but as in some way distinct from, although of course related to, his death. Yet in the burial of the believer what was buried did not remain buried but was transformed and raised. The death-burial-resurrection of the Christian in baptism, therefore, while not proving that early Christians would of necessity believe that the tomb of Jesus must have been empty, would likely have been compared to the death-burial-resurrection of Jesus, so that with Jesus, as with the believer, that which was buried rose transformed, leaving nothing behind.

Two other arguments can be listed to support the view that “dead, buried, raised” would at least imply that the tomb was empty. The first involves the terms used to describe the resurrection of Jesus. One of those terms is “raised” (*egeirō*).²⁰ He who died and was buried was raised. This would imply, at least to most, that “what” was buried was raised and that the tomb as a result was empty.

A second argument that can be mentioned is found in Acts 2:29-31, where Peter contrasts the experience of David who died, was buried, and saw corruption with Jesus who was crucified and killed (v 23) but whose flesh, unlike David’s, saw no corruption because God raised him up. The difference between David and Jesus lies in the fact that the tomb of David was still occupied by the bones of David, for he saw corruption. The tomb of Jesus, on the other hand, was empty, for he saw no corruption. It is true that we have here *Luke’s* account of Peter’s

¹⁸In Colossians 2:6 we should also note that the passage is introduced by “As therefore you *received* Christ Jesus the Lord” (italics mine), which is the same term that introduces the tradition found in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4.

¹⁹The author is well aware of the difficulty involved in knowing what “likeness” in Romans 6:5 means and with what it is associated, but it is clear, at least to him, that regardless of how these questions are answered the baptism of the believer in some way recalls the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. See R. C. Tannehill, *Dying and Rising with Christ* (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1966) 30-39, for an excellent discussion of the various ways “likeness” has been interpreted.

²⁰Matthew 16:21; 17:9, 23; 20:19; Mark 14:28; 16:6; John 21:14; Acts 3:15; etc.

pentecostal address, but it would appear that Luke has either used early tradition to formulate Peter's sermon or at least witnesses to an early tradition in which the tomb of Jesus was acknowledged as empty. This same comparison between David and Jesus is also found on the lips of Paul in Acts 13:29-37.²¹

It may be that the lack of a specific reference to the empty tomb by Paul stems from an apologetic motive rather than from ignorance. When it came to the resurrection appearances, the apostle could argue on equal terms with the other disciples. He, too, had seen the Lord! He could not, however, say the same about the empty tomb. Perhaps this is the reason why he does not refer to it specifically in his letters.

If the empty tomb tradition arose from the experience of the early followers of Jesus on that first Easter morning and was from the beginning part and parcel of early Christian preaching, the question remains, "What caused the tomb to be empty on that first Easter morning?" What "cause" brought about this "effect"? Evangelicals still find the simplest and easiest explanation the testimony of the NT writers. Christ has risen from the dead! The tomb could not hold him, for "in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor 15:20).

²¹For a more detailed discussion of the implications of these passages see J. Manek, "The Apostle Paul and the Empty Tomb," *NovT* 2 (1957) 276-280.