The Empty Tomb

Zanesville, OH | November 17, 2019 | John Pollard | Sermon Notes

**Foundational Scripture:**

**Intro**:

* The gospels record for us that on the first day of the week, Jesus rose from the dead. Each of them tell us that at least six sets of eyes looked in the tomb and saw that Jesus’ body was nowhere to be found (Matt. 28:5-8; Mk. 16:5-8; Lk. 24:2-8; Jn. 20:2-8). Not only were there at least six sets of eyes, but a number of women were the first to witness this pointing to the legitimacy of the gospel narratives. Our skeptic/atheist friends for the most part do not deny that the tomb was indeed empty. There is too much evidence to legitimately argue otherwise.
* Instead, theories have been proposed to explain away the empty tomb. The idea of a truly resurrected Jesus seems to be indigestible for most if not ludicrous altogether. But it also poses problems for the status quo that most would like to be left undisturbed as far as our post-modern, selfish, self-righteous tendencies are concerned. And so we are left to decrypt the complications and ins and outs of all these supposed theories that explain why the tomb of Joseph was really empty. There are two bases that form the starting point for these theories and explanations.

1. **Was Jesus really dead?**
   1. In order to explain why Jesus was seen alive after the crucifixion and why the tomb was found empty, many scholars have suggested the **apparent death theory**. The theory itself suggests that Jesus did not die on the cross but He only appeared to die.
   2. In the book, ***“Evidence that Demands a Verdict”*** Josh McDowell sums up the theory this way:
      1. *“According to the theory, after being removed from the cross, Jesus was placed in Joseph of Arimathea’s tomb while still alive, yet unconscious. After several hours he revived in the coolness of the tomb, arose, freed himself from burial wrappings and the sealed tomb, and made his way back to his disciples to declare himself the risen Lord, the conqueror and defeater of death”* (McDowell, *ETDV*).
   3. This theory originated probably some time during the late 1700’s and bits and pieces have been changed, added or removed since then all while concluding the same thing: Jesus did not die on the cross. Many have since gotten away from this theory due its controversial and frankly stupid nature.
   4. However, some do still support this theory to be true as an explanation to why Jesus was seen alive and why the tomb was empty. But this theory quickly falls apart because of the historical and medical evidence surrounding Jesus’ crucifixion.
   5. That Jesus having already been scourged, crowned with thorns, carrying the burden of the cross beam and dealing with severe lack of sleep would still be alive even after going through the crucifixion process is anything but logical.
   6. The Romans were professionals in relation the crucifixion process. When they crucified someone, that person was guaranteed to die the moment they received such condemnation. There was no coming back. The Roman centurions kept careful watch on their victims to ensure they died and at times they would break their legs to speed up the process (Jn. 19:31-33).
   7. The fact that they did not do this to Jesus illustrates that He died before they had the chance and if there was ever an individual they were to make sure they killed, it was Jesus. Pilate confirmed the death of Jesus with the centurion who was on the scene (Mk. 15:44-45).
   8. Another fascinating piece of evidence which shows the apparent death theory to be inadequate is the blood and water that came forth from Jesus’ side after they pierced Him. From a purely medical standpoint, this only happens when someone is already dead.
   9. Even if Jesus survived the crucifixion, the linen wrappings and spices with which He had been embalmed (Jn. 19:39-40) would have prevented breathing and having received no medical attention, food and water there is no doubt He would die in the sealed tomb.
   10. Non-Christian and Christian sources record that Jesus died on the cross. Assuming Jesus did in fact survive the whole ordeal, what happened after He exited the tomb is impossible for anyone in His state to execute.
   11. He would have had to remove the linen wrappings Himself when Lazarus clearly couldn’t (Jn. 11:3, 17, 43-44). He would have had to remove the 400lb stone from the inside, fight off the guards and walk seven miles to Emmaus. It is inconceivable to think Jesus did any of this in the supposed state He was in.
   12. All these things miss the point that Jesus needed to die. He could have prevented His death before any of these things happened if He wanted to so why would He start now (Matt. 26:52-54). This theory doesn’t adequately explain why the tomb was empty and why Jesus was seen alive after the crucifixion.
2. **If Jesus was dead, how can we explain the empty tomb?**
   1. The other basis for which the empty tomb is explained is that Jesus did in fact die. This is certainly a better starting point so how can we explain the empty tomb if He in fact was dead?
   2. One of the most popular theories that accepts Jesus’ death and seeks to explain the tomb being empty is the **theft theory.** The theft theory like the apparent death theory comes in different shapes and forms but the conclusion is the same: Someone or some people stole Jesus’ body from the tomb.
   3. Concerning the different versions of this theory McDowell says:
      1. *“The first form is that the disciples stole the body from the sealed and guarded tomb and then conspired to teach that Jesus had been resurrected but knowing that he had done no such thing. The second form is that grave robbers stole the body and when Jesus’ followers discovered the tomb empty, they believed that Jesus rose from the dead”* (McDowell, *ETDV*).
   4. Unlike the previous theory, this one does in fact have some biblical traction (Matt. 28:11-15). The Jewish leaders clearly conspired to spread this theory because of the fact that accepting a resurrected Jesus would create unwanted repercussions for them as a group.
   5. The major argument that is often used to support the idea of a theft is that there was a window of opportunity in which the disciples (or other people) could have removed the body since no guards had been posted as yet (Matt. 27:62-66).
   6. The question that begs an answer is why the disciples would steal away the body of Jesus. These are men who did not understand that Jesus had to die and they certainly didn’t anticipate His coming back to them alive (Mk. 9:9-10; Jn. 20:9).
   7. Gary Habermas and Michael Licona make an excellent point as to why the disciples wouldn’t have stolen Jesus’ body in their book: ***“The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus.”***
      1. *“The data we have strongly suggest that this was not what happened. First . . . the disciples of Jesus claimed to have seen the risen Jesus because they really believed that they had seen him. Shortly after Jesus’ crucifixion, their lives were radically transformed to the point that they were willing to endure imprisonment, sufferings, and even martyrdom. This indicates that their claim of seeing the risen Jesus was the result of a strong and sincere belief they truly had seen him. In all the political scandals that occurred over recent generations, one or more of the guilty party was often willing to tell the truth rather than face a lengthy prison term. The disciples of Jesus, on the other hand, boldly proclaimed the risen Christ in the face of severe persecution and death. They faced dungeons, torture, and brutal executions—not the white-collar prisons that hold today’s corrupt politicians. . . . Second, a mere story propagated by the disciples would not have convinced Paul, who was an enemy of the church. . . . Instead of rejecting the claims of Jesus’ resurrection as fraud, Paul was convinced by what he described as the risen Jesus appearing to him. Third, it is doubtful that fraud [theft] on the part of the disciples would have convinced James who, even though he may have heard of Jesus’ miracles, had rejected him prior to his resurrection. . . . Like Paul, James appears to have been convinced by what he believed was an appearance of the risen Jesus to himself”* (Habermas and Licona, *CRJ*).
   8. If it wasn’t the disciples, then who stole the body? The idea that it was robbers also doesn’t make much sense. Even if robbers stole the body for some sordid, mischievous reason, it doesn’t explain His appearances. Habermas and Licona report:
      1. *“First, an empty tomb by itself would not have convinced the church persecutor Paul. Instead, he would have suspected foul play. . . . Second, an empty tomb by itself would not have convinced the skeptic James who, like Paul, appears to have been convinced by an appearance of the risen Jesus to him. [1 Cor 15:7] Third, the empty tomb did not appear to lead any of Jesus’ followers except John to believe that he had risen from the dead. Indeed, the gospel of John reports that Mary Magdalene immediately jumped to the conclusion that someone had stolen the body upon discovering the empty tomb. Her first thought was not that Jesus had risen. The gospels further report that Peter, upon seeing the empty tomb, was unconvinced as well. Thomas was unconvinced by reports of an empty tomb and reports of appearances by the risen Jesus to the others. It was the appearances that led to the disciples’ belief that Jesus had risen from the dead. Fourth, even if true, Fraud 2 [someone else stole the body] could only call into question the cause of the empty tomb, not the Resurrection itself. . . . The empty tomb convinced no one. Rather, it was the appearances that brought about belief in friends and foe alike”* (Habermas and Licona, *CRJ*).
   9. The theft theory falls apart whether it relates to the disciples stealing to body or some other person or group of individuals. Even though the theft theory does its best to explain the empty tomb, it does not and cannot account for why so many people saw Him alive after.
   10. Some notable other theories to explain the empty tomb on the basis Jesus did die but never came back to life include:
       1. Hallucination Theory
       2. Wrong Tomb Theory
       3. Talpiot Tomb Theory
   11. None of these theories are sufficient to explain why the tomb was empty on the first day of the week. At best, they are speculative, biased and lackluster. The problem with these theories is that they use human means and speculation to try and compensate for the events of that day that were heavenly, extraordinary and based on faith.

**Sources:**

Chrysostom, John. *“Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew.”* Christian Classics Ethereal Library.

Habermas, Gary R. and Michael R. Licona. *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus.* Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2004.

McDowell, J. *Evidence That Demands A Verdict*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999.