

The Empty Tomb

Luke 24:1-8

Introduction

Luke's gospel gives the short version of the first day of the resurrection. The story begins with a group of grieving women and ends with a bewildered Peter stooping uncomfortably in the empty tomb gazing at the grave clothes "*marveling to himself at what had happened*" (v.12). The first three verses focus on the empty tomb; verses 4-7 focus on the angel's message; and verses 8-12 focus on the clear and compelling evidence for the resurrection and the stubborn unbelief of the apostles in spite of the evidence.

"Men and women disbelieve the Easter story not because of the evidence but in spite of it" (J.N.D. Anderson).

The Greek philosopher Sophocles said, "Truth is always the strongest argument."

The Easter story claims to tell the truth. It claims that you can put truth in a grave but truth reserves the right to leave that grave. C.S. Lewis wrote; "A man can't be always defending the truth; there must be a time to feed on it."

Henry Ware in a famous couplet wrote;

*"Lift your voices in triumph on high,
For Jesus is risen and man cannot die."*

Jesus is risen. Man cannot die. At least not forever.
Did you come here this morning to think or to feed?

The Empty Tomb (vv.1-3)

Luke 24:1 (NKJV) 1Now on the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they, and certain other women with them, came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared.

2But they found the stone rolled away from the tomb.

3Then they went in and did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.

All the gospel writers agree that Jesus rose on Sunday ("the first day of the week"; see Matthew 28:1; ". . . Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn"; Mark 16:2; "very early in the morning, on the first day of the week"; John 20:1 "Now on the first day of the week").

These are the women who had come with Him from Galilee (and) followed after, and they observed the tomb how His body was laid" (see Luke 23:55). The grieving entourage included Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James; Joanna and others (see v.10). The women brought

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spices to mask the odor of death. They expected a traumatized body bearing the signs of torture and the familiar smell of decomposition.

They expected more sorrow.

These women were vessels filled with heartache and anguish and grief. C.S. Lewis described grief this way; “It feels like being mildly concussed. There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says. . .”

Death will do that. Death fills us with sorrow. Death is proof that we are mortal, limited, wretched. Death is business like, simple, decisive. Erwin Lutzer writes; “By all standards, death is a most dreaded event. Our society will pay any price to prolong life. Just one more month, or even day. Perhaps our desire to postpone death reflects our dissatisfaction with God’s ultimate purpose. Remember, his work isn’t finished until we are glorified. Most of us would like to see God’s work remain half finished. We’re glad we are called and justified, but we’re not too excited about being glorified.”

And what do you expect to find this morning?

The women expected a dead body and a blocked entry. They expected an occupied tomb. The ladies were aware that the tomb had been sealed. The stone was rolled away (v.2). Frank Morrison author of the book *Who Moved The Stone* calls the stone “the one silent and infallible witness to the whole episode.” Bible scholars and researchers estimate the stone weighted over two tons. It was so heavy the women realized they would not be able to move the stone and would have to enlist the aid of the Roman guard. The tomb was sealed with a heavy cord strung across the facade of the tomb with the Roman procurator’s heavily embossed stamp. The penalty for breaking the seal was death. This would have served as a rather severe incentive to leave the stone alone.

But someone or something moved that stone. Fredrick Beck wrote; “*The stone at the tomb of Jesus was a pebble to the Rock of Ages inside.*”

The stone is a type and picture of the hard heart, the cynicism or skepticism that requires that dead things remain dead. How would you describe your heart this morning?

Several theories have been advanced to explain what happened that Sunday Morning. Some suggest Jesus did not really die on that cross. That he lost consciousness, was somehow revived by the cold damp tomb and the pungent spices, regained his strength, removed the shroud; moved the stone, overcame the Roman guard and convinced his followers that he was risen from the dead. Others suggest that the women went to the wrong tomb. An empty tomb where they were met by a groundskeeper who said, “He is not here” meaning he is buried elsewhere. This theory suffers from the serious flaw that if the women went to the wrong tomb—so did the disciples and the angels. The true tomb would still have a Roman guard and a heavy stone and a

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dead occupant. Others have suggested that the women and the disciples suffered from some mass hallucination.

The Angel's Message (vv.4-7)

4And it happened, as they were greatly perplexed about this, that behold, two men stood by them in shining garments.

The empty tomb at first did not produce belief but perplexity (v.4) and bewilderment (v.12). The expression *greatly perplexed* has also been translated “utterly at a loss” (NEB).

Now the ladies experience a strange encounter with two men wearing glow in the dark robes. Does this support the alien abduction theory? Let's all say it together: “*Ancient alien theorists say yes!*”

The women's first response is not belief in a resurrected Lord but confusion and supposition. They supposed the body was moved or taken (at least according to John 20:13). “*Then they said to her, “Woman why are you weeping?” She said to them, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him.”*”

“The empty tomb intensifies their distress” (R. Kent Hughes p.399). And what about you? Does the empty tomb intensify your distress? It should—if you have doubts or reservations about the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

You are free to doubt and not believe. But aren't you the least bit curious about what happened to the body? Something happened to the body of Jesus. Something natural or supernatural.

Who took the body of Jesus? If friends could they? And if foes would they? Welcome to CSI Jerusalem. Was the body taken by the disciples? Was it taken by the Romans? Was it taken by the religious leaders? Souvenir hunters? Aliens? Angels?

The historian Luke records the details. He describes the angel's radiance; “two men stood by them in shining garments”. The angelic being offers reassurance (vv.5-6) and a reminder of Jesus' words (v.8).

The angels appear to function as witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15). Jesus made the angels. Angels announced His conception and birth, and now His resurrection. Later they will appear and point out His ascension into Heaven (Acts 1:9-11). Angels ministered to Jesus in the wilderness of temptation and in the Garden of Gethsemane. Angels witnessed His beatings, His crucifixion and death. They watched. They watched for some signal, some gesture, some word, for Jesus to allow them to intervene, to stop the violence, the brutality the torture. But Jesus was determined to fulfill all righteousness. Jesus was determined to be your substitute, to be your Savior.

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5Then, as they were afraid and bowed their faces to the earth, they said to them, “Why do you seek the living among the dead?”

The angels have a message. The women thought Jesus dead. Now the angels rebuke them and remind them that they should have known better. After all Jesus said he would be delivered into the hands of the religious leaders and sinful men. He described the manner of His death and the time-line for His death and resurrection.

“It was scandalous to look for Jesus in a grave. If you are looking for Elvis the proper place is in Memphis in a Doric-style mausoleum with ornate brass and bronze fittings in marble. . .among the dead” (R. Kent Hughes p.400). But if you are looking for Jesus in the graveyard of human history, you are looking in the wrong place.

“All resurrection-denying churches look for Jesus ‘among the dead’ (ibid). You might ask, “are you making fun of other faith traditions?” No. Other faith traditions may love the example of Jesus, the words of Jesus, the courage of Jesus, even the faith of Jesus. They may preach the purity of His life, the injustice of His trial, the horror of His death, the curiosity of the rumors of his miracles, the myths, the superstitions, the surroundings of His alleged empty tomb; they may fill their sermons with the syrup of sentimental springs, hope springing eternal, they might light a candle or make reference to a worm that throws off its cocoon; but they cannot speak of a resurrection—or if they do speak of a resurrection it is only as a symbol or metaphor. **For all their beautiful words and sentimental sayings they are still looking for Jesus among the pantheon of dead heroes of the past.**

The liberal churches seek Jesus among the dead. The History Channel and PBS and CNN look for Jesus among the great departed dead.

The atheist and agnostic, the skeptic and cynic are all searching among the rotting graves or brass urns or empty monuments. The angel’s question is never answered by the frightened ladies.

Why would anyone seek the living among the dead?

6He is not here, but is risen! Remember how He spoke to you when He was still in Galilee, 7saying, ‘The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.’ ”

If the resurrection of Jesus was symbol or metaphor or allegory the angel should have said, “He is not here, he is everywhere! He lives inside of you and the rocks and the trees and the birds and the bees and the moon up above—and a thing called love!”

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The text literally reads; “*he has been raised*”(that is literally raised). Later in the chapter Jesus invites the disciples to touch Him (v.39). “Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. (v. 40) Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.” When He had said this, He showed them His hands and feet.” The resurrected Jesus ate physical food on four different occasions. The physical body of Jesus was touched and handled by different people. The New Testament records on at least 12 different or separate appearances of Jesus after His resurrection. He appears to individuals, small groups, large groups. He was seen by at least 500 different people. Still later He was seen by Stephen and Saul at his conversion and John the Apostle on the Island of Patmos. These are all eyewitness accounts. You may dismiss one or two as wishful thinking or mental illness or emotional distress. But all of them?

The angel repeats the words of Jesus almost word for word! Matthew 16:21; *From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day,*” The Messengers from Heaven remembered God’s Word. Over and over again the word “must” is used (v.7). God’s plan had three steps; betrayal, crucifixion and resurrection. Death precedes resurrection. “*And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again*” (Mark 8:31 NKJV).

The Evidence And Unbelief (v.8)

8And they remembered His words.

The Lord Jesus told the religious leaders in John 2:19-21; “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.’ The Jews replied it has taken 46 years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days? But the temple he had spoken of was his body.”

In every instance when Jesus predicted His death He includes His resurrection! This was to serve as a sign to authenticate His message. “But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee” (Matthew 26:32).

The Lord said He would come back to life. But they at first did not believe Him. The ladies report the news to Peter and other apostles (v.9). They did not believe the ladies (v.11). Their words seemed like idle tales, and they did not believe them.

Their response seems “modern” skeptical and sophisticated. The resurrection was not a fabrication created by the church, but rather the church was created by the resurrection.

We Christians need not get defensive or upset when our family and friends or the larger culture questions the reality of a resurrection from the dead. The disciples doubt may not be exemplary but it is instructive. The resurrection is a hard doctrine to believe. This is why the Spirit of God

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and the Word of God must do the work in the heart of the unbeliever. We know that both Peter and John were willing to check out the ladies story (v.12). The body is gone. The grave-clothes are present. You must ask yourself the question that Peter pondered. What happened to the body of Jesus?

1. The Empty tomb. Explain it.
2. The Roman guard. Bribed.
3. The Stone. Who moved it?
4. The initial unbelief. All the gospel writers agree that none of the followers were expecting a resurrection believed it—at first.
5. The angels message.
6. The post-resurrection appearances.
7. The disciples radically changed lives.

Have you ever wondered what it would have been like to be there on that first Resurrection Sunday? Can you imagine sitting in that empty tomb with Peter and seeing the carcass of cloth still crimson from the now dried blood of Jesus? Peter remains unconvinced (v.12).

A.W. Tozer wrote; “Every man will have to decide for himself whether or not he can afford the terrible luxury of unbelief.”

Unbelief means you must search for meaning without God and without Christ and without a resurrection. Unbelief does not make death go away. Unbelief has to define hope as extinction.

Conclusion

One of the great preachers of all time Phillips Brooks said, “The great Easter truth is not that we are to live newly after death, but that we are to be new here and now by the power of the resurrection.”

It is indeed a great truth that those who embrace Jesus as Lord and Savior can expect a future resurrection. Can we be new now?

Tomb, thou shalt not hold him longer;
Death is strong, but life is stronger;
Stronger than the dark, the light;
Stronger than the wrong, the right;
Faith and hope triumphant say,
Christ will rise on Easter Day.

Phillips Brooks (1835-1893)