

## QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

### **18 Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?**

*Scripture: John 20:1-10*

People watched Jesus die. We do not know how many were present. Their number is not important. What is important is that Jesus died. Close to 9 A.M. Jesus' hands were nailed to a patibulum or crossbeam which was lowered onto a vertical stake to be mounted in the ground. His feet were also spiked to this post, and a wedge was placed between his legs to help in support of his weight lest the nails tear his flesh apart.

There has been some difference of opinion as to the exact day of the week these proceedings took place. Friday has long been the traditional day recognized, while on the other hand, some understand from Scripture that Wednesday was the actual day of crucifixion. The difference in opinion has to do with the Jewish method of measuring time, that is, using a part of a day for an entire day in terms of reckoning. If a part can mean a whole, Jesus could have been crucified on Friday, remained in the tomb on Saturday, risen early on Sunday, fulfilling the three day stipulation of Matthew 12:40, Matthew 17:22-23, and Luke 24:21. If three full days are required, Jesus could have been crucified on Wednesday, with burial late Wednesday night and his body would have thus been interred Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. Some feel he may have been crucified on Thursday. I have satisfied my own mind, with the belief that Jesus was crucified at about 9 A.M. on Friday and that people were present when he died about 3 P.M. the same day. John records that a Roman soldier *"stabbed his side with a spear, and at once there was a flow of blood and water."* (Mark 15:21-37; John 19:31-37)

As the story continues we find that Joseph of Arimathea a member of the Jewish Council, sought permission of Pilate, the Roman Governor, to remove Jesus body from the cross. Nicodemus and Joseph wrapped the body with strips of linen cloth and placed it in Joseph's unused tomb. It would seem that this tomb was not far from the place of crucifixion. There were witnesses to this burial in the form of certain women who followed Jesus. (John 19:38-42; Mark 15:40-47) There was a smaller piece of grave cloth in which Jesus head was wrapped as it was placed on a pillow of stones.

**I. THE SEAL AND GUARD:**

Matthew 27:62-66 tells us that on Saturday the chief priests and Pharisees urged Pilate to have agreed to this and the tomb was then made sure with a massive cartwheel of a stone rolled into place. With the kicking of a wedge, the stone rolled down its track. A detachment of Temple police secured the area. The seal was a cord strung across the rock and made to hold at either end with clay. Its purpose was to bear evidence of any kind of tampering.

These are the events concerning the crises which the friends of Jesus faced on that ever memorable Friday afternoon so long ago. They are described in the cold but exact wording of the creed, "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried..."

**II. THE WOMAN VISITORS:**

The tomb of Jesus was visited by certain women very early on Sunday morning. It was their intention to anoint the body of Jesus. They desired to improve on the hasty burial given by Joseph and Nicodemus. These women were Galilean followers of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Mary (mother of James), Salome, and Joanna. Salome was probably the mother of the disciples, James and John. Joanna was the wife of Herod Antipas' chief steward, Chuza. Upon arrival they found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance to the tomb. When they entered the tomb they were confronted by two angels who explained that Jesus had risen from the dead. They were informed that Jesus would meet them again in Galilee. (Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-11)

**III. TWO MEN ARE CURIOUS:**

The women fled from the tomb immediately to inform the disciples. The risen Lord intercepts them in his first resurrection appearance. (Matthew 28:1-10) Soon after they are with unanimous disbelief by the eleven. The story of the missing body wears on Peter and John who decide to see-for themselves. John records that they saw, *"the linen cloths lying, and the napkin, which had been on his head, not lying with the linen cloths but rolled up in a place by itself,"* (John 20:1-10) It is at that time, I believe; John was convinced of the revivification of Jesus. This belief is confirmed within hours by the Easter evening general appearance of Jesus to his disciples. (Mark 16:14-18; Luke 24:36-40; John 20:19-23; I Corinthians 15:5)

Briefly, this is the story of the death and resurrection of Christ. It is believed upon the historical evidence of Joseph's empty tomb, the transformation of the disciples, the separation of Christianity from Judaism, and the existence of the Christian church. The prediction Jesus made concerning his resurrection is affirmable by the weight of this evidence. Many things can be said, only some things are affirmable. The evidence is sufficient to render the resurrection of Christ believable for anyone who is willing to be convince. The person who is not willing to allow the evidence to convince him, whose mind is already made up not to believe in the resurrection of Christ, will doubtless, never come to the faith or to belief. If you will not believe that Christ arose from the dead, then you simply will not believe it. It is, indeed, a matter of the will at this point and not of the mind. We have a fascinating example of this truth in the story of the rich man in Hades who asked Abraham, across the great fixed gulf, if someone could not go back to earth and warn his brothers. Abraham's answer was that they had Moses and the prophets who so warned. The rich man argued that if one came back from the dead there would be a response. Abraham answered in a way that shows the capacity of the human heart to reject response to truth. *"If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead."* (Luke 16:29-31)

It is our purpose in this study to consider the evidence for Christ's resurrection from the dead by virtue of Joseph's empty tomb. Many facts from antiquity render the fact of any empty tomb unimpeachable. Evidence apart from the seven ancient sources found in Scripture (the four gospels, Acts, and the letters of Paul and Peter), can be brought forward to show that the tomb was empty. The keenest minds of agnosticism have done their best to show that an empty tomb does not prove a resurrection took place. Let us examine some of the theories.

The resurrection of Christ bodily from the grave is denied by non Christians and by liberal theologians. The basic reason for this unbelief has to do with the improbability of miracles. By this reasoning a miracle is a highly irregular event. The law of nature is a very regular event. It is natural for things to happen over and over again. It is so unlikely that natural law is ever suspended, chances are it never has been. The dead are not raise able by our experience of natural law and any report to the contrary is a mistaken and unreliable report. Wise men base their belief on the highest probability. (David Hume, 1711-76, Scottish philosopher famous for his skepticism) Therefore, discounting a literal

resurrection, the following hypotheses have been put forth to explain the phenomena of Joseph's empty tomb.

#### **IV. THE THEORY THAT JESUS DID NOT DIE:**

This is the only theory which lays claim to the belief that Jesus merely swooned and was placed unconscious in the tomb. This view was first suggested by the pagan philosopher Celsus in the second century. Various forms of this position have appeared through the years. No more satisfying answer to this theory can be found than that of the critic David Strauss, who himself denied the resurrection, when he wrote, "it is impossible that a being who had stolen half-dead out of the sepulcher, who crept about weak and ill, wanting medical treatment, who required bandaging, strengthening, and indulgence, and who still at last yielded to his sufferings, could have given the disciples the impression he was a conqueror over death and the grave, the Prince of Life: an impression which lay at the bottom of their future ministry." This view is also left with the problem of when Christ actually did die and under what circumstances. There is no other ancient record of a post cross death. We may rest certain that the Romans were grimly expert about crucifixion.

#### **V. THE THEORY THAT JESUS BODY WAS STOLEN:**

Four suggestions have been made concerning removal of the body. This is the view held by the outstanding Jewish scholar, Professor Joseph Klausner, of the National Hebrew University in Jerusalem, in his epochal work, **Jesus of Nazareth**. He writes, "Joseph of Arimathea, therefore, secretly removed the body at the close of the Sabbath." It has been suggested that the disciples removed the body in order to give substance to the myth of a resurrection. Others have felt that Pontius Pilate removed the body in order to prevent a martyr cult hatching at the grave. Lastly, it might have been the Jewish authorities. They are the only ones left and they might have wanted to make the body a public spectacle to put an end to any resurrection talk. This view has insurmountable problems, those of motivation and execution.

#### **VI. THE THEORY THAT THE WOMEN WENT TO THE WRONG TOMB:**

Some scholars argue that the grief stricken women in the pre-dawn light of morning were not able to identify the exact tomb among the many rock hewn tombs in the area. The tomb they found was not yet occupied. The grave worker whom they mistook for an angel corrected their mistake with the words, "*He is not here.*" He pointed in another direction and said, "*See the place where he lay.*"

The view begs the question of a private tomb in a private burying ground. It further seems unreasonable that upon burying one's dearest loved one on a Friday afternoon, a lapse of memory could occur within the space of two days so that the body could not be located. It seems unlikely the ladies erred. If they had, doubtless Joseph of Arimathea would have corrected them in the explosion of excitement which followed.

At this point let us consider lesser known theories. There is the **twin brother theory** which suggests that Jesus emerged triumphantly from the tomb in the person of a twin brother who people beheld as the risen Lord. Another theory is that of **rapid body decomposition**. This view suggests that organ breakdown was accelerated because of climatic conditions and the tomb was not visited until Jesus' body decomposed. This seems incredible in three days.

#### **VI. THE THEORY THAT BELIEVERS HALLUCINATED:**

This view is of the opinion that the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus were the psychic effects of profound wish fulfillment. This theory is the most generally accepted explanation of the resurrection visits of Christ. Early believers beheld visions of a risen Lord which convinced them of his resurrection. The experience of one became contagious and it was not long before others saw him too. The German scholar David Strauss (1808-74) suggested that one of the disciples, perhaps Peter, had the original hallucination. His enthusiasm was contagious. The answer to this theory lies in the fact that it is unheard of for 500 people to experience the same kind of hallucination at the same time in the same place, the phenomenon is most individualistic. Secondly, visions are born of expectancy whereas the disciples were filled with sorrow and despair. Thirdly, these experiences took place over a period of seven weeks in different places and at different times of the day, and they suddenly ceased. Why did they not continue indefinitely? Also, this view does not deal with the problem of the empty tomb.

#### **VII. THE THEORY THAT THE WHOLE STORY WAS INVENTED:**

The most desperate of critics have suggested that so intent were the Apostles on fulfilling the promises Christ made concerning his resurrection, they made up the whole story. They did not intend that it be looked upon in an historical way necessarily but as a way of expressing their feeling for Jesus. Thus, there was nothing dishonest in what they did. They were very concerned about the continuing influence of Jesus and came to express themselves in terms of "myth." The stories in time came to be looked upon as actual events in the real world.

One answer to this view is the unlikelihood of the disciples persisting in the hoax when they found it led to ridicule, suffering, and martyrdom. Myths do not make martyrs.

#### **VIII. THE PROTECTIVE GARDNER THEORY:**

The second century church Father Tertullian records this unusual view. A certain gardener was so upset over curiosity seekers trampling over a lettuce seedling patch he had planted near Joseph's tomb that he removed the body and laid it in another tomb he was familiar with. This is a further explanation of the wrong tomb theory. This view introduces a bit of humor as we can imagine this energetic gardener taking on the guards and being willing to answer to the owner of a tomb for removing the body of a loved one for want of a crop of lettuce.

What can honestly and fairly be said about these conjectures? **First**, not one of them has met with general acceptance by radical critics. The reason being that there is no solid historical base for reconstructing what actually happened in any of the views. **Secondly**, no one view explains all the phenomena given in Scripture. It takes a fanciful combination of several views to do so, **Thirdly**, if they are carefully and honestly examined, the theories raise more questions than they answer. In conclusion, Joseph's tomb was empty. It happened by natural cause or supernatural cause. The Christian teaching is that God raised Jesus bodily from the dead. This is what the New Testament gospel is all about.

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