

# The Empty Tomb Echoes Down through the Centuries



By Alfred B. Davis  
7 March 2024

The empty tomb is probably one of the greatest evidences of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But how can we be sure that the tomb was really empty?

Well, first we need to establish that Jesus was actually in the tomb at some point. After all, if Jesus was never in the tomb, the fact that the tomb was later

found empty would be of no consequence. Consequently, all four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, tell us that after Jesus died on the cross His lifeless body was taken down and buried in a new tomb.

John, for instance, gives us this account in John 19:38-42:

*<sup>38</sup>And after this Joseph of Arimathaea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, besought Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus: and Pilate gave him leave. He came therefore, and took the body of Jesus. <sup>39</sup>And there came also Nicodemus, which at the first came to Jesus by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight. <sup>40</sup>Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury. <sup>41</sup>Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid. <sup>42</sup>There laid they Jesus therefore because of the Jews' preparation day; for the sepulchre was nigh at hand.*

Mark also adds, in Mark 15:47, that "...Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses beheld where he was laid." Matthew and Luke echo the same facts in their Gospels as well.

So, we have a written testimony in the Gospels telling us that at least four people, Joseph, Nicodemus, and the two Marys, witnessed the lifeless body of Jesus laid in the tomb. There were likely others, such as John, but we have these four for sure. And, based on these witnesses, it is reasonable to believe that Jesus was in the tomb.

But is that enough? All the witnesses so far could have colluded together to claim falsely that Jesus was buried in the tomb so that they could later claim that it was empty and that Jesus had risen from the dead. Consequently, the Holy Spirit ensured that the Gospel writers included a few other witnesses. Hostile witnesses.

In Matthew 27:62-66 we read:

*<sup>62</sup>Now the next day, that followed the day of the preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees came together unto Pilate, <sup>63</sup>Saying, Sir, we remember that that deceiver said, while he was*

*yet alive, After three days I will rise again. <sup>64</sup>Command therefore that the sepulchre be made sure until the third day, lest his disciples come by night, and steal him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead: so the last error shall be worse than the first. <sup>65</sup>Pilate said unto them, Ye have a watch: go your way, make it as sure as ye can. <sup>66</sup>So they went, and made the sepulchre sure, sealing the stone, and setting a watch.*

Now, while Pilate may not have personally observed the body of Jesus lying in the tomb, the soldiers of the watch that he authorized would have certainly ensured that the body of Christ was indeed in the tomb that they were about to seal and secure. Likewise, the chief priests and Pharisees would have ensured that the body of Jesus was in the tomb before it was sealed. Neither the soldiers or the religious leaders would have risked sealing an empty tomb, nor would they have been likely to collude with any of Jesus' followers to falsely claim that Jesus had risen from the dead. Consequently, since the soldiers and the Jews knew that the body of Jesus was sealed in the tomb, it would have been a simple matter to refute the later claims of Jesus' resurrection by opening the tomb and revealing the body of Jesus resting therein.

In fact, the very fact that they did not bring people to the tomb and show that the body was still there is another evidence that the tomb was empty. Instead, Matthew informs us, in Matthew 28:11-15, that the Jewish leaders colluded with the soldiers to provide an alternative narrative to the resurrection claims:

*<sup>11</sup>Now when they were going, behold, some of the watch came into the city, and shewed unto the chief priests all the things that were done. <sup>12</sup>And when they were assembled with the elders, and had taken counsel, they gave large money unto the soldiers, <sup>13</sup>Saying, Say ye, His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept. <sup>14</sup>And if this come to the governor's ears, we will persuade him, and secure you. <sup>15</sup>So they took the money, and did as they were taught: and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day.*

The irony in this is amazing. The same people who begged Pilate for a watch to seal and secure the tomb "lest his disciples come by night, and steal him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead" bribed the soldiers to "Say ye, His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept." They even promised to bribe Pilate to protect them, if need be. Seems like a lot of trouble, and expense, to refute the claims of Jesus' followers if the tomb really was not empty.

So, we have now seen both friendly witnesses and hostile witnesses to the fact that Jesus was dead and place in the tomb. We have also seen hostile witnesses to the fact that the tomb was empty. What about friendly witnesses to the empty tomb as well?

Well, Matthew 28:1-6 says:

*<sup>1</sup>In the end of the sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre. <sup>2</sup>And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it. <sup>3</sup>His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow: <sup>4</sup>And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men. <sup>5</sup>And the angel answered and said unto the women, Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. <sup>6</sup>He is not here: for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay.*

In this passage, “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary” not only see the empty tomb, but they also see the stone rolled away and that the tomb is already empty. Mark 16:1 identifies the “other Mary” as “Mary the *mother* of James” and further mentions that a third woman, Salome, was there as well. These three women, as well as the angel that rolled the stone away, certainly count as friendly eyewitnesses. (Incidentally, the soldiers that are later paid off to say “His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept” were also eyewitnesses, albeit hostile, to the angel descending from heaven and rolling back the stone. Or, at least until they fainted.)

Two more friendly witnesses, Peter and John (“that other disciple”), to the empty tomb are found in John 20:3-8:

*<sup>3</sup>Peter therefore went forth, and that other disciple, and came to the sepulchre. <sup>4</sup>So they ran both together: and the other disciple did outrun Peter, and came first to the sepulchre. <sup>5</sup>And he stooping down, and looking in, saw the linen clothes lying; yet went he not in. <sup>6</sup>Then cometh Simon Peter following him, and went into the sepulchre, and seeth the linen clothes lie, <sup>7</sup>And the napkin, that was about his head, not lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself. <sup>8</sup>Then went in also that other disciple, which came first to the sepulchre, and he saw, and believed.*

Clearly, then, multiple friendly and hostile witnesses attest to two facts:

- (1) The lifeless body of Jesus was placed in the tomb after Jesus’ crucifixion, and
- (2) The same tomb was later found to be empty.

These facts are so well established that those who reject the resurrection have never been able to refute Jesus’ followers claims of an empty tomb by directing anyone to a tomb containing the bodily remains of Jesus Christ. Instead, they resort to finding ways to explain away the empty tomb, which is, in itself, an admission to the fact of the reality of the empty tomb.

One of those ways to explain away the empty tomb was discussed earlier while looking at Matthew 28:11-15. That is the false claim, cooked up by the Jewish leaders, to bribe the soldiers charged with sealing and securing the tomb to say, “His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept.” In fact, Matthew goes on to tell us in verse 15 that, despite it being so blatantly and provably false, “this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day.” Apparently, later Christian writers, such as Justin Martyr in the second century and Tertullian in the third, claimed the same false story was still being repeated in their day.

Another feeble attempt is to claim that the women and the disciples went to the wrong tomb early in the morning on the first day of the week. Well, if this were the case, why didn’t the Jewish leaders simply point out the correct tomb, open it, and prove that it was not empty instead of fabricating the story of the disciples stealing the body of Jesus in the dark of the night? Besides, the Gospel accounts clearly tell us that the women arrived at a tomb that was being guarded by soldiers. If it was the wrong tomb, then either the soldiers had somehow gotten mixed up and were guarding the wrong tomb or more than one tomb in the area had watches over them.

My personal favorite false explanation, however, is that Jesus never actually died on the cross. Instead, he “swooned” and the coolness of the tomb revived Him. Then, realizing where He was at, He pushed the stone aside, breaking the seal and mortar, just enough to slip out unnoticed. Once

out He then carefully set the stone back in place, repaired the broken seal and mortar, and slipped away into the night. All of this was, of course, done very quietly so as not to attract the attention of the guards. Right.

Needless to say, the attempts to explain away the empty tomb only serve to underscore the inescapable conclusion that the tomb was empty. And if the tomb was empty, where was the body? Well, the Bible is clear on that, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8:

*<sup>3</sup>For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; <sup>4</sup>And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: <sup>5</sup>And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: <sup>6</sup>After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. <sup>7</sup>After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. <sup>8</sup>And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time.*

The tomb was empty because Jesus triumphed over death and hell in the resurrection, raising bodily from the grave. He then appeared to many over the next 40 days before ascending bodily up into heaven from Mount Olives in Jerusalem. If the tomb was not empty, then Jesus could not have been resurrected and our faith, according to 1 Corinthians 15:13-14, would be in vain:

*<sup>13</sup>But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen: <sup>14</sup>And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain.*

As you can see, the enemies of Jesus Christ could have easily defeated the followers of Christ at any time by simply proving that the tomb was not empty, but they could not. And so, because the tomb was empty, we can readily concur with the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:20:

*<sup>20</sup>But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept. <sup>21</sup>For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. <sup>22</sup>For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.*

And so, the fact of the empty tomb, and its importance to the message of salvation, continue to reverberate down through the centuries, assuring us of our salvation today. Amen!

###