

# What Happened to the Body?

By Brad Bromling

**Q.**

Christianity is based in its entirety on the claim that Jesus arose from the dead. Is there any actual evidence to support such a claim?

**A.**

The unexpected happened. He told them it would; He even told them how. They simply refused to believe. Thursday, Jesus walked the streets of Jerusalem with His friends; Friday, He was dead. His battered, lifeless body was removed from the cross and carried away. Friday night it was there—undisturbed. All day Saturday it was there—under guard. Sunday dawned. The tomb was empty. What happened to the body?

Jesus Christ met death face-to-face, and defeated it. The tomb was empty Sunday morning because Jesus was alive. Tombs are for the dead—not the living. By His resurrection, every claim Jesus made regarding His deity was confirmed “with power” (Romans 1:4). He not only kept His word that He would be raised, but He fulfilled a thousand-year-old prophecy by David (cf. Psalm 16:1-2; Acts 2:24-36).

In an age devoid of active miracles, people often wonder if such a claim can be proved. The answer is “yes!” A compelling case for the resurrection can be made from the information contained in the Gospel records. This article will present some of that material, and will answer common alternative theories employed to explain away the resurrection.

## THE EMPTY TOMB

If Jesus was raised, His tomb **had** to be emptied. His bodily resurrection is indefensible if He remained in the tomb even one hour of day four. If the tomb was occupied Monday,

Jesus is less than divine, and there is no hope in Him as Savior. This makes the witness of the tomb all-important.

Before discussing the evidence from the tomb, however, two preliminary points call for attention. First, was Jesus placed in a tomb? The Bible is clear on this point. His interment was witnessed by at least four individuals. Joseph of Arimathea received permission from Pilate to bury Jesus (Mark 15:43-45). He and Nicodemus hurriedly prepared and entombed the Lord's body (John 19:38). Their activities were observed by Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph (Mark 15:46-47). Then, on the next day, the chief priests and Pharisees requested of Pilate that a guard be provided for the tomb (Matthew 27:62-65). They necessarily believed Jesus' body remained there at the time of their request. This request was granted and a guard was sent. It is inconceivable that Pilate (who was responsible for maintaining the body of Jesus) would have sealed and set watch over a tomb that he did not believe was occupied. Hence, at least four people saw Jesus' body in the tomb on Friday. The Jews, Pilate, and the guards acknowledged its presence on Saturday.

Second, Jesus was not buried in just any tomb; it was a **new** tomb. This is significant when one remembers that a dead man was once miraculously revived when his body was placed into the tomb that contained Elisha's bones (2 Kings 13:21). Instead, Jesus was put into a tomb "in which no one had yet been laid" (John 19:41). The Lord's resurrection was a unique event that could not be attributed to such a factor.

With these facts established, consider how the tomb offers powerful evidence of the Lord's resurrection. First, it was impossible for Jesus to escape from the tomb without being detected. This is seen in various ways.

- All four of the Gospel records explicitly declare that the Lord was dead prior to entering the tomb (Matthew 27:50; Mark 15:44-45; Luke 23:46; John 19:32-34).
- The tomb was cut out of solid rock (Matthew 27:60). Tombs, like caskets, generally are not equipped with back doors!
- The cave opening was blocked by a massive stone (Matthew 27:60).

- The stone was affixed with a seal, and watched by soldiers (Matthew 27:66).

Obviously, it was impossible for Jesus to leave that tomb (apart from the resurrection miracle), let alone to do so without detection.

Second, the tomb did not contain the body of Jesus after the dawning of Sunday. This evidence is gleaned from those on both sides of the issue.

- The empty tomb was seen by at least six of Jesus' followers: Mary Magdalene (Matthew 28:1-10), Mary (the mother of James) and Salome (Mark 16:1-8), Joanna (Luke 24:10), and Peter and John (John 20:2-8).
- The empty tomb was probably seen by at least a few Roman guards (Matthew 28:2,11-15).
- That the tomb was empty was not denied by the antagonistic Jews (they merely attempted to explain **why** it was empty).
- That the tomb was empty was loudly proclaimed on the day of Pentecost in the presence of literally thousands of Jews who most certainly would have denied it if they could (Acts 2:24-36).

### **WHO MOVED THE STONE?**

One of the tomb's most impressive features was the immense stone that acted as its door. Matthew used the Greek phrase *lithon megan* to describe the stone (27:60). This two-word combination is the source of our modern term, "megalith" (i.e., large stone). Mark and Luke report that the four women who came to the tomb wondered who would move the stone for them (Mark 16:2-4; Luke 24:10). Mark calls the stone "very large." How large is "very large"? While we may never know, it is safe to assume that four women could move a fairly large stone without help; yet, apparently the force needed to move this stone exceeded their combined strength (Mark 16:3). If these women didn't move it, who did? Can we rationally conclude that it was moved by a brutally beaten, crucified, and allegedly dead man? The record indicates that an angel of the Lord was dispatched from heaven to accomplish the task (Matthew 28:2).

Someone might contend that the stone could not have been too heavy since Joseph rolled it in place by himself (Matthew 27:60). But this is only partially correct. The stones used for this purpose often were set in a sloping groove with the low point in front of the tomb's opening. While it may have taken many men to move and scotch the stone up and away from the doorway prior to burial, one man easily could have removed the block and allowed gravity to draw the stone down the slope into its proper resting position. Also, it is possible that the stone was set in place by a number of men under the direction of Joseph. After all, when we say that Alexander conquered the world, we do not mean that he did so without the aid of an army!

Moreover, the stone was not just nudged aside to allow a single man to slip through, but it actually was moved **completely away** from the tomb (John 20:1). The moving of the great stone by the angel was an event of such magnitude that Matthew tells us the soldiers "shook for fear of him, and became as dead men" (28:4). It is no wonder they left their post and returned to the city to make a report to the chief priests! Adding to their fear of this supernatural sighting was the fact that the tomb they were guarding was **opened** and **empty**. Perhaps they reasoned that if the Jews knew the circumstances, they would not press charges against them for losing custody of the body.

The impressive evidence from the tomb and stone may be summarized as follows. On Friday, at least four witnesses saw Jesus' dead body placed into a previously empty tomb. The tomb was sealed with a stone too large for four women to move. Jesus' presence in the tomb was acknowledged by friend and enemy alike on Saturday, when the stone was affixed with a Roman seal (McDowell, 1981, p. 59). On Sunday the stone had been moved and Jesus' body was gone!

### **WHY BRIBE THE GUARDS?**

The Jews' primary effort to prevent the disciples of Jesus from making any resurrection claims for their Master served as one of the strongest evidences supporting those claims. Matthew recounts the incident:

The next day, after the Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees were gathered together before Pilate, saying, “Sir, we remember that the deceiver said, I will arise after three days. Command therefore that the tomb be made secure until the third day to guard against his disciples stealing the body and saying, He has been raised from the dead. The last deception will be worse than the first.” Pilate replied to them, “Take guards and go and make the tomb as secure as you can.” They departed and secured the tomb, sealing the stone, and stationing the guards (Matthew 27:62-66; McCord, 1988).

Although they did not believe Christ, the Jews realized the importance of His words. The passage implies that the Jews were obtaining a **Roman** guard. Some scholars contend that Pilate told the Jews to take their **own** temple guard for the task. This seems unlikely. In the Greek, the phrase, “Take a guard” is in the imperative. It was a “curt permission” to take guards (Robertson, 1930, 1:239). Why would the Jews approach Pilate to request a **Jewish** guard? If they used their own guard, they would have been open to criticisms should the body turn up missing. Why would the temple guard fear Pilate’s reaction (Matthew 28:14)? It seems more probable that the Jews wanted a Roman guard to prevent Jesus’ disciples from stealing their Lord’s body.

As noted above, the guards were terrified when the angel moved the giant stone away from the tomb. They left their post and some of them returned to the city to report the incredible event. No doubt fearful of what would become of them, they went to the Jews (to plead for help?). The record continues:

When they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, saying, “Tell them, His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept. And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will appease him and make you secure.” So they took the money and did as they were instructed; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day (Matthew 28:12-15).

The guards were left with an empty tomb, and the Jews were faced with a dilemma. They had to deal with not just an empty tomb, but also eyewitness accounts (from **neutral** witnesses) of the resurrection of Jesus. What could they do? Three options were possible:

they could accept the testimony and believe in the One they crucified; they could complain to Pilate about his incompetent soldiers; or, they could enact a cover-up. They were not yet willing to accept this Jesus as the Messiah. If they complained to Pilate, he might either believe or slay the soldiers. If he believed them, the Jews would be defeated. If he slew them, the Jews would be left with an inexplicably empty tomb. There was really only one option for them—a cover-up. So they bought a false report and circulated it in all directions. However, contrary to their desire, everywhere that false report traveled, so went one important fact—the tomb was empty!

### **ALTERNATIVE THEORIES**

Some persist in doubt. They reject the possibility of Christ's resurrection and offer various explanations for the data.

#### **The Swoon Theory**

Some have suggested that Jesus did not actually die. He just fainted (“swooned”) and merely seemed to be dead. Thinking He was dead, His friends buried Him according to custom. After resting upon that cold stone slab, the Lord's body naturally revived; thus revived, He moved the stone and exited the tomb (carefully avoiding being spotted by the guards). This view is utterly without foundation and collapses after even the most cursory glance at the evidence.

First, the body was acknowledged as dead by all parties involved. The Romans (who were experts at crucifixion) saw He was already dead and did not need to have His legs broken (John 19:33). Pilate was surprised to hear that Jesus had died so quickly, and investigated the matter (Mark 15:44-45). The followers of Jesus knew He was dead, for they began to prepare Him for burial, and even anticipated the coming of Sunday so they could finish the job. The Jews were sure He was dead, otherwise they would not have been so concerned with keeping His disciples from stealing His body (Matthew 27:62-66).

Second, no one who has been scourged, nailed to and hung upon a cross for six hours, and has had a spear pierce his side, is going to wake up capable of rolling away a stone that four women could not move!

Third, if this theory were true, the Jews would have been more successful claiming that Jesus had only swooned than in manufacturing an excuse for the empty tomb.

Fourth, where is Jesus now? The divine record has Him appearing for only forty days after His alleged swoon—what of the rest of His life?

Fifth, can any clear-thinking person really believe that the apostles lived persecuted lives and died as martyrs for a cause they **knew** to be false, or that Jesus would have been so cruel as to be the cause of such (either directly or indirectly)? Everything we know of Jesus mitigates against this thought.

### **The Wrong Tomb Theory**

Some suggest that although Jesus was actually dead and buried, His followers accidentally went to another tomb that was empty. This theory hardly deserves mention; it defies nearly every detail of the resurrection narratives and leads to the absurd conclusion that not only His friends, but His enemies, and the Roman soldiers **all** went to the wrong tomb. On the contrary, the Gospel records mention that the interred body was seen by at least four people. How long would it take before someone recognized the mistake? After all, Joseph of Arimathea surely knew how to locate his own tomb, and easily could have corrected this error. Finally, Paul told of more than five hundred witnesses who did not see the empty tomb, but who had seen the risen Lord (1 Corinthians 15:6).

### **Friends Stole the Body**

The most common theory suggests that Jesus' friends stole His body while the guards slept. This was the story circulating when Matthew wrote his history (Matthew 28:15). But, where is the evidence that the guards slept? How could the disciples have moved the

stone and kept from waking the guards? Why would the Jews have paid the guards to say the very thing that they tried to avoid in the first place? The whole reason the Pharisees asked Pilate to grant them a guard was to keep the disciples from stealing the body!

This view implies that the disciples knowingly devoted their lives to a falsehood. But, J.P. Moreland points out, “the disciples had nothing to gain by lying and starting a new religion. They faced hardship, ridicule, hostility, and martyrs’ deaths. In light of this, they could have never sustained such unwavering motivation if they knew what they were preaching was a lie” (1987, pp. 171-172).

### **Enemies Stole the Body**

Some might aver that Jesus’ body was stolen by the Jews to keep the disciples from doing so. Hence, they took the body and hired a guard to watch an already vacant tomb. But this is ridiculous. If they stole the body, why did they not expose the disciples’ lie? Instead, they maintained the unprovable position that it was really the disciples who took the body. They never produced the body. What did they have to gain by concealing the most powerful evidence conceivable against the resurrection? Imagine how devastating it would have been for the disciples, had the Jews paraded Jesus’ rotting corpse before the many thousands on Pentecost. Such an act would have strangled the infant church in its crib.

### **God Stole the Body**

One of the most unusual theories regarding the resurrection of Jesus was penned by Charles Taze Russell, founder of the Jehovah’s Witnesses:

Our Lord’s human body was, however, supernaturally removed from the tomb; because had it remained there it would have been an insurmountable obstacle to the faith of the disciples, who were not yet instructed in spiritual things—for “the spirit was not yet given.” (John 7:39.) We know nothing about what became of it, except that it did not decay or corrupt. (Acts 2:27,31.) Whether it was dissolved into gases or whether it is still

preserved somewhere as the grand memorial of God's love, of Christ's obedience, and of our redemption, no one knows (1912, 2:129).

Obvious problems with this theory are numerous. Not only does it deny the plain teachings of Scripture, but it implies that the disciples' faith in the resurrection was based upon a falsehood. In other words, they believed the Lord was raised, and had irrefutable proof of it—when in fact He wasn't. This makes God guilty of deliberate deception.

### **The Hallucination Theory**

Another alternative theory is that the disciples never actually saw the Lord's risen body—they only imagined they did. However, the biggest hindrance to this view is that many of these eyewitnesses were not easily convinced. Thomas was hardly alone in his skepticism concerning the resurrection. When the women went to the tomb on Sunday they found it empty. Their first reaction was one of **bewilderment**, not **belief** (Luke 24:4). Remember the disciples' reaction to Mary's incredible report? They had been with Jesus and had no doubt heard Him say many times that He would rise again, and yet Mark wrote: "And when they heard that He was alive and had been seen by her, **they did not believe**" (Mark 16:11). Jesus later rebuked them for this unbelief (Mark 16:14). They should have expected His resurrection, but obviously they did not. Jesus was also disappointed in the two disciples from Emmaus for failing to believe in the resurrection claims (Luke 24:25). Even at nightfall of the resurrection day the disciples were still doubting (Luke 24:38). The point is this: at first, these witnesses were unwilling to accept the fact of the resurrection.

Had they been predisposed to believe the reports of the resurrection, we might wonder if they simply believed what they wanted to about the matter. On the contrary, here were people who initially were skeptical and required evidence for belief. If they had believed all along that they would see the Lord alive again, then isolated hallucinations might have taken place among the mentally unstable disciples (if there were any). But, hallucinations do not occur in people of stable mental condition (unless artificially induced). Regardless, the empty tomb remains unexplained by this theory.

## CONCLUSION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESURRECTION

If compelled by the evidence to believe the resurrection, what is its relevance? First, the resurrection is the strongest single argument for the deity of Jesus (Romans 1:4). If He was raised from the dead as David prophesied, and as He so often promised, then He must have been deity! If He was not raised, then David spoke of another, and Jesus was a liar.

Second, the resurrection is the foundational principle upon which Christianity is built. Paul linked the reality of salvation to the fact of the resurrection; refute that fact, and Christians are a truly pathetic lot (1 Corinthians 15). Christianity is either the one true religion of the one true God, or it is a farce—the reality of the resurrection determines which.

Third, the fact of the resurrection is the greatest source of genuine hope available in this transient and confusing world. If Christ was raised, Christians will be raised (1 Corinthians 15). Since Christ was raised, He took away the power of death. His resurrection made it possible for Him to keep His promise to prepare a heavenly home for the faithful (John 14:1-4). No one fact offers more hope or assurance than does the truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ!

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Originally published in *Reason and Revelation*, May 1993, 13[5]:33-38.

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