

45. His Resurrection: The Certainty

In our last study, we saw—almost without commentary—the Sunday after Jesus’ crucifixion. At dawn of the first day of the week, his disciples saw that the tomb where his body had been placed was empty. In addition, different people began to claim that Jesus, who was alive again, had appeared to them. First there was Mary Magdalene, then certain other women, then Cleopas and another disciple who talked with Jesus on the road to Emmaus. On their return to Jerusalem, they learned that Peter, also, had seen the Lord.

Finally Jesus presented himself to ten disciples at one time. Judas had already committed suicide and Thomas was not with the others. But the other ten were able, on this first Sunday evening after the death of Jesus, to speak with him, touch him and see him eat (showing that he was not a ghost). Other appearances of the risen Savior followed during a period of forty days, and we will examine some of these in future studies. But two facts have already been set forth which give clear evidence of the reality of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth: the empty tomb and the eye witnesses.

THE EMPTY TOMB

Three days after the crucifixion of Jesus, his tomb was found to be empty. It is a historical fact, well attested to. If the body of Christ had been found in the tomb where it was laid, Christianity would have been stillborn. Who would have proclaimed Jesus as the living Lord while his body rotted in the sepulcher? No one.

Those who don’t want to accept the idea that Jesus was resurrected have proposed three theories to explain why the body was no longer there.

1. The body stolen by his disciples? Some tell us that the disciples of Jesus stole his body. This was the first explanation offered by non-believers.

Let’s recall that after Jesus’ death, the chief priests and Pharisees had gone to Pilate and said:

“Sir, we remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise.’ Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night and steal Him away, and say to the people, ‘He has risen from the dead.’ So the last

deception will be worse than the first.’ Pilate said to them, ‘You have a guard; go your way, make it as secure as you know how.’” (Matthew 27:63-65)

So all appropriate precautions were taken: the burial place was a tomb carved out of the rock; a large stone weighing at least one ton was rolled over the opening; the seal of the Roman government was placed on the stone as a warning to any person who might think about disturbing it. And soldiers were assigned to guard it. According to experts, this would have included sixteen men, with four on duty at all times. According to Roman custom, a soldier who was found asleep at his post would be put to death.

In spite of all these precautions, some people still have claimed the body was stolen.

In Matthew 28:11-15, the Bible tells us what happened when certain women saw the Lord:

“Now while they were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened. When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, 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 does not even bother to refute this idea—after all, who can say what happens around him while he is asleep? Moreover, none of these soldiers would have dared fall asleep at the risk of losing their lives. The disciples would not have had the opportunity to steal Jesus’ body.

If the disciples had been able to steal the body of Jesus, they would have committed the greatest fraud that history has ever seen. It would also mean that they lied deliberately. But their behavior is not that of conscious liars. On the contrary, nearly all the apostles died for their testimony (and they were all beaten and imprisoned). One would not be willing to endure all of that or to give one’s life for something

he knew was a deliberate lie. Not only did they give their own lives rather than retract their words, but they knew that all those who believed that message would also die for having believed. Yet none of them renounced their testimony about the resurrection of Jesus.

2. The body stolen by Jewish authorities? A second theory says that the body of Jesus was stolen by his enemies. But this idea is even more improbable than the first. The Jewish authorities wanted to put an end to the preachings of Christians. They said to the disciples: "Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man's blood on us!" (Acts 5:28). If the Jewish authorities had the body of Jesus, they could have simply produced it and paraded it through the streets of Jerusalem. There would have been no need to tell the apostles not to preach—they would have been ridiculed. No one would have converted to Christianity. The fact that the leaders did not do such a thing proves clearly that they had not taken the body.

3. Jesus was not dead? The third theory offered by adversaries of the Gospel is that Jesus had not really died on the cross—He had fainted. It was the cool air in the tomb that revived him. But again we have to be realistic. Jesus was definitely dead. He had been severely beaten by experts in that process before the crucifixion. The Roman soldiers knew perfectly well how to use their leather whips embedded with sharp pieces of glass and stone to bruise the body and leave the skin hanging in bloody ribbons.

They knew their method of execution very well—one of the cruelest methods of execution ever invented by men, a slow death of pain and suffocation. They knew well how to determine if their victim was dead. And in Jesus's case, they went the extra mile and pierced his side with a sword. But when they came to Jesus and saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out (John 19:33,34). Let us also add that Jesus was buried according to Jewish custom: And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. Then they took the body of Jesus, and bound

it in strips of linen with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury (John 19:39,40).

Even if we suppose that Jesus had not died but merely fainted, how could he have survived for three days shut up in a humid tomb, severely wounded, wrapped in several meters of cloth strips stuck together with 50 kilos of sticky spices—without food or water or any medical care? How would he have had the strength to free himself from the bandages, roll away the gigantic stone from the entrance to the tomb, gain control of the guards, travel several kilometers on feet that had been pierced by nails, and then present himself to his disciples in a condition that would convince them that he was Lord of life?

Let's be frank—other than resurrection, there is no reasonable explanation for the empty tomb of Jesus. But there is another incontrovertible proof of the resurrection.

THE EYEWITNESSES

Remember that as soon as the first day after the resurrection, Jesus presented himself to a variety of people in different circumstances. The witnesses did not all have the same temperament. There were men and also women who saw him. He presented himself to individuals and to groups. Some appearances took place in closed spaces and some were outdoors—some in the mornings and some in the evenings.

Notice also that the witnesses of the resurrection did not expect to see him. In spite of the promises that he had made to return from the dead, one cannot say that these disciples ardently desired or hoped for his resurrection. The women who saw him went to the tomb to embalm a body, not to find a living Lord. When the women returned and said that they had seen the risen Jesus, the other disciples did not welcome the news with joy—they mocked them. Before Jesus made himself known to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24 beginning in verse 13, he found them sad and downcast, without hope in spite of the women's testimony that they had heard.

All this shows that, when it comes to the appearances of Jesus, they were not hallucinations or a mirage. This was not like the person in the desert who believes he sees an oasis with plenty of water and trees though there is really only sand. Such visions are not a group activity where everyone sees

and hears the same thing. Also, one generally sees what one very much hopes or desires to see. Finally, all these appearances stopped abruptly about 40 days after the resurrection, after Jesus went back up into heaven in the sight of his disciples.

The witnesses of the resurrection were men and women who knew him very well. They could not have been mistaken about his identity. These were also pious people who were never accused of dishonesty or immorality. They called others, also, to live according to absolute righteousness. If they were deliberately lying, we find it very difficult to find a motive. Indeed, they never received any material advantage for what they preached. On the contrary, they were persecuted to death. If this were about a modern trial, there would not be reason enough to gather a jury. Historians have found no reason to reject their writings. Many historians have solemnly said that no historical event is better attested to than the resurrection of Jesus.

CONCLUSION

In our next study, we will see the importance of this historical fact for us today. Nearly two thousand years ago, a man who was called Jesus of Nazareth was crucified in the city of Jerusalem. The third day after his death, he returned to life. Nothing is more certain. But what does this certain knowledge tell us of the real identity of this Jesus and what does all this mean for you and me? These are the questions we must consider.