

The Fact of the Empty Tomb

Even though the Gospel accounts of the women visiting the tomb have what appear to be irreconcilable differences – which Christian exegesis has sought to harmonize from the beginning – nevertheless, their most fundamental, common element is exactly the same: on the first Sunday after Jesus' death by crucifixion, His tomb was found empty. The empty tomb of Christ constitutes the first *datum*, the foundational, essential kernel of the most ancient Christian account of the Sunday after His crucifixion. What significance does it really have?

Before we answer this question, it should be noted that the empty tomb was a *fact* for all concerned parties, disciples and antagonists alike. From a historical-critical point of view, this cannot be taken for granted. By itself, it does not indicate any Resurrection upon its discovery. Mary Magdalene thought someone removed the body (Jn 20:2). When Peter – who did not believe the account of the women who saw Jesus, which was like an “idle tale” to him – ran and confirmed the empty tomb, he only “wondered what had happened” (Lk 24:11-12); it did not immediately lead to his belief in the Resurrection. Those who wanted Jesus dead seemed to understand its significance immediately: it provided a factual, public condition for what could be seen as the Resurrection of Jesus. They understood this before anyone was claiming to have seen Jesus, much less give public testimony to that effect. Therefore, when they learned of the empty tomb, they proceeded to bribe the guards to spread a rumor that the disciples had come and stolen the body (Mt 27:64, 28:12-15).

Could the body of Jesus have been stolen from the tomb? Upon closer examination, there are two details that would belie that possibility entirely, especially to the ancients who lived through these events. The first would be any bribed guard, going around saying that the body was stolen. Soldiers who failed to guard their prisoners were summarily executed. We see this in several places even in the New Testament: when Peter is let out of prison by an angel, Herod executes the keepers the following day (Acts 12:19). When an earthquake opens all the jail doors at midnight as Paul and Silas are singing hymns, the guard, supposing all to have escaped, was about to commit suicide rather than pay the penalty he thought would be coming to him (Acts 16:27). Finally, when Paul is about to suffer shipwreck, the Roman soldiers had to be restrained from killing all their prisoners, rather than endure the possibility of their escape and their own subsequent demise (Acts 27:42-3). Therefore, any soldier that was given orders to guard Jesus' tomb would not be going around town, telling people that he failed to do so. If they did, their report could not be taken at face value by anyone, and their friends and family would tell them to be quiet. Those antagonists of Jesus who bribed the soldiers therefore had to assure them that they would protect them if Pilate found out that they had failed in their commission (Mt 28:14).

The second detail that would belie the possibility of a stolen corpse is given by two Gospels only in brief passing: the grave cloths were left behind. The Evangelists John and Luke give us details about these cloths, but do not give any commentary. We may therefore surmise that the existence of these cloths was important – important enough to be mentioned – as a witness as to what had happened to Jesus. Thus, we know that the cloths were linen and that “Jesus was wrapped” with them in the manner of Jewish burial (Jn 19:40). Peter saw these as soon as he entered the tomb. These cloths were set aside in a special manner (Jn 20:5-7, Lk 24:12), they were not just thrown on the ground. Contemporary scientific research has provided stunning information on what today are believed to be these two cloths found in the tomb: the Shroud of Turin and the Sudarium of Oviedo, the former containing a full-body, anatomically

correct image of a crucified man, formed by an unknown process of oxidation which cannot be duplicated. Leaving aside this important aspect of these cloths, their very being mentioned without commentary points to the fact that a corpse was not stolen. As is sung at Sunday Vespers, “Who has ever seen or heard of a corpse stolen, and moreover one embalmed and naked, and the grave cloths left behind in the tomb?” (*Tone 5*). St. John Chrysostom likewise mentions how much time this would take, especially with the myrrh’s effect on the cloth, making a theft all but impossible. In other words, if someone were to have stolen Jesus’ embalmed corpse, it would be senseless if they had first taken it out of its mummy-like wrappings.

So what is the importance of the empty tomb? Even though the preaching of that first church in Jerusalem would have been incomprehensible without the empty tomb, clearly the Resurrection is ultimately inseparable from the testimonies of eye-witnesses. The disciples had to see and even touch Jesus for themselves. Nothing else convinced them that He had risen. Obviously, then, the fact of the empty tomb is not the same as providing proof of the Resurrection. How it became empty cannot be established scientifically. By itself, the phenomenon of the empty tomb is ambiguous; it provides a necessary circumstance but not a definitive proof of the Resurrection. Nevertheless, this circumstance is all-important in that it was acknowledged by all parties as inexplicable. As one German scholar has noted, “The resurrection *kerygma* could not have been maintained in Jerusalem for a single day – no, not for a single hour – if the emptiness of the tomb had not been established as a fact for all concerned.”

Yes, ours is not faith in the empty tomb, but in the Lord risen and glorified. Yet He has provided everything for us to see that He did in fact rise and the first proof is a publicly acknowledged empty tomb. It is for this reason that the earliest icon, still *the* icon used in the Orthodox Church on Pascha itself, is that of the women and angels at the empty tomb.