

The Empty Tomb and the Appearances

The evidence for the resurrection -- and why every natural explanation has failed

THE QUESTION EVERYTHING RESTS ON

For four weeks we have walked the ground of history. We have read what Tacitus, Josephus, and the Talmud admitted about Jesus from outside the church. We have traced the creed of 1 Corinthians 15 back to within a handful of years of the crucifixion. We have watched a frightened, scattered band of disciples die rather than recant. Every road has led to one Sunday morning and one empty grave.

This week we ask the question the apostles themselves staked everything on: was Jesus actually raised from the dead? Paul put it bluntly — if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain (1 Corinthians 15:14). So we will not flinch from the hard work. We will lay out the historical evidence for the empty tomb and the appearances, and then we will test, one by one, every natural explanation that has been offered to explain them away. Our claim is modest in method and immense in result: the resurrection is the best explanation of facts that even skeptical historians accept.

WHAT WE ARE WEIGHING

Two things require explanation: a tomb found empty, and a band of people convinced they had seen Jesus alive. Naturalists must account for both — without one another's help.

HOW WE ARE WEIGHING IT

We use only the data critical scholars grant, then ask which explanation — natural or supernatural — actually fits all of it. The conclusion follows the evidence; it is not assumed.

THE EMPTY TOMB

Notice first what the earliest creed already implies. The formula Paul received says that Christ "died ... was buried ... was raised on the third day" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). In Jewish thought, to say that a buried man was raised is to say the burial place no longer held him. The empty tomb is not a later legend bolted onto the story; it is folded into the oldest summary of the gospel we possess. As Habermas notes, the belief that "the same Jesus who was dead and buried was raised again ... also strongly implies the empty tomb, especially in the context of Jewish thought."

But the most striking witness to the empty tomb comes from the enemies of the church. The very first counter-explanation on record does not claim the body was still in the grave. It claims someone took it. Matthew records that the authorities bribed the guards to say, "His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep" (Matthew 28:13). Pause on that. To argue that the body was stolen is to concede that the body was gone. The earliest hostile response to the resurrection is itself a hostile admission that the tomb was empty.

GREEK NEW TESTAMENT · MATTHEW 28:13-15

13 λέγοντες· εἶπατε ὅτι οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ νυκτὸς ἐλθόντες ἔκλεψαν αὐτὸν ἡμῶν κοιμωμένων. **14** καὶ ἐὰν ἀκουσθῆ τοῦτο ἐπὶ τοῦ ἡγεμόνος, ἡμεῖς πείσομεν αὐτὸν καὶ ὑμᾶς ἀμερίμους ποιήσομεν. **15** οἱ δὲ λαβόντες τὰ ἀργύρια ἐποίησαν ὡς ἐδιδάχθησαν. καὶ διεφημίσθη ὁ λόγος οὗτος παρὰ Ἰουδαίοις μέχρι τῆς σήμερον [ἡμέρας].

ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION · MATTHEW 28:13-15

13 and said, "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' **14** And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." **15** So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

What is remarkable is how long that rumor outlived the first generation. It was not quietly dropped; it was institutionalized. A century later Justin Martyr and Tertullian both report that Jewish leaders were still sending out trained men around the Mediterranean to say the disciples had stolen the body. Later still, the Jewish polemic the *Toledoth Jesu* told its own version — that a gardener named Juda reburied the corpse and later sold it. The details shift; the bottom line never does. For centuries the standard counter-claim was not "the body is still there" but "someone moved the body."

Habermas draws the conclusion carefully: the Jewish sources, "with the exception of Josephus ... teach that the body was stolen or moved," and yet "they still admit the empty tomb." Notice the chain of hostile witnesses — the guards' bribe in Matthew, Justin and Tertullian a century on, the *Toledoth Jesu* later still. None of them produced a body. Add a quiet but telling fact: there are no ancient sources at all that claim the tomb still held Jesus' corpse. The empty tomb is established not by friendly testimony alone, but by the consistent admission of those who most wanted to refute it.

Note. The Nazareth Decree — a marble slab found in 1878 ordering capital punishment for anyone who disturbs a sealed grave, generally agreed to have been issued by Claudius (AD 41–54) — may well be a Roman ruler's nervous reaction to exactly this dispute: a sealed Galilean tomb, a missing body, and a rumor of theft that had reached Rome.

THE APPEARANCES

An empty tomb by itself proves only absence. What turned grief into proclamation was not a missing body but a present Lord. The same creed that names the burial goes on to list, in rapid succession, the people who said they had seen Jesus alive again.

GREEK NEW TESTAMENT · 1 CORINTHIANS 15:5-8

5 καὶ ὅτι ὤφθη Κηφᾶ εἶτα τοῖς δώδεκα· 6 ἔπειτα ὤφθη ἐπάνω πεντακοσίοις ἀδελφοῖς ἐφάπαξ, ἐξ ὧν οἱ πλείονες μένουσιν ἕως ἄρτι, τινὲς δὲ ἐκοιμήθησαν· 7 ἔπειτα ὤφθη Ἰακώβῳ εἶτα τοῖς ἀποστόλοις πᾶσιν· 8 ἔσχατον δὲ πάντων ὡσπερὶ τῷ ἐκτρώματι ὤφθη κάμοι.

ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION · 1 CORINTHIANS 15:5-8

5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

Read the list slowly, because its very shape is part of the argument. The risen Jesus is said to have appeared to an individual (Peter), to a small group (the Twelve), to a large crowd (more than five hundred at once), to another individual (James, his own brother), to the apostles together, and finally to Paul. These were not all the same kind of experience, all in the same room, on the same evening. They were spread across different people, different settings, and different points in time. A single shared mistake might be imagined for one moment; it strains to cover this scattered range of witnesses.

And the testimony is checkable. When Paul writes that "more than five hundred" saw the risen Christ, he adds — almost as a dare — that "most of whom are still alive." That is the language of a man inviting his readers to go ask them. This is why the historian Hans von Campenhausen could write of this passage, "This account meets all the demands of historical reliability that could possibly be made of such a text," and A.M. Hunter could call it testimony that "meets every

reasonable demand of historical reliability." The appearances are not a rumor reported from a distance; they are named, dated, eyewitness claims.

- 1 To **Peter** — a private appearance, also preserved independently in Luke 24:34, possibly older even than the creed.
- 2 To **the Twelve** — the inner circle, as a group.
- 3 To **more than 500 at once** — most still living when Paul wrote, and able to be questioned.
- 4 To **James** — the brother of Jesus, who had not believed during the ministry.
- 5 To **all the apostles** — the wider company of witnesses.
- 6 To **Paul** — last of all, a sworn enemy of the church.

WHY THE NATURAL EXPLANATIONS FAIL

Here is where honest inquiry must do its hardest work. It is not enough to assert the resurrection; we must ask whether any ordinary explanation accounts for the same facts more simply. For two centuries skeptics have tried, and the proposals are well known. The striking thing is that they fail not because believers reject them, but because the historical data refuse to fit them. Habermas observes that "each naturalistic theory is beset by many major objections that invalidate it as a viable hypothesis," and that even nineteenth-century liberal scholars dismantled these theories one by one.

Hallucination. Could the witnesses simply have seen things that were not there? The difficulty is that hallucinations are private and personal — like dreams, they are not shared. One grieving person might imagine a lost loved one; five hundred people do not collectively hallucinate the same figure at the same moment, nor do groups "catch" a vision from one another like a cold.

And crucially, two of the witnesses were in no frame of mind to expect anything. James was a skeptic of his brother; Paul was on his way to arrest Christians. Hallucinations arise from longing and expectation. These men were not longing to see Jesus — one doubted him, the other was hunting his followers.

Fraud and the stolen body. Could the disciples have taken the body and invented the whole thing? This founders on a simple human fact: liars do not become martyrs for what they know to be a lie. The disciples were transformed from people who hid at the arrest into people who proclaimed the resurrection in Jerusalem itself — the one city where the grave could be checked — and who went on to suffer and die for that proclamation. People will die for what they sincerely believe is true; they do not die for a corpse they themselves hid.

Legend. Could the resurrection be a story that grew over generations, as the figure of Jesus was slowly mythologized? The dates forbid it. The creed of 1 Corinthians 15 reaches back to within a few years of the crucifixion and names living eyewitnesses. Legends require time and distance from the events and the people who witnessed them; this testimony has neither. It is too early, and it is too closely tied to the very persons who claimed to have been there.

Swoon. Could Jesus have merely fainted on the cross and revived in the cool of the tomb? We answered this in Week 4: the liberal scholar David Strauss delivered the decisive blow long ago, noting that even a half-dead man crawling from a tomb, needing care himself, could never have convinced his disciples that he was the risen Conqueror of death. Add the medical evidence of the spear wound and the brutal certainty of Roman crucifixion, and the swoon theory was abandoned even by critics — Schweitzer called Strauss's critique the "death-blow" to it, and by the early twentieth century it was treated as little more than a historical curiosity of the past.

Note. Combining the failed theories does not rescue them. If hallucination cannot explain the empty tomb, and theft cannot explain the appearances, stacking weak explanations together only multiplies the problems rather than solving them. This is why Habermas concludes that the naturalistic alternatives, individually and in combination, "have thereby been shown to be unable to account for these facts."

Of all the witnesses, two stand out because they were not friends of Jesus to begin with. They had every reason to disbelieve — and they became leaders of the very movement they had doubted or hated. Their conversions are among the firmest facts in the whole inquiry.

James, the brother of Jesus. The Gospels are candid that Jesus' own brothers did not believe in him during his ministry (John 7:5). Yet after the crucifixion James appears as a pillar of the Jerusalem church and dies for the faith. What changed? The creed says simply: "he appeared to James" (1 Corinthians 15:7). Reginald Fuller draws the historian's conclusion: even if that appearance had never been recorded, "we should have to invent one in order to account for his post-resurrection conversion and rapid advance." Something turned a skeptical brother into a martyred leader, and the sources name it.

Paul, the persecutor. Paul did not merely doubt; he hunted Christians to prison and death. He had no longing for a vision and every theological reason to reject one. Yet he insists he saw the risen Christ (1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8), an experience reported three times in Acts, and he spent the rest of his life suffering for the message he had once tried to destroy. No hallucination explains a man predisposed against the very thing he claims to have seen; no legend explains a contemporary enemy converted by it.

"Even the more sceptical historians agree that ... the resurrection of Jesus from the dead was a real event in history ... not a mythical idea arising out of the creative imagination of believers."

— **Carl Braaten, on the conviction of the earliest witnesses**

"indisputable facts ... upon which both believer and unbeliever may agree."

— **Reginald Fuller, on the disciples' resurrection experiences**

Let us be careful not to overstate. The historian cannot place a camera inside the tomb, and faith is more than the sum of its evidences. What the evidence does establish is this: the witnesses really had experiences they were convinced were appearances of the risen Jesus, those experiences cannot be explained by the usual natural theories, and the empty tomb stands

admitted even by hostile sources. Given all of that, the resurrection is not a leap in the dark. It is the explanation that actually fits the facts.

"YOU WILL NOT ABANDON MY SOUL TO HADES"

The first Christians did not think they were inventing something new. They believed the resurrection was the fulfillment of Scripture — "raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:4). When Peter stood up at Pentecost to explain the empty tomb, he reached for a single psalm of David and declared it fulfilled in Jesus (Acts 2:25-32). Here it is in the Greek of the Septuagint, where it stands as Psalm 15, beside the ESV.

SEPTUAGINT (LXX) · PSALM 15:8-11

8 προωρόμην τὸν κύριον ἐνώπιόν μου διὰ παντός, ὅτι ἐκ δεξιῶν μου ἐστίν, ἵνα μὴ σαλευθῶ. 9 διὰ τοῦτο ἠὐφράνθη ἡ καρδία μου, καὶ ἠγαλλιάσατο ἡ γλῶσσά μου, ἔτι δὲ καὶ ἡ σὰρξ μου κατασκηνώσει ἐπ' ἐλπίδι, 10 ὅτι οὐκ ἐγκαταλείψεις τὴν ψυχὴν μου εἰς ἄδην οὐδὲ δώσεις τὸν ὄσιόν σου ἰδεῖν διαφθοράν. 11 ἐγνώρισάς μοι ὁδοὺς ζωῆς· πληρώσεις με εὐφροσύνης μετὰ τοῦ προσώπου σου, τερπνότητες ἐν τῇ δεξιᾷ σου εἰς τέλος.

ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION · PSALM 16:8-11

8 I have set the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken. 9 Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. 10 For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption. 11 You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

ΔΙΑΦΘΟΡΑ

diaphthora · "corruption, decay"

The LXX promises that God will not let his holy one "see *diaphthora*" — bodily decay in the grave. At Pentecost Peter argued that David died and was buried, his tomb still among them, so the psalm could not

be about David himself. It pointed forward to the One whose flesh did not decay because the tomb did not hold him. The empty grave and the appearances are the psalm coming true.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The earliest counter-claim — that the disciples stole the body — actually concedes that the tomb was empty. Why is an admission from an opponent often stronger evidence than testimony from a friend?
2. Paul lists appearances to individuals, to small groups, and to more than five hundred at once, across different times and places. Which feature of that list does the most damage to the hallucination theory, and why?
3. "Liars do not become martyrs." How does the willingness of the disciples to suffer and die in Jerusalem itself weigh against the fraud and stolen-body theories?
4. James doubted his brother and Paul hunted the church. Why are the conversions of two hostile witnesses harder to explain naturally than the faith of the original disciples?
5. Peter preached Psalm 16 as fulfilled when Jesus' flesh did not "see corruption." What difference does it make to you that the first Christians read the resurrection as the keeping of an ancient promise, not a sudden surprise?

CLOSING PRAYER

Father, you did not abandon your Holy One to the grave, nor let him see corruption. We thank you for the empty tomb that even his enemies could not deny, and for the witnesses — friends, strangers, and once-bitter foes — who staked their lives on having seen him alive. Where we have doubted, give us the honesty of Thomas and the boldness of Paul. Anchor our hope not in wishful thinking but in the risen Christ himself, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. And as you raised Jesus from the dead, raise us with him to walk in newness of life, until we see him face to

face and know the fullness of joy that is at your right hand forevermore. In the name of the risen Lord Jesus, Amen.

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