

## The Faith of a Physicist

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Excerpt from pages 116 - 119

For some, these stories are the strongest evidence for the resurrection. Why did the Jerusalem authorities not nip the nascent Christian movement in the bud by exhibiting the mouldering body of its leader? It is incredible to suggest that the disciples stole the body in an act of contrived deceit, and unbelievably lame to suggest that the women went to the wrong tomb, so that it all arose from a mistake. The only credible reason for the emptiness of the sepulchre was that Jesus had actually risen. So the argument goes.

A somewhat more careful assessment is required. The first explicit account of the empty tomb is in Mark, written some thirty-five years or so after the event. It is suggested by some scholars that we have here a second-generation story, made up as the expression of an already existing conviction (perhaps based on the appearances) that Jesus had survived death. Even the fact of a separate tomb at all is held to be questionable, for it was the common Roman practice to inter executed felons in the anonymity of a common grave. A number of points may be made in response.

While it is notorious that Paul does not refer explicitly to the empty tomb in his extant letters, not only is the argument from silence particularly dangerous when applied to such occasional writings, but also the occurrence of the phrase 'was buried' in that extraordinarily spare summary in 1 Corinthians 15 seems clearly to indicate that a special significance attached to the burial of Jesus. It seems very hard to believe that a Jew like Paul, whose background of thought would have been one emphasizing the psychosomatic unity of the human being, could have believed that Jesus was alive but that his tomb still contained his mouldering body. James Dunn concludes a survey of first-century Pharisaic thought and practice by saying, 'the ideas of resurrection and of empty tomb would naturally go together for many people. But this also means that any assertion that Jesus had been raised would be unlikely to cut much ice *unless his tomb was empty.*'<sup>1</sup>

There is archaeological evidence from Palestine later in the first century which shows that a crucified man was, in that case, buried separately and not assigned to a common grave. Thus the story of Jesus' separate burial is not impossible. If it were a made-up story, it is hard to see why Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus are the names associated with it, since these figures do not play any prominent part in the subsequent story of the Christian movement. The most natural explanation of their assignment to an honoured role is that they fulfilled it.

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<sup>1</sup> Dunn, James D.G. (1985) [The Evidence for Jesus](#); The Westminster Press: Louisville, KY, p.67.

Equally, if the discovery of the empty tomb were a concocted fiction, why, in the male-dominated world of that time, were women chosen to play the key parts? Far and away the most natural answer is that they actually did so. Of course, there are oddities about the story. How did the women imagine they were going to cope with the heavy stone blocking the entrance? (This problem is acknowledged in the account: Mark 16.3.) After three days, in that hot climate, would it not have been too late to attend to the corpse? However, contemporary understanding held that corruption set in on the fourth day (cf. John 11.17, 39). John alone suggests that some preliminary precautions had been taken on the Friday evening (John 19.39-40). Such problems are, perhaps, more characteristic of the roughness of reminiscence than the smoothness of composition and, in any case, one should not expect coolly logical behavior from women still distraught at the execution of their revered Master.

Whatever difficulties twentieth-century scholars may feel about the empty tomb stories, they do not seem to have been shared by critics of Christianity in the ancient world. As a bitter polemical argument sprang up between Judaism and the Church, it was always accepted that there was a tomb and that it was empty. The critical counter-suggestion was that the disciples had stolen the body in an act of deception, an explanation which I regard as incredible. Just how far back this argument can be traced is indicated by the story of the watch set on the tomb (Matt. 27.62-6; 28.11-15). I consider this to be a patently fabricated tale from a Christian source, concocted precisely to rebut the canard that the disciples had been grave-robbing. There is clear evidence, then, that in the first century those hostile to Christianity nevertheless accepted that the tomb had been found empty. A confirmatory consideration is the complete lack of any evidence of a cult associated with the burial place of Jesus. Ancient Jewish piety was much given to respectful veneration of the tombs of prophets and patriarchs (cf. Matt. 23.29). The total absence of this in the case of Jesus strongly suggests that from the first it was realized that for him the tomb was an irrelevancy. Christian interest in the possible burial place only dates from later centuries, when an increasing engagement of Christians thought with history led to give attention to sites associated with Jesus' life.

Thus there are many reasons for taking seriously the tradition of the empty tomb, in addition to the tradition of the appearances of the risen Christ. Dodd summarizes his assessment of the gospel writers' narratives by saying, "It looks as though they had a solid piece of tradition, which they were bound to report because it came down to them from the first witnesses, though it did not add much to the message they wished to convey, and they hardly knew what use to make of it."<sup>2</sup>

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2 Dodd, C.H. (1971), The Founder of Christianity; Collins: New York, NY, p. 172.

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