

I've found through the years that a lot of people are okay with Jesus for the first bit. They are quite fine with teaching love, with turning the other cheek, and especially with the whole challenging religious hypocrites. It's that last bit, the rising from the dead that gets a little sticky.

If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then we can believe that he was nothing more than a good teacher or a prophet. After all, the one universal in life is that we die. Everything dies. Even the animals and the very stars themselves end. But Jesus rose from the dead, affirming everything he ever taught, including that he is the son of God come to save us from our sins. A risen Jesus is one that demands more than slamming quotes on a bumper sticker or sharing Facebook memes.

So, it stands to reason that many people have tried to explain away the resurrection. They argue that maybe Jesus never died at all. Perhaps the apostles stole the body away in an elaborate scheme, or maybe they went to the wrong tomb. Perhaps this was all just a scam. But the empty tomb of Easter morning is evidence that refuses to go away and that refuses to be dismissed.

Over the years some have argued that Jesus never really died. They argue that he merely swooned on the cross or was drugged, and revived in the tomb later. The problem with this theory is that we know of the punishment of Jesus beyond any doubt due to Christian and non-Christian historical sources. Jesus was flogged by the romans 39 times, an act that often resulted in death. This was not just a leather whip. This was long strips of leather with metal claws on the end designed to rip flesh from bone. Then of course there was the crucifixion itself, which still remains after all the years among the most brutal ways to kill a human. After one's wrists and ankles were nailed to the cross, the weight of the body would

pull down, making it difficult to breath. Imagine trying to push your body up by pressing into your nailed ankles just to take a breath, and you've got the right idea. Even this was not enough, however. Scripture and history alike confirm that Jesus was pierced through the side. This was no little knife wound. Imagine a big long spear, and a man who had done this countless times before, stabbing right under your left rib cage, but angled up. This very likely would pierce the heart, and in fact, the rush of water in Scripture is consistent with someone whose heart has been under tremendous stress and has essentially ripped itself apart. That aside, this man and his spear has done this hundreds of times before. He knows death when he sees it, and he knows how to ensure it. Jesus was fully dead that day.

Well, a dead Jesus can still be ignored. So, the argument becomes that the apostles stole the body or got confused and went to the wrong tomb. Here again, Christian and non-Christian sources make this impossible. It is well documented that Jesus was laid in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. Even if the apostles got lost, surely someone in the days or weeks to come, as word of the resurrection spread, would've gone to the correct tomb and produced a body. The romans and the Jews would have been highly motivated to do so. Perhaps then it was the apostles who stoles the body. Again, this is not realistic.

The tomb was guarded by the romans. A stolen body would've meant death. And you think your boss is hardnosed. Furthermore, even the romans and the Jews didn't believe that's what happened, but explicitly gave that as a cover story. Moreover, tombs such as Jesus' were caves carved down into rock. The level of the tomb would be lower than ground level. When you read Peter stooping down to look into the tomb that's because its lower than the ground around it. Large stone was rolled from

this higher lever down a slope to lock in front of the entrance. To imagine that the apostles stole the body we would have to believe that they silently evaded the highly motivated roman soldiers standing guard, rolled the stone away, which would have taken tremendous man power, undressed Jesus body and carried the naked corpse to another location, all while never, in two thousand years, has the body been found, and even in the face of death they kept this story. It simply isn't possible.

There is but one excuse left to grasp, and that is that somehow all this was a scam. The apostles created this religion for some reason or another and the empty tomb was somehow a scam.

The problem is that even people who hated Christianity could not deny that the apostles certainly believed they had encountered the resurrected Christ. More than 500 people saw Jesus after the resurrection. That's a lot of people. That would fill up the theater downtown. And then there is the witness of the apostles, of the men and women who testified to the Gospel and the especially the resurrection. And of course, we would have to believe all these people could keep a secret. The problem being 500 can keep a secret, if 499 of them are dead. Think of all the scandals that would have gone unknown if people could keep a secret. It is impossible to imagine no one fell out of favor, got annoyed, no one made a deathbed confession, and so on. Almost like the empty tomb was and in the truth.

Immediately after the crucifixion the apostles were huddled together in fear. They were hiding. They had denied the name of Jesus. The next thing we know they've become bold apostles, traveling to far off and often hostile areas to share the good news. According to church tradition, all of the apostles except for John were martyred. James was beheaded, Peter

was crucified upside down, Bartolomew was flayed alive. All of them suffered violent ends. It is ridiculous to think they would have done so had they known that Jesus remained dead and so, too, would they.

The empty tomb will not allow itself to be explained away. It is one of the greatest witnesses to the risen Christ. Jesus Christ is who he says he is. Which makes it very important for us to know what he said, and to live by it. Today I invite you to come, see for yourself, the tomb is empty, Jesus is not there for not even death could hold Christ. Come, let us become disciples to the risen Lord.

Rev. Kate Mauch

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