

There are three Historical truths about the resurrection which are so strong that they are accepted by all serious historians, even non-Christians.

1. The tomb in which Jesus was buried was discovered empty by a group of women on the Sunday following the crucifixion.
2. Jesus' disciples had real experiences with one whom they believed was the risen Christ.
3. As a result of the preaching of these disciples, which had the resurrection at its center, the Christian church was established and grew.

Evidence for the Empty Tomb

FIRST: the resurrection was preached in the same city where Jesus had been buried shortly before. Jesus' disciples did not go to some obscure place where no one had heard of Jesus to begin preaching about the resurrection, but instead began preaching in Jerusalem, the very city where Jesus had died and been buried. They could not have done this if Jesus was still in his tomb--no one would have believed them.

SECOND: the earliest Jewish arguments against Christianity admit the empty tomb.

In Matthew 28:11-15, there is a reference made to the Jew's attempt to refute Christianity by saying that the disciples stole the body. This is significant because it shows that the Jews did not deny the empty tomb. Instead, their "stolen body" theory admitted the significant truth that the tomb was in fact empty.

The Toledoth Jesu, a compilation of early Jewish writings, is another source acknowledging this. It acknowledges that the tomb was empty, and attempts to explain it away. Further, we have a record of a second century debate between a

Christian and a Jew, in which a reference is made to the fact that the Jews claim the body was stolen. So it is pretty well established that the early Jews admitted the empty tomb. Remember that the Jewish leaders were opposed to Christianity. **They were hostile witnesses.** In acknowledging the empty tomb, they were admitting the reality of a fact that was certainly not in their favor.

THIRD: the empty tomb account in the gospel of Mark is based upon a source that originated within seven years of the event it narrates. This places the evidence for the empty tomb too early to be legendary, and makes it much more likely that it is accurate. What is the evidence for this? I will list two pieces. A German commentator on Mark, Rudolf Pesch, points out that this pre-Markan source never mentions the high priest by name. "This implies that Caiaphas, who we know was high priest at that time, was still high priest when the story began circulating." For "if it had been written after Caiaphas' term of office, his name would have had to have been used to distinguish him from the next high priest. But since Caiaphas was high priest from A.D. 18 to 37, this story began circulating no later than A.D. 37, within the first seven years after the events," as Michael Horton has summarized it. Furthermore, Pesch argues "that since Paul's traditions concerning the Last Supper [written in 56] (1 Cor 11) presuppose the Markan account, that implies that the Markan source goes right back to the early years" of Christianity (Craig). So the early source Mark used puts the testimony of the empty tomb too early to be legendary.

FOURTH: the empty tomb is supported by the historical reliability of the burial story. NT scholars agree that the burial story is one of the best established facts about Jesus. One reason for this is because of the inclusion of Joseph of Arimathea as

the one who buried Christ. Joseph was a member of the Jewish Sanhedrein, a sort of Jewish supreme court. People of this ruling class were simply too well known for fictitious stories about them to be pulled off in this way. Also, if the burial account was legendary, one would expect to find conflicting traditions--which we don't have.

The burial account and empty tomb account have grammatical and linguistic ties, indicating that they are one continuous account. Therefore, if the burial account is accurate, the empty tomb is likely to be accurate as well. Further, if the burial account is accurate then everyone knew where Jesus was buried. This would have been decisive evidence to refute the early Christians who were preaching the resurrection--for if the tomb had not been empty, it would have been evident to all and the disciples would have been exposed as frauds at worst, or insane at best.

FIFTH: Jesus' tomb was never venerated as a shrine. This is striking because it was the 1st century custom to set up a shrine at the site of a holy man's bones. There were at least 50 such sites in Jesus' day. Since there was no such shrine for Jesus, it suggests that his bones weren't there.

SIXTH: Mark's account of the empty tomb is simple and shows no signs of legendary development. This is very apparent when we compare it with the gospel of Peter, a forgery from about 125. This legend has all of the Jewish leaders, Roman guards, and many people from the countryside gathered to watch the resurrection. Then three men come out of the tomb, with their heads reaching up to the clouds. Then a talking cross comes out of the tomb! This is what legend looks like, and we see none of that in Mark's account of the empty tomb--or anywhere else in the gospels for that matter!

SEVENTH: women discovered the tomb was empty. Why is this important? Because, the testimony of women in 1st century Jewish culture was considered worthless. As Craig says, "If the empty tomb story were a legend, then it is most likely that the male disciples would have been made the first to discover the empty tomb. The fact that despised women, whose testimony was deemed worthless, were the chief witnesses to the fact of the empty tomb can only be plausibly explained if, like it or not, they actually were the discoverers of the empty tomb."

There have been various theories used to explain away the empty tomb, such as that the body was stolen. But those theories are laughed at today by all serious scholars. In fact, they have been considered dead and refuted for almost a hundred years.

For example, the Jews or Romans had no motive to steal the body--they wanted to suppress Christianity, not encourage it by providing it with an empty tomb. The disciples would have had no motive, either. Their preaching on the resurrection got them beaten, killed, and persecuted. Why would they go through all of this for a deliberate lie? No serious scholars hold to any of these theories today.

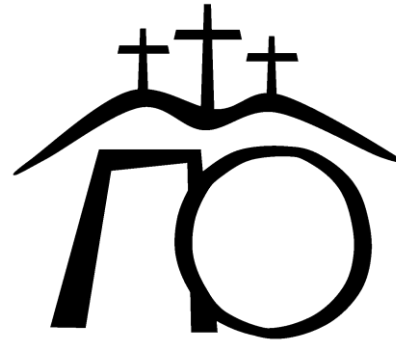
What explanation, then, do the critics offer, you may ask? Craig tells us that, "They are self-confessedly without any explanation to offer. There is simply no plausible natural explanation today to account for Jesus' tomb being empty. If we deny the resurrection of Jesus, we are left with an inexplicable mystery."

The resurrection of Jesus is not just the best explanation for the empty tomb, it is the only explanation around!

Because of the strong evidence for the empty tomb, most recent scholars do not deny it.

D.H. Van Daalen has said, "It is extremely difficult to object to the empty tomb on historical grounds; those who deny it do so on the basis of theological or philosophical assumptions."

Jacob Kremer, who has specialized in the study of the resurrection and is a New Testament critic, has said "By far most exegetes hold firmly to the reliability of the biblical statements about the empty tomb" and he lists twenty-eight scholars to back up his fantastic claim.



Information drawn from these sources:

- William Lane Craig's *Reasonable Faith & The Son Rises*
- J.P. Moreland's *Scaling the Secular City*
- Gary Habermas' *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus & Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?*
- desiringgod.org/articles/historical-evidence-for-the-resurrection

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Historical Evidence for the Resurrection

The Empty Tomb



There is solid historical ground for the truth that Jesus Christ rose from the dead.



"Inference to the Best Explanation"

A method commonly used today to determine the historicity of an event.

William Lane Craig describes this as an approach where we, "begin with the evidence available to us and then infer what would, if true, provide the best explanation of that evidence." In other words, we ought to accept an event as historical if it gives the best explanation for the evidence surrounding it.