

Luke 24:1-12

An empty tomb

Introduction

In 1746, two cousins, Gilbert West and George Lyttelton made a deal. They were prominent English intellectuals, friends of Dr Samuel Johnson and Alexander Pope. And they decided to strike a "death blow" to Christianity, of which they were both deeply sceptical. They agreed to spend a year independently researching a key claim of the Bible to expose it as a fraud: Gilbert West chose to disprove the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and George Lyttelton to disprove the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. If they could disprove these two events, they believed that the entire Christian faith would come tumbling down. In 1747, after a year of painstaking research, the two men met to share their findings. But to their surprise, they had both reached the same unintended conclusion: rather than disproving these two events, they had found that the evidence in support of them was too strong to ignore. Both became Christians. They each published their research as books. And for his work, *Observations on the History and Evidences of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ*, Gilbert West received an honorary doctorate from Oxford university. And they're far from the only ones.

Nearly 200 years later, a British advertising executive and journalist called Frank Morison set out to do the same, and to prove that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was a myth. He approached his task as an investigative journalist, planning to write up his findings as a book. But, he says, he found the evidence to be 'stubborn' and eventually he too became a believer. In 1930, he published his findings in a very different book to the one he had originally planned to write, and called it *Who Moved the Stone?*

After him came Lee Strobel, an award-winning journalist and legal editor for the Chicago Tribune. He was an atheist. When his wife became a Christian in 1979, he set out to rescue her from her irrational beliefs by using his legal and journalistic skills to prove that Christianity was a sham. Two years later, he concluded that the evidence for the resurrection was so strong that it would 'require more faith to maintain his atheism than to become a Christian'. He became a Christian in 1981 and in 1998 he published his findings in a book called, *The Case for Christ*.

Gilbert West, Frank Morison and Lee Strobel; three sceptics who became believers. We could name many others, people like C. S. Lewis, who went from scepticism to faith. But what strikes me about these three is that they each looked at the historical evidence for the resurrection as opponents yet found it compelling.

Lord Darling, a former High Court Judge and Lord Chief Justice of England, said this:

‘The crux of the problem of whether Jesus was or was not what he proclaimed himself to be, must surely depend on the truth or otherwise of the resurrection. On that greatest point we are not merely to have faith. In its favour as a living truth there exists such overwhelming evidence, positive and negative, factual and circumstantial, that no intelligent jury in the world could fail to bring in the verdict that the resurrection story is true.’

Having just celebrated Easter, we’re going to spend the next four weeks considering the evidence for the resurrection. The apostle Peter writes, in 1 Peter 3:15: **Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have.** People often describe our faith as ‘blind faith’, a leap in the dark. My aim over the next four weeks is to give us confidence to defend our faith by showing the strong evidence it has in support.

I won’t say everything that could be said. Many of you will have read these things before, in which case I want to remind you of what you already know. For some of you, this may be the first time you’ve thought about the historical evidence for the resurrection, and I hope that doing so will deepen your joy in Christ. Or you may still be sceptical about the resurrection and not yet consider yourself a believer. If that’s you, I’m so glad you’re here. And I hope to show you that faith in the risen Jesus is entirely reasonable.

I’m not trying to prove it with 100% certainty, because that’s an impossible task. In a court of law, what’s required is to demonstrate that something is true beyond reasonable doubt. Scholars of history accept something as historical if the reasons for accepting it significantly outweigh the reasons for not accepting it. So, my task over the next four weeks is to show that we have very good reasons for accepting the resurrection of Jesus based on the significant historical evidence that supports it.

These sermons won’t be like our normal sermons when we work carefully through a passage of scripture. Rather, we’re going to follow the events of the resurrection chronologically, as recorded in scripture, and examine the evidence. And the place we must start is the death of Jesus. If Jesus didn’t die on the cross, then he can’t have risen from the grave. So, then, as we think about the evidence for the resurrection, here’s our first question: Did Jesus really die?

Did Jesus really die?

The evidence is overwhelming. Firstly, it’s well attested in the New Testament. We hold a Bible today as a single book, but originally the New Testament writings circulated separately. They were only collected into one book over time. And they come from numerous different authors. If you’ve still got Luke 24 open in front of you, glance across the page to verse 33 of the previous chapter. Luke writes this: **When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals – one on his right, the other on his left.** Matthew, Mark and John all say the same thing. Jesus was crucified.

Now, we don't need to make any claims about the inspiration or authority of the Bible to see the weight of their evidence. For the record, I fully believe in the inspiration and authority of the Bible. I believe it is the authoritative word of God. But even if we read it as nothing more than a historical book, it gives us a huge amount of information. People may object that it's biased. But all historical writings contain bias. Historians don't dismiss them on that basis.

The clear testimony of the four gospel writers is that Jesus was crucified. And there are non-Christian sources from the same period that record the crucifixion as well. For example, Tacitus, considered to be the greatest Roman historian, writes that, 'Christus, from whom the name [Christian] had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty (by which he means crucifixion) during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate.' And we could add other non-Christian sources like Lucian of Samosata and the Talmud, which also refer to Jesus' crucifixion.

One scholar writes of Jesus, 'That he was crucified is as sure as anything historical can ever be.'

So then, Jesus was crucified; we have Christian and non-Christian sources that confirm it. But did he die or could he have survived it?

In November 2014, 91-year-old Janina Kolkiewicz was discovered by her niece with no pulse and not breathing. The family doctor was called to the home and having checked her vitals, declared her dead. He signed her death certificate, and she was taken to the local mortuary to await her funeral. Her body was placed in a body bag and moved into cold storage. It was 11 hours later that the mortuary staff noticed movement inside the bag. They opened it up and found her shivering but very much alive. After being taken home, she complained of feeling cold and asked for a cup of tea and two pancakes. The doctor was stunned, and said that when he examined her, he had been absolutely certain that she was dead.

Well, what about Jesus? Could he have survived? Might he merely have passed out? Again, we have the testimony of the four gospel writers. Look across at Luke 23, verse 46. It's just under the heading, 'The death of Jesus'. Luke writes this: **Jesus called out with a loud voice, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.'** **When he had said this, he breathed his last.** And again, Matthew, Mark and John say the same. But could they have been mistaken, like Janina's doctor?

We need to consider the ordeal that Jesus went through. The gospel writers tell us that Jesus was flogged before his crucifixion. It was known as scourging, and it was viscous.

The intention of scourging the victim was to weaken them to a point just short of death. The soldiers used a whip, in which small iron balls and sharp pieces of bone were tied at intervals. We can imagine the damage that would do as it penetrated skin and muscle, sometimes reaching as far as the internal organs. Many didn't survive it.

Then, carrying his own cross on his lacerated back, Jesus set out to the place of execution. Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us that the soldiers forced a bystander called Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross, presumably because of Jesus' state of exhaustion.

Then he was crucified. Crucifixion caused death by asphyxia. Victims couldn't breathe properly and had to keep pushing themselves up on their pierced feet, scraping their scourged back against the wood. Eventually exhaustion prevented them from doing so and they died of asphyxiation. The Roman writer Quintilian confirms the practice of piercing the victim's side with a spear to confirm they were dead, and that's what we read in John's Gospel. John tells us that when the soldiers pierced the side of Jesus, it brought a sudden flow of blood and water. Modern medicine confirms that this was almost certainly due to the rupturing of the pericardial sac as the spear pierced the heart. No doubt about the victim's status remained after that.

Even if Jesus could somehow have survived all of that and been mistaken for dead, can we really believe that a few days later, a bruised, blooded Jesus, limping on pierced feet, bent over in pain, could have convinced the disciples that he was gloriously risen from the dead? Not a chance! Rather than worshipping him, they would have rushed him to a doctor.

We're establishing the facts. And based on the evidence, we can be confident that Jesus was crucified and that he really did die. The next stage in the story is his burial in a tomb. Opponents of the resurrection question every detail, and this is no exception. It was normal for the bodies of those who were crucified to be put in a common grave. To be buried in a tomb is unusual. So can we really believe it happened. Was Jesus really buried in a tomb?

Was Jesus really buried in a tomb?

Well, let's consider what Luke tells us. He records the details at the end of chapter 23. In verse 50 he says this: **Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea, and he himself was waiting for the kingdom of God. Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body. Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid.** The same details are found in Matthew, Mark and John.

Archaeologists have confirmed that tombs like the one described in the Gospels have been discovered in Israel. Strikingly, they all date from Jesus' day, they were only used by rich or prominent people, and they have been found in Jerusalem. All the archaeological evidence fits with the New Testament accounts. And Joseph of Arimathea is exactly the sort of person who would own such a tomb.

So, consider this. If you were making up a fictitious account of Jesus' burial, why on earth would you make the central character a prominent member of the ruling Jewish council, the Sanhedrin? You'd have to be stupid to do that, because if it wasn't true, he would

immediately expose it as a lie. And the membership of the Sanhedrin was so well known that if Joseph himself was a fictitious character, it would be obvious.

Although Jesus' burial was unusual, we have no grounds for believing it to be untrue. Based on the historical evidence, we can be confident that Jesus was crucified, died and that his body was buried in a tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea. So that brings us to our final question for this week. On Easter morning, was the tomb really empty?

Was the tomb really empty?

This is how Luke describes it, in chapter 24, verses 1 to 3. **On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.**

For 17 years, the family of Tom Bell visited a grave at Holy Trinity Church in Wingate, Durham. They left flowers and regularly maintained the headstone. But in 2022, when Tom's wife died and the family prepared to bury her in the same plot, they discovered that the grave was empty. Tom's remains weren't there. What had happened? After a big search using probes and historic maps, Tom's remains were finally located six feet to the side in an unmarked section of the graveyard. It was put down to human error.

Could something similar account for the empty tomb of Jesus? There are three pieces of evidence that we need to consider.

Firstly, Jesus was buried in Jerusalem.

The story of the resurrection, which originated in Jerusalem, wouldn't have lasted very long if there was still a tomb in Jerusalem with a body in it. It stands to reason that no-one would have believed it. Luke tells us that the women who went to the tomb and discovered it to be empty had already been there two days earlier, and seen Jesus being buried. They knew which tomb to go to. But if, somehow, they had made a mistake and gone to the wrong tomb, it would have been easy for the authorities to go to the right tomb, exhume the body and display it. Likewise, if the Romans or the Jews had moved the body, they could have simply produced it.

It's significant that no opponents of the resurrection claim to have found a body. In fact, they confirm there wasn't one. So, secondly, we need to consider the evidence of Jesus' enemies.

In Matthew's Gospel, we read that Pilate gives orders for the tomb to be guarded so that the body of Jesus couldn't be stolen. And then when the empty tomb gets discovered, rather than producing a body or pointing to a different tomb, the Jewish authorities and the soldiers collude to make up a story.

Matthew tells us this: **When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, ‘You are to say, ‘His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.’** And then Matthew adds, **...this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.** (Matthew 28:12-13, 15)

Of course, that doesn’t make sense. If they were asleep, how could they have known who might have stolen the body. But the point is that it’s a made up story. Justin Martyr, writing in the second century AD, wrote that the Jewish leaders were still spreading the same rumour in his day. The point is that you only need an explanation if the tomb was actually empty! If a student tells his teacher that the dog’s eaten his homework, that’s because he hasn’t got any homework to hand in.

When Jesus’ disciples tell us that the tomb was empty, we might suspect their motives. But when his enemies tell us it’s empty, we can be confident that it’s true.

Thirdly, and finally, it’s significant that the first witnesses to the empty tomb were women.

All four gospels tell us that the first witnesses were women. And that’s remarkable because in both Roman and Jewish cultures, the testimony of women was regarded as questionable at best. According to the Talmud, a foundational text of Judaism, any evidence which came from a woman wasn’t valid. It says this: ‘Any evidence which a woman [gives] is not valid, also they are not valid to offer. This is equivalent to saying that one who is Rabbinically accounted a robber is qualified to give the same evidence as a woman.’ (Talmud, Rosh Hashannah 1.8)

For obvious reasons, if you were inventing the story of the empty tomb, you wouldn’t have women as your primary witnesses. If you were making it up, your primary witnesses would be men. The fact that the first witnesses are women points to the authenticity of the account.

When we put those three pieces of evidence together – the location in Jerusalem, the evidence of enemies and the testimony of the women – it becomes highly likely that the story of the empty tomb is historically reliable. And a majority of scholars accept it as such. When we look at the evidence, we can be confident that Jesus was crucified, died and was buried, and that on the third day the tomb was empty. The historical evidence is compelling.

Conclusion

So where does that leave us?

Well, as believers, I hope it deepens our convictions about the truth of the resurrection and strengthens the hope we have because of Jesus. Faith isn’t the result of evidence; it’s the

work of the Holy Spirit within us. But when we see the evidence, it should deepen our faith. And it should give us greater confidence to speak of the empty tomb with others. There is strong evidence for the resurrection, and we shouldn't be afraid to use it. Of course, people will always raise objections. But someone's failure to believe in the resurrection isn't for a lack of evidence.

Nonetheless, if you wouldn't yet call yourself a Christian, you may still be unpersuaded. And if so, we should acknowledge that, at the time, the empty tomb alone didn't convince anyone of the resurrection. As we heard in our Bible reading, the disciples weren't persuaded. Luke says, in verse 11, that the words of the women seemed to them like nonsense. In John's Gospel we read that Thomas refused to believe. Peter himself went away wondering what had happened. Luke tells us in verse 12 that he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves. It was a sure sign that the body hadn't been stolen by tomb robbers, because they'd have taken the linen with them. But he doesn't know what to make of it. This initial disbelief is highly embarrassing for those who would go on to be leaders of the church... another indication that we are dealing with a reliable account and not a fabrication. So, if you're still not persuaded, you're in good company. But I hope like Peter, it's at least got your attention. Over the coming weeks, as we look at more evidence, the case for the resurrection will only get stronger.

What ultimately convinced the disciples of the truth of the resurrection wasn't the empty tomb. It was the appearances of the risen Jesus. And that's what we'll be looking at next week.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, thank you for the confidence we can have in the resurrection because of the historical evidence that supports it. As we consider that evidence, please strengthen our faith in Christ and our joy in his empty tomb. Please help us to remember the evidence for the empty tomb so that when others ask us to give the reason for the hope we have, we can answer with confidence. And please would Christ be exalted in us as we live in the light of his resurrection in this week ahead. In his name we pray. Amen.