



THE EMPTY TOMB OF JESUS

Dr. Glenn Parkinson

It was my last day in Israel. After ten days with a group exploring biblical history off the beaten path, we ended up in the bustling city of Jerusalem. That morning we had visited the Garden Tomb, a beautiful retreat lovingly tended by English Christians dedicated to commemorating Jesus' resurrection. Unfortunately, the crowds had been heavy that morning, and the experience felt crowded and hurried. I was disappointed because spending some "quality time" at that site had been one of the personal goals of my journey.

However, that afternoon I had about three hours of free time, so I decided to try again on my own. Not speaking Hebrew, I set out with my CD player from the hotel in the general direction and just started walking.

I realize that the Garden Tomb may not be Jesus' actual tomb. There are some intriguing archeological arguments in favor of it, but just as many against. But whether it was the true tomb of Jesus or merely paralleled the real one, I very much wanted to visit the roots of my faith ...



The resurrection of Jesus is the centerpiece of the Christian faith. Not that it is more important than other key features, but it serves to link them all together. Christ's divinity is underscored by the resurrection. The significance of the cross is vindicated by the resurrection. The ascension and current reign of Christ, culminating in his future return is all made possible by the resurrection. When the Apostle Paul summarized the gospel message, he wrote,

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures ...

1 Corinthians 15:1-4

All four Gospels record a distinct personal account of Jesus' resurrection. The earliest Christian sermons recorded in the Book of Acts emphasize the resurrection even more than the cross. The resurrection is described as the historical event which marks Jesus as the real McCoy, the one objectively true Savior in a world of well intentioned (and some not so well intentioned) candidates. Because it vindicates Jesus himself, it enables Jesus to tie together what would otherwise be hopelessly loose ends from the Old Testament: an obvious Creator whom we do not know ... a humanity as full of pain and misery as we are full of beauty and potential ... our instinctive conviction that our lives have meaning even though death seems to negate it all. All these things are stunningly resolved in Jesus Christ. And the New Testament declares that Jesus can be taken seriously because he rose from the dead.

Biblical Christianity—Christianity as understood by Christ and the apostles—simply could not exist without the resurrection of Jesus. Churches that once had historic biblical roots are able to invent new religions whenever they wish, of course, based upon creeds they generate among themselves. But biblical Christianity is founded on the historical, bodily resurrection of Christ.

This is why any serious attack on the resurrection of Christ is an attack on the Christian faith as a whole. It's one thing to reject the Christian faith personally, or even mock Christians for being stupid or obnoxious. It's another thing to attack the historicity of the resurrection. Such an attack is not a matter of inspecting the fruit of the Christian tree; it is an axe applied to the roots.

Since no one seriously doubts that Jesus died, there are only so many options available to explain away the empty tomb. Was Jesus drugged during the crucifixion, "buried" alive and later revived? (Never taken seriously, since a nearly dead Jesus would hardly have inspired faith that he was divine.) Did the Jews or Romans remove the body? (The resurrection was inconvenient for both; yet neither ever even claimed to have taken the body.) Did the disciples take the body? (This was, in fact, a contemporary rumor which Matthew refutes in his gospel, in Chapter 28).

This last option is the only reasonable alternative, and runs up against a most intriguing question. Except for John (who suffered

exile), all of the original apostles, plus Paul, are believed to have eventually died as martyrs for their faith. Granted, many people will die for what they believe. But who in their right mind would die for something they *knew* to be false? One of the things that defined an apostle was that they personally saw the risen Jesus with their own eyes. If they had taken the body, they would have known that it was all a lie.

Consider Paul's take on the significance of Jesus' resurrection:

If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.

1 Corinthians 15:14-19

There is one other way to attack the resurrection, and that is to discount the reliability of the entire biblical narrative, asserting that the church made up Jesus, or recreated Jesus for its own social ends. This was the path taken by a competing religious group, loosely defined as *Gnostic*, a word that echoes their devotion to secret knowledge. Centuries after Christ, this group published a series of books they claimed were copies of the real Scriptures that had been rejected by the church and replaced with what we now have as the Bible.

As a general analogy, imagine a long standing, secretive group that never accepted democratic American principles. Imagine them producing in our day copies of ancient letters which may or may not have been actually written by the founding fathers, allegedly proving that they were really misunderstood fascists. This secret society would ask us to reject all the history we have in favor of their alleged copies of letters that paint an entirely different picture of our past. Furthermore, they ask to be taken with equal seriousness as our whole body of established history, just because they think their ideas are better.

The Gnostic accounts tell a different story than the resurrection recorded by the biblical witnesses. Their denial of the resurrection has resurfaced over the centuries, even among those who may not even remember or care about the original Gnostic philosophy that motivated it. Recently, it has appeared once again in the fictional novel, *The DaVinci Code*, and in the film *The Lost Tomb of Jesus*.

Christians take these attacks seriously. For one thing, the public reputation of Jesus is at stake. Typically, attacks on Christianity focus on the weaknesses of the church, but an attack on the resurrection slanders Jesus himself. It tries to do exactly what the attackers accuse the church of doing: it attempts to reject the Jesus we know from the best historical sources and remake him in their own philosophical image.

Speaking from my own perspective, I can say that Christians also take these attacks seriously because they are deeply personal attacks on our faith (whether or not they are intended as such). I don't mean this in the sense that I think those who attack the resurrection are trying to persecute me. I mean it in the sense that by attacking Christ's resurrection, they are of necessity chopping away at the boat that is keeping me afloat in this life.

Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, integrates my entire view of the world and my place in it. He literally gives me reason to be alive; I'm not certain I would care to live without him. Every single day, I walk near the edge of my faith, determined to appreciate its importance to me. Beyond that edge is a bottomless abyss that swallows every secular value and aspiration. No meaning can survive in that abyss. In there, life could only be what I defined it to be, and I'm going to die, taking all my self-defined meaning out of existence with me. My children, my works, all of humanity and the planet with us—everything is destined to die, unless God has defeated death. And I mean defeated death in all its aspects, overcoming evil and pain and all that distances us from our Creator, as well.

Those who attack the resurrection are trying to push me over the edge. Whether they are honestly asking deep questions or only trying to make a name and a buck for themselves, I have to take their push seriously. I have to look at their arguments and consider their

evidence—not to poke holes in it, as if this were an academic fencing match—but because my own faith demands a clear and rational understanding.

I should clarify at this point, for the sake of any readers who are not Christians, that faith in Christ is not only a matter of rational arguments. An adult when I became a Christian, I did not come to faith through debate alone—and frankly, I do not know of anyone who has. The Bible says that God’s Spirit takes the initiative when it comes to faith, that he calls a person and does something to enable them to “see” the truth of the gospel message. I can tell you the details of my own spiritual journey, the impact of the lives I met and the spiritual experiences I had, along with all the rational considerations that led to my faith. But I cannot explain my change of heart from that of a committed atheist. In the end, I came to believe in Jesus because I wanted to, I was compelled to. It made sense in every way. Actually, if I might coin a phrase, it not only made sense to me, it made *life* to me.

However, while Christian faith does not stand solely on intellectual grounds, it does assume the historicity of Jesus, and of his resurrection in particular. If I were intellectually forced to doubt its historicity, the conflict in me would be immense. Even so, integrity demands that I consider the arguments and alternatives presented by Gnostics and any others who would attack Jesus’ resurrection.

Which brings me to the purpose of this little booklet. In this day when such attacks have resurfaced, I write to respectfully suggest that Christ’s resurrection is something every one of us needs to come to grips with, one way or another. Jesus either rose from the dead or he didn’t, and one’s conviction about that is the seed out of which the rest of his or her life will grow.

Do I expect to live until I die? Do I expect that I (and my spouse, and my children) will simply cease to exist one day? Do I believe that the significance of everything I accomplish will die with me, or die with those who remember me? Or do I instinctively know that death cannot be the end, but have no idea why that is so—no rational basis for such a hope? Or is my expectation of the future full of dread, realizing that if God exists (and is presumably a better person than I am), then I might very well face his displeasure?

Alternatively, could I hope in a future which fills my challenges and successes and suffering with meaning? A future in which “love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other.” A future in which the whole creation shouts with joy at the ultimate renewal of humanity? And could such a hope be grounded in something more than wishful thinking?

Jesus once said,

“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

John 11:25-26

That’s the question, isn’t it? “Do you believe this?” How can a person answer such a question? As someone who has struggled with this, I can suggest a couple of things:

First, try to be open about the possibilities. By all means, see the *DaVinci* movie or look into the *Lost Tomb* business if you like (just be sure to research the many reasonable responses to these high profile money makers). I haven’t found anything there to threaten the resurrection, but that’s something you would have to decide for yourself. But also read all four of the New Testament Gospels in a modern translation and with an open mind. If you have questions, follow them up with people who know the Bible well, and include someone who takes it seriously for what it actually says.

Second, ponder the scope of the implications. On the one hand, what would it mean if Jesus had not been raised? Are you prepared to actually live your life on that basis? What would it mean to live with the prospect of death—personal and cosmic—hanging over you every day? What would motivate your goals? Your politics? Your causes and passions? On the other hand, what would it mean to become a follower of Christ, living with a hope of eternal life that enables you to afford investing yourself in today? Someone once said, “Not to decide is to decide.” One way or another, you’re going to have to live your life. How are you going to decide to live it?

Third, try to assess your own motives in this search. I include this because of something Jesus once said to those who wondered about him:

“If anyone chooses to do God’s will, he will find out whether my

teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.”

John 7:17

Therefore, a good place to start might be with a prayer to God, asking him to make the truth about Jesus clear to you, one way or another. If God is there, he could do that. If he's not there, then it wouldn't really matter (would *anything* really matter?).



... Eventually, I spotted the bus terminal I had seen that morning, and the unobtrusive white wall behind it that housed the garden. As I approached, I saw a collection of vans sprouting a tangle of cables and wires. I discovered that the site had been closed for two hours while a musician taped some sort of music video. The taping was over, and since no one objected, I walked in behind the crew.

The center of the garden had been tidied up after the taping, and temporarily deserted. What a difference to be there without a mass of other tourists displacing the carefully kept serenity. The ancient place (complete with first century Christian graffiti) was like the one mentioned in the gospel accounts: not far from a cliff that still looks like a skull, a large round stone door that rolled in a stone grove, and a ledge for the body (clumsily extended in the rock, as if the person laid to rest had been taller than expected).

The area was absolutely quiet, and for the next half hour there was no human being there but me, listening to my favorite music and gazing at an empty tomb.



SEVERNA PARK
evangelical presbyterian^(PCA)

110 Ritchie Highway - Pasadena, MD 21146
410-544-5013 - www.spepchurch.org