

The Empty Tomb

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Abstract: *This essay examines the historical reliability of the empty tomb tradition. The scriptural tradition, found in the four canonical gospels, is reviewed. In surveying the arguments against the empty tomb tradition, two groups of arguments can be found, denial that the tradition has any historical basis, and rejection that the empty tomb is explained by the resurrection. Arguments in favour of the empty tomb as an historical event are reviewed, and it is concluded that the empty tomb tradition is as reliable as accounts of any other ancient event. Finally, the meaning of the empty tomb is examined. Although the empty tomb is a reliable historical event, it has never been understood as conclusive proof of the resurrection.*

Key Words: Christian apologetics; Jesus' empty tomb; resurrection of Jesus Christ; New Testament tradition; historical criticism

The story of the empty tomb is heard every year by Christians during the liturgical commemoration of Easter and the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The historical accuracy of this tradition has been challenged by critics. This essay will examine the basis and reliability of the empty tomb tradition, and explore its meaning for Christian faith in the resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the axis on which Christianity turns. Without the resurrection, there is no New Testament and Jesus becomes just another failed revolutionary or wise teacher.¹ "If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain."² It is the central fact upheld in both the New Testament and the ecumenical Creeds of the church. The earliest complete works in the NT canon³ attest to the resurrection, as do the surviving pre-testamental statements found within the New Testament.⁴ Today, scholars of all theological persuasions affirm the central importance of the resurrection to the Christian faith.

However, there is no description of the resurrection itself. It was unwitnessed, and is not described in any of the canonical texts. The extracanonical gospel of Peter describes Jesus' resurrection, as seen by the soldiers guarding the tomb.⁵ However, this is generally held to be a fanciful elaboration of accounts found in the canonical gospels.⁶ The closest

¹ Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 346.

² 1 Corinthians 15:14.

³ 1 Thess 1:10, about 50 CE.

⁴ Such as 1 Cor 15:3-7.

⁵ Thorwald Lorenzen, *Resurrection and Discipleship: Interpretive Models, Biblical Reflections, Theological Consequences* (Maryknoll: Orbis books, 1995), 174.

⁶ Nicholas Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003), 593. This comprehensive work unfortunately was not available when I wrote the bulk of this essay. It is well recommended for anyone seeking a comprehensive treatment of the resurrection.

that the contemporary reader has to a description of the resurrection are the Easter accounts: the stories of the experiences of Jesus' male and female disciples on the third day after the crucifixion. The Easter stories take two forms: stories of Jesus' appearance to male and female disciples, and stories relating the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb.⁷

The appearances of the risen Jesus form part of the earliest preaching of the apostles, found in Acts 2⁸ and in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. The first letter to the Corinthians dates from approximately 55-57 CE.⁹ 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 appears to be a primitive statement of Christian faith, a tradition of the early church predating Paul's letter: "...that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve..." The appearance of Jesus to Paul is described by Paul in Galatians¹⁰ and by Luke in Acts.¹¹ The appearances of the risen Jesus to the disciples are described in narrative form in the gospels of Matthew, Luke and John.

Finally, there are four accounts of the empty tomb, found in each of the four canonical gospels. While the basic story remains the same, each account has distinct differences. These may be noted by any careful reader; this essay will outline the basic story and the major variations between the accounts.

The Empty Tomb Story

The empty tomb account in Mark's gospel (Mk 16:1-8) is generally accepted as the earliest,¹² between 60 and 75 CE. The earliest manuscripts of Mark finish at verse 8. Expanded endings to Mark have been found, and date from the second century CE. These have been demonstrated to be a harmonisation of the accounts from Matthew, Luke and Acts.¹³

On the first day of the week, the day after the Sabbath, Mary Magdalene and some other women go to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus. When they arrive, they find the stone in front of the entrance of the tomb removed. They enter the tomb where they meet a young man dressed in white, who announces that Jesus is risen, and is not in the tomb. The women are commanded to tell Peter and the disciples to go to Galilee where Jesus will meet them. Seized with fear, the women flee the tomb and tell no one.

The origin of this empty tomb narrative is contentious. Some hold that Mark was working from a pre-existing narrative tradition. Others argue that Mark had composed this passage entirely himself.¹⁴ It is difficult to find evidence of a tradition prior to Mark, as there is little to compare the text to. Matthew and Luke are of little help in this regard. Mark remains the first witness to the story of the women arriving at the tomb. The reader may gain some insight through review of the internal coherence of the narrative.¹⁵

⁷ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man*. (London: SCM press 1968), 88.

⁸ Specifically, Acts 2:32, "This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses."

⁹ Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 512.

¹⁰ Gal 1:16.

¹¹ Acts 9:1-9.

¹² Jean Delorme, 'Résurrection et Tombeau de Jésus: Marc 16, 1-8 dans la Tradition Évangélique' in P. Surgy (ed.), *La résurrection du Christ* (Paris: Cerf, 1969), 105. Note that there are mainstream NT scholars who maintain Matthean priority, eg. X. Léon-Dufour.

¹³ Raymond Brown, *Introduction*, 148.

¹⁴ John Crossan, 'Empty tomb and absent Lord (Mark 16: 1-8)' in Werner Kelber (ed.) *The Passion in Mark*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 135.

¹⁵ Delorme, *Résurrection*, 112.

There are two instances of textual inconsistency that suggest the narrative may have been edited at an early stage, or may perhaps be a composite work combining pre-existent traditions.¹⁶ Verse 1, 'When the Sabbath was over...', is virtually repeated in verse 2, 'and very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen...'. Perkins suggests that 'on the first day [after the Sabbath]' is a Semitic expression retained by Mark from his original source.¹⁷ This collection of temporal markers would not be expected if the narrative had been composed as one piece.

Many critics see verse 7 as similarly incongruous with the rest of this narrative. 'Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he has told you.' This is consistent with Mk 14:28, and appears to have been inserted by Mark to refer to the Galilean appearance tradition.¹⁸ The following verse, 'So they went out and fled...and they said nothing...', may also be a Markan insertion. Lüdemann, following Bultmann, interprets the silence of the women as *apologia* to explain the absence of the empty tomb narrative in earlier Christian texts.¹⁹ These incongruous textual elements suggest that a pre-existing text was manipulated by the evangelist. Of course, this in itself does not provide any final judgement as to the historicity of this tradition.

Matthew's account of the empty tomb is generally read as an expansion of the Markan story to accommodate Matthew's own theological agenda. The gospel of Matthew is concerned to demonstrate Jesus as the fulfilment of Jewish messianic hope; in Matthew's account of Jesus' ministry, Jesus is repeatedly shown as an interpreter of, and successor to, Mosaic Law. The crucifixion story in Matthew's gospel uses Jewish apocalyptic imagery to demonstrate the dawn of a new age. The earthquake and the rising of the dead in Matt 27:51 are references to Ezekiel, while the tearing of the temple curtain heralds the end of the old temple cult.²⁰ The apocalyptic imagery continues in Matthew's account of the empty tomb. Matt 28:2-4, the great earthquake and the guards falling stunned, connects directly with Matt 27:51. The young man in white sitting in the tomb has become an angel with dazzling clothes, who is seen to descend from heaven and move the stone for the women. In Matthew's account, the women again respond to the angel's message with fear, but this time they tell the disciples.²¹

Apologetic concerns are clearly present. Mark's account leaves questions that Matthew seeks to address. In an apparent attempt to dismiss suggestions that the empty tomb is due to anything other than the resurrection, Matthew includes a story about the posting of guards at the tomb.²² The tomb is never left unguarded, and the stone remains in place until removed by the angel. Stories of grave robbery by the disciples are shown to have originated with the Jewish elders and the tomb guards.²³ Matthew excludes any suggestion that the fate of Jesus' body was other than that given by the angel.

¹⁶ Delorme, *Résurrection*, 112.

¹⁷ PHEME PERKINS, *Resurrection: New Testament Witness and Contemporary Reflection* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1984), 117.

¹⁸ Perkins, *Resurrection*, 120.

¹⁹ Gerd Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Jesus: History, Experience, Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 116.

²⁰ Perkins, *Resurrection*, 125.

²¹ Matt 28:8.

²² Matt 27:62-66.

²³ Matt 28:11-15.

In Matthew and John, the story of the empty tomb is linked with the appearance stories. In these gospels, stories of Jesus' appearance near the tomb may reflect an independent tradition that was not available to Mark.²⁴ If so, neither is it mentioned by Paul in his catalogue of Jesus' appearances. Alternatively, they may reflect the evangelists' attempts to combine these two Easter traditions into a harmonised testimony of the resurrection.

The account of the empty tomb in Luke seems to be based on Mark's account, but with significant variation not found in the other gospels. Whether this represents an alternative literary source used by Luke, or is purely a redactional change, is open to dispute. The main differences from Mark are the names of the women, the presence of two angels (rather than a single young man in white), the wording of the angelic message, and the positive response of the women to the angelic command. Luke 24:12 has Peter coming to the tomb to confirm the findings of the women. A number of scholars remark that women could not give valid legal testimony in the Palestinian Jewish society.²⁵ The presence of Peter may therefore be an apologetic addition.

Perkins weighs up the varying scholarly opinions and elects for the existence of a separate literary source available only to Luke, to explain the differences in his account.²⁶ She bases much of her judgement on literary and linguistic differences between the Markan and Lukan accounts. A third independent account of the empty tomb, in addition to Mark and John, would certainly strengthen the argument for the historicity of the event. However, following Pannenberg²⁷ and others, there is insufficient evidence in this case for a separate pre-Lukan tradition; as in Matthew, the differences are due mainly to the rewriting of Markan material to fit with the rest of his gospel.

Some propose that the opening verses of John's Easter account (Jn 20:1-2) constitute the historical core of the empty tomb tradition.²⁸ Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb, finds the stone rolled away, and returns to tell the disciples. Those who see the angelic appearances and proclamations as later editorial innovations prefer this historical core. Later verses of John's account include a conversation by Mary Magdalene with two angels, followed by an encounter with the risen Jesus. These are considered legendary accretions to the basic text. It is difficult to reconcile these differences with the earlier tomb accounts, without postulating some corruption of the original tradition.

John provides the most detail about the contents of the empty tomb. The location of the grave clothes is clearly noted, yet is not mentioned in the other gospel accounts. The involvement of disciples, particularly Peter, with the empty tomb may indicate a tradition that is distinct from Mark but shared with Luke (despite the reservations outlined above).²⁹ The inclusion of the beloved disciple is consistent with the rest of John's gospel, and indicates a tradition or an interest in the beloved disciple unique to the evangelist's community. John's account may constitute an independent account of the empty tomb. However, it must be born in mind that John's gospel is the most recent of the canonical gospels, and the most removed from the initial event.

²⁴ Perkins, *Resurrection*, 130.

²⁵ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 345.

²⁶ Perkins, *Resurrection*, 151ff.

²⁷ Pannenberg, *Jesus*, 102.

²⁸ Raymond Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1973), 120.

²⁹ Perkins, *Resurrection*, 173.

For the purposes of historical enquiry, Mark 16:1-8 appears to be the most reliable text. While the Matthean and Lukan versions may be of interest in tracing the apologetic and catechetical activities of the evangelists' communities, they appear to be based firmly on the Markan account, and are of little use here. The Johannine story may form an independent account of the empty tomb. However, it is significantly later; where it varies with Mark, the older version should be given precedence.

Rejection of the Empty Tomb

Objections to the empty tomb have been raised from the earliest days of the Christian church. These objections fall into two groups: denial of the historical basis behind the tradition (the empty tomb never happened), and denial of the resurrection as the explanation for the event (the empty tomb was misinterpreted).

The classical objections to the empty tomb narrative suggest non-miraculous causes for Jesus' disappearance from the tomb. Apologetic aspects of Matthew's tomb account have already been mentioned. Claims of grave robbery by disciples arose again in the second century, and in the eighteenth century by Reimarus.³⁰ Variations on this theme are the removal of the body by a local gardener, mentioned by Tertullian in his third century work *de Spectaculis*,³¹ more recent suggestions that Joseph of Arimathea shifted the body to a more convenient tomb without the disciples' knowledge, or that other grave robbers took the body.³² One early twentieth century writer suggests that the women went to the wrong tomb.³³ Other writers have suggested that Jesus did not die on the cross, but recovered in the tomb before making his way out.³⁴

Most recent objections to the empty tomb, however, are based on a denial of the initial event, and claim that the empty tomb narrative developed without an historical basis. These objections are based on textual and historical criticism (the text does not add up) and ideological and philosophical objection (these sort of things don't happen).

Willi Marxsen argues that the historical data for the bodily resurrection are obscure and problematic. The New Testament accounts are, for the most part, unverifiable third-hand testimonies. The only first-hand account is Paul's description of his experience with the risen Christ. However, Paul's description (Gal 1:16 and 1 Cor 15:8) is very brief. Luke's description in Acts 9:1-19 is considerably longer, but is again a second-hand account that describes the event as a subjective vision experienced only by Paul. The gospel accounts are contradictory and show signs of having been altered to meet a variety of theological, apologetic and catechetical agendas. While there is clear historical evidence for Jesus' life and ministry, Marxsen is agnostic about the empty tomb and the events of the resurrection, due to lack of historical evidence.³⁵ Marxsen sees faith as the way past this historical *impasse*. According to Marxsen, the Christian faith is not faith in historically unverifiable and dubious events, but in the life, work and witness of Jesus and his cause. The New Testament suggests that Peter was the first disciple to realise that Jesus lives on

³⁰ Gerald O'Collins, *Jesus Risen: A Historical, Fundamental and Systematic Examination of Christ's Resurrection* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 124.

³¹ O'Collins, *Jesus Risen*, 9.

³² O'Collins, *Jesus Risen*, 125.

³³ O'Collins, *Jesus Risen*, 124.

³⁴ H. Schonfield, referred to in Roch Kereszty, *Jesus Christ: Fundamentals of Christology*, revised and updated edition (New York: St. Paul's, 2002), 50. Also B. Thierring.

³⁵ Willi Marxsen, *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth* (London: SCM, 1970), 119.

wherever his cause is lived out.³⁶ This realisation first came to Peter in a vision, and is therefore historically unverifiable.³⁷ Needless to say, the status of the empty tomb story is irrelevant to Marxsen's understanding of the resurrection.

Bornkamm shares Marxsen's historical fatalism regarding the events surrounding the resurrection. We cannot know with any historical certainty, he writes, about the events that surround the resurrection. What we can be sure of is the transformation that took place in Jesus' earliest followers. For Bornkamm, this is the 'last historical fact available.'³⁸ This Easter experience of the Risen Lord was shared by a large number of different individuals and communities. Bornkamm is convinced of the reality of an underlying experience of the Resurrected One, as difficult as he may find the historical reliability of the Easter narratives as found in the gospels.³⁹

The variation in the Easter accounts relates to a variety of fluid traditions that were in circulation before the formation of the Gospels. Bornkamm dismisses the story of the women at the empty tomb, found in Mark 16:1-8, as 'obviously a legend'.⁴⁰ Interestingly, like Bultmann, he does not see the need to outline his reasoning further. He takes Mark 16:8 at its word: the women "...went out and fled... .. and said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid". For Bornkamm, this indicates that this story is a late development in the resurrection tradition.⁴¹ Clearly for him, this reflects the kind of privileged point of view only attainable by the teller of legends. If this was told while the women in question were alive, then as a legend it could be directly challenged, and therefore it must date from a later period. Bornkamm seems to ignore the possibility that the account, as it stands, could indicate that the women initially said nothing but later were able to recount their experience.

Bultmann was a landmark figure in modern New Testament scholarship, who has had a significant influence on Protestant and Roman Catholic theology.⁴² Bultmann's objection to historical criticism of the resurrection stories, including the empty tomb, is made first and foremost on ideological grounds. History cannot and should not contribute to the decision of faith; to look for historical evidence behind the resurrection is to make a work out of faith. As a Lutheran, this is anathema. The historical basis or otherwise of the empty tomb, the appearance of Christ to the disciples, and their testimony to the resurrection are irrelevant to faith.⁴³

For Bultmann, the resurrection is a purely mythological event, expressing the self-understanding of the early Christians and the significance of Christ to the new believing community in the language and metaphor of the period. Bodily resurrection and appearance stories did not indicate an underlying miraculous event, but were instead the disciples' way of expressing their new awareness of the ultimate redeeming value of the

³⁶ Marxsen, *Resurrection*, 125.

³⁷ Marxsen, *Resurrection*, 126.

³⁸ Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1960), 180.

³⁹ Bornkamm, *Jesus*, 181.

⁴⁰ Bornkamm, *Jesus*, 181.

⁴¹ Bornkamm, *Jesus*, 183.

⁴² Given the extent of Bultmann's scholarship, my assessment is based on Gerald O'Collins' summary in *Jesus Risen*.

⁴³ O'Collins, *Jesus Risen*, 47.

cross.⁴⁴ Jesus' death on the cross brings to an end this world of sin and death. The salvation of the cross is present wherever the cross is proclaimed.⁴⁵

The empty tomb is dismissed as an apologetic, legendary tradition, secondary to and derived from the apostolic kerygma.⁴⁶ Many New Testament exegetes interpret the young man in the tomb as an angel. Angels often appeared in Hebrew Scripture as men, for example 2 Mac 3:26ff and Daniel 3:25. White clothing is used within the New Testament as an indication of heavenly glory.⁴⁷ The angel is a mythological device for communicating divine revelation.⁴⁸ Insertion of the apostles' teaching on the resurrection into the mouth of the angel gives divine approval of their proclamation.⁴⁹ The empty tomb was invented as proof of the resurrection.

Crossan is a contemporary scholar who comes to a similar conclusion based on literary criticism. There is no documented evidence of an empty tomb tradition existing before Mark. In the context of the gospel as a whole, the narrative climax is the crucifixion and Jesus' dereliction on the cross. The silence of the women fleeing the tomb compliments the abandonment of the male disciples from around the cross. Subsequent empty tomb accounts are based on Mark's account, and cannot be used as independent attestation. The empty tomb was an invention of the evangelist, who composed this passage *in toto*, as a fitting closure to his gospel.⁵⁰

Jesus was probably buried by those who crucified him at some unknown location: "those who knew the site did not care and those who cared did not know the site."⁵¹ Crossan rejects both the burial by Joseph of Arimathea and the empty tomb stories as narrative inventions. The usual fate of condemned criminals was to be buried in an anonymous common grave. Crossan sees no reason why Jesus should be any different. There was no empty tomb; the tomb was unknown.⁵²

Support for the Empty Tomb

The most explicit, if also the least sophisticated, rejection of the empty tomb story comes from John Spong, American Episcopalian bishop and popular writer. "I will not let my twentieth-century mind to be compromised by the literalism of another era that is not capable of being believed in a literal way today."⁵³ It is clearly difficult to challenge such ideological commitment directly. However, it is possible to respond to many of the other objections raised against the historicity of the empty tomb.

Grave robbery and fraud by the disciples is possible, but unlikely. If the accounts of Jesus' passion are accepted, which was a public and verifiable event, the disciples fled in fear of their lives. Their teacher, and the man they saw as the hope for Israel, had been

⁴⁴ O'Collins, *Jesus Risen*, 49.

⁴⁵ O'Collins, *Jesus Risen*, 50.

⁴⁶ O'Collins, *Jesus Risen*, 47.

⁴⁷ Mark 9:3; Revelation 7:9ff.

⁴⁸ Delorme, *Résurrection*, 129-130.

⁴⁹ Gerd Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Jesus: History, Experience, Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress press, 1994), 116.

⁵⁰ John Crossan, 'Empty Tomb and Absent Lord (Mark 16: 1-8),' in Werner Kelber (ed.), *The Passion in Mark* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 135.

⁵¹ Crossan, 'Empty Tomb,' 152.

⁵² Crossan, 'Empty Tomb,' 152.

⁵³ John Spong, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 237.

arrested, tortured and crucified. It is doubtful that they would have had sufficient forethought or organisation in such a situation to gather again in Jerusalem to perpetuate such a crime. It is even less conceivable that they would later have the conviction and inspiration to risk their lives preaching Jesus' resurrection, if their religion was based on such conscious fraud.

Grave robbery by others is very dubious, given that Jesus possessed very little (if anything) during his life, and that as a condemned criminal, far from home, whatever he did have was lost. It is impossible to see a motive. Suggestions of movement of Jesus' body by Joseph of Arimathea or by a gardener are difficult to refute, but again one would have to question the motivation.⁵⁴ The suggestion that the women went to the wrong tomb is hardly convincing.

Stories of Jesus fainting on the cross, and later recovering after burial, have almost certainly circulated since antiquity. This neatly explains Jesus' appearances. In this case one must depend on the abilities of the Roman soldiers who were present. One would expect that the soldiers who examined Jesus after he was taken down from the cross would be able to assess whether or not he was dead.⁵⁵ The argument of Jesus having survived the crucifixion is nonsensical.

The writers of the New Testament were well aware that the empty tomb could be interpreted in a variety of ways. Thus the presence in Matt 28:11-16 of the testimony of the tomb guards, and in John 20:13 of the response of Mary Magdalene to the empty tomb.⁵⁶ Surviving evidence from gospel material of the earliest attempts to refute the resurrection does not challenge the existence of the empty tomb, only the interpretation of it.

The proclamation of the resurrection in Jerusalem by Peter, as described in Acts 2, could not have occurred if the location of Jesus' body were known. The Jerusalem crowd saw Jesus condemned and crucified. Jerusalem dwellers would have known where the condemned were buried, and where Jesus was likely to have been. First century Jewish understanding of the resurrection included bodily resurrection. Therefore, Peter could not have preached to the Jerusalem crowd at Pentecost if the location, or probable location, of Jesus' body could be demonstrated.⁵⁷ This remains true, regardless of whether the Markan account of the tomb is shown to be a later legend.⁵⁸

The empty tomb story as found in Mark does not fill any apologetic role. Perkins argues that the empty tomb is not presupposed within the Pauline proclamation of the resurrection. Paul is able to describe the resurrection and the resurrection body without referring to an empty tomb. There was no need to create an apologetic account to support Paul's teaching. Furthermore, in the Markan account, only women are witness to the tomb. Within first century Palestinian and Hellene culture, women were unable to give legal testimony. Therefore, in contrast to the arguments of Bultmann and Crossan, Mary Magdalene and the other women in Mark's account are a poor choice for an apologetic legend or literary creation.⁵⁹ The empty tomb in Mark cannot be seen as an apologetic creation.

⁵⁴ O'Collins, *Jesus Risen*, 124.

⁵⁵ Kereszty, *Jesus Christ*, 51.

⁵⁶ O'Collins, *Jesus Risen*, 121.

⁵⁷ Pannenberg, *Jesus*, 100.

⁵⁸ Pannenberg, *Jesus*, 101.

⁵⁹ Perkins, *Resurrection*, 94.

The story of the empty tomb is as reliable, and as well attested to, as any event in the New Testament. There may be some value in the interpretation of the young man in the tomb as a literary device to proclaim the apostolic kerygma and provide reference to the Galilean appearance tradition. The earliest challenges to the resurrection were not based on rejection of the empty tomb, but on its interpretation. The historical core of the tomb story may be further specified. Soon after the crucifixion, perhaps the day after the Sabbath, Mary Magdalene and some other women went to the place where Jesus was buried, and found the tomb empty. The empty tomb story (with or without the young man in white) relates an historical event experienced by some of Jesus' followers.

The Meaning of the Empty Tomb

The empty tomb is an historical event. It occurred at a particular time and place; it is not a literary creation or an apologetic legend. The empty tomb narrative is not, ultimately, essential to the Christian faith in the resurrection. Paul was able to preach effectively on the resurrection without direct mention of the tomb. However, the New Testament canon is greater than the writings of the apostle Paul. Thus a consideration of the empty tomb also provides theological insights into the resurrection and the Christian life.

The empty tomb does not explain itself. Within the gospel accounts, the tomb appears as a surprise and a mystery to those who discover it. The full significance of the empty tomb is only understood in light of the knowledge of Jesus' resurrection, by the revelation from God through an angel, or by the encounter with the risen Jesus. Insights into the meaning of the empty tomb are found by looking beyond the purely historical core of the Markan account.

At the resurrection, Jesus entered into new life, a new form of life. Writers are clear to distinguish this new life in resurrection from resuscitation, the reanimation of the dead. Paul describes the resurrection body as incorruptible, imperishable.⁶⁰ Resuscitated individuals, such as Lazarus or Jairus' daughter, have returned to their old life, with all their previous failings, and will die again. Jesus enters a new form of existence, which he may share with others. The new creation inaugurated by Jesus at his resurrection gives the Christian hope that he or she is part of this new world through faith in the Resurrected One.⁶¹

In the light of the resurrection, the empty tomb becomes a sign of redemption, the renewal of the whole body. The Resurrected One is continuous with the Crucified One. The resurrection is not some spiritualised, psychological phenomenon in the minds of the disciples.⁶² The resurrected body is not a disembodied essence of an individual. At the resurrection, the whole body, including the decaying and irredeemably lost parts, is transformed and raised.

The empty tomb is not only the absence of a body, but the absence of Jesus completely. Jesus is not in the tomb. The disciples cannot find him there. He cannot be visited in person by the will of the enquirer. Jesus is not readily available to legitimate any particular regime or programme. Instead Jesus appears, at his own time, to a variety of followers, as they leave the tomb behind.⁶³

⁶⁰ 1 Cor 15:42f.

⁶¹ Luke Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospel* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 134.

⁶² Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 194.

⁶³ Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 191.

'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, he is risen.'⁶⁴ The Risen One has gone ahead on the road.⁶⁵ He is awaiting the disciples at Galilee. He is encountered unexpectedly by followers, then as now as they attempt to follow his teaching. Occasionally, as for Paul on the road to Damascus, he meets others unexpectedly as they oppose his teaching. The Risen One is not confined by the walls of a tomb or the walls of religious affiliation. The tomb is empty. He has risen, bringing new life to all.

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⁶⁴ Luke 24:5.

⁶⁵ Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 126.