

The Empty Tomb Is Not Proof By Reverend Litton Logan

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Scriptures:

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ²And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?' ⁴When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. ⁵As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. ⁶But he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. ⁷But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.' ⁸So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. Mark 16: 1-8 (NRSV)

Sermon:

The earliest manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark, along with the evidence of several of the early Church fathers, indicate that Mark's Gospel ends in Chapter 16, verse 8. (Please turn to page 66 in the New Testament and read footnote "t") This is where I shall end it today because I believe it is the authentic ending. I will deal only with Jesus' resurrection in the Gospel of Mark, so please keep this in mind as I go along.

When we look at Mark's Gospel in comparison to the other gospels, it is brief and to the point. Mark tells his audiences very concisely everything he thinks they need to know to have life in Jesus the Christ because I think he believed the end was right around the corner. Also, Mark's audience would have understood his Jewish context and would not need very much elaboration or interpretation. Therefore, the Gospel of Mark closes with a young man telling the women to remind Jesus' disciples that he said he would meet them three days after his death in Galilee. Galilee was the outback, backward areas in what would come to be called Palestine, where it all began. But, this young man makes a special point of mentioning Peter, the apostle, who denied his relationship with Jesus three times before his crucifixion.

People often wonder if this young man in our text today was the same young follower of Jesus who fled in fear during Jesus' arrest and had a sindōn, an expensive burial cloth, ripped off his body by one of the arresting officials as he fled, but is now bravely waiting at what could be considered a desecrated tomb. He waits to explain and redirect anyone, who may have come to the tomb to mourn, that they are to go and meet Jesus in "Galilee". The women are amazed and frightened, leaving the empty tomb and telling no one.

Let me make it very clear that Christianity is powered and empowered by the resurrection, and the resurrection has withstood two-thousand years of attacks and still performs the works and wonders of faith in people's lives. However, let us look at Jesus' resurrection within Mark's understanding of its historical Palestinian Jewish context today as best we can. I think we will get an expanded insight into Jesus' resurrection and its importance for Mark's first audience and for us.

Traditionally in Judaism, even a criminal or one's enemy, was to be buried. Also, people were supposed to be buried within the day or a day of death. If a person was not buried within a day for whatever reasons, given the climate, there would have been a need to anoint the body

with preservative oils, ointments, spices, and perfumes. However, the anointing and perfuming of a body could also be seen as a simple act of devotion and honor for the deceased, regardless of the time between death and burial, but not normally after burial. Now, couple these understandings with the Jewish belief among many at the time that the soul was aware of its dead body and lingered for three days before migrating on the fourth day to a holding place to await resurrection and we find another dimension to these women coming to honor a dead Jesus in a tomb.

A body was to remain in a tomb for one year until decomposition was complete. The process of decay was believed to be painful for the body and thus an atoning process was believed to be the sins retained in the flesh. After one year and all sins purged, a person's bones, which were understood to house their personality, would be retrieved, placed in a special box, an ossuary, and given a second burial and there to await the resurrection and serve as the scaffolding for a reconstituted body.

Therefore, Jesus' resurrection within three days of death sends a clear and irrefutable message to the Jewish authorities and others that although they may have condemned Jesus for blasphemy and manipulated his crucifixion for sedition, a higher authority had overturned their judgment and sentence - he did not have anything to atone for in death.¹

I often find it amazing that people discount all the varied eye-witness accounts of the resurrection in the Christian Scriptures while confirming all sorts of other ancient phenomena. Some people doubt because they see the New Testament eye-witnesses as just ancient, religious primitives with some perverse, honorific interest to protect. This is to say, that to save face since Jesus failed to be the Messiah of nationalist expectations, coupled with his ignominious death, the disciples made up the story of the resurrection, and thereby, predisposed others to mass hallucinations. Or, another explanation was the women miss located Jesus' original burial site, finding an empty tomb, and thereby assumed that he had been resurrected. This is contrary to Mark 15:47, which indicates Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James, saw where he had been lain. A more popular explanation is that Jesus was taken down and not allowed to hang on the cross overnight - he wasn't really dead, just passed out. Once in a cool tomb he revived and even with two broken legs hobbled off or was assisted never to be heard of again. There are a lot of problems with all these speculations just given our scriptural references.

Interestingly, given the ending of the gospel today, we have no appearances of Jesus to anyone in Mark's Gospel - wonder why? Some thoughts are that Mark believed that Jesus' return and the coming kingdom of God were so imminent as to cause him to stress the living and present Christ soon to return.

Further speculations are that Jesus' body had been relocated prior to the women's arrival by the Jewish leadership to a place designated for dead blasphemers overseen by the court for the year of putrefaction and the purifying processes. Others support the idea that the disciples removed Jesus' body prior to the women's arrival to keep the authorities from doing just this. I also read that one prominent New Testament scholar even doubted Jesus was buried at all, simply left to hang and rot on the cross, which would have been the ultimate disgrace and degradation of Jesus, his family, and his followers. As time goes by, however, the other gospel writers will address many of these issues and speculations, but not our first gospel writer, Mark.

Therefore, I want to remind us that just because we can't prove the resurrection by our modern standards does not mean it is not true or that it did not happen. Also, for those who are

¹ Malina, Bruce J. and Richard L. Rohrbaugh. "Mark", Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, 2nd Ed. Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2003, p 347-348.

enamored with an empty tomb - an empty tomb is not proof of the resurrected Jesus, so we must look elsewhere.

Jesus was crucified as a criminal and a blasphemer, and a person's death was believed to reflect their character in life. Even being crucified between two militant social bandits, Zealots, did nothing to clarify or improve Jesus' status in death since the Zealots didn't recognize him or deny him as one of their own in Mark's Gospel. I add this clarification and its importance because crucifixion was not normally the Roman punishment for a run-of-the-mill thief. However, it was for thieves associated with an armed band of thieves. We know that the Zealots often stole from the rich to benefit the poor as well as to finance their efforts to overthrow the temple establishment that was cozy with the Romans. All this earned the Zealots, what today we might call freedom fighters, the title of thieves or brigands by the elites, but heroes by many others.

In summary, as Dr. Ben Witherington III of Ashland Theological Seminary points out, "It wouldn't make sense to create a story about a crucified and risen man being the savior of the world - unless you really believe it is historically true - because the instinctive reaction to such a message is exactly what Paul, our earliest New Testament writer, said it would be: It was a stumbling block or scandal to the Jews, and sheer nonsense to [others] Gentiles (1 Corinthians 1:23)".²

So, sometime after 70 C.E. I believe the author of Mark's Gospel, drawing on his oral sources tries to correct some of the misunderstandings and disinformation about Jesus, especially his humanity; his suffering as a son of God, his bodily resurrection, and the idea that he and his disciples were a part of the militant Zealot movement. I repeat, in Mark's Gospel neither the common folk, the disciples, the Zealots, nor the religious leaders seem to recognize who Jesus really was. The only ones who recognized Jesus were the demons and a Roman soldier at the foot of the cross, who called him a son of God or a son of the Most High God. Thus, given Mark's narrative format and the use of his sources, I believe he wants to leave it up to the individual to arrive at an understanding and declaration about who and what Jesus was and is for themselves within a highly-charged Jewish and non-Jewish religious-political environment in Rome.

Today's Easter scriptures give us a snap shot in time shortly after the crucifixion, when three women - disciple-followers of Jesus - come to the tomb to anoint his body. The absence of the male disciples is very telling. In Mark's Gospel, the disciples are generally portrayed as either thick headed, disloyal, or cowardly.

Mark tells us that Joseph of Arimathea, whom we learn is a prominent admirer of Jesus and his message, asked for or bribed Pilate to claim Jesus' body. He does this in part, I think, out of respect for Jesus, but in part because as a devout Jew and member of the Sanhedrin, he needed to comply with the long-standing Jewish mandate not to keep the dead overnight in Jerusalem. Joseph of Arimathea would have had the time from Jesus death to the beginning of the Sabbath to buy all that was needed to prepare Jesus for burial. Once he and Nicodemus, another admirer of Jesus, both more loyal and braver than Jesus' disciples, retrieved Jesus' body, they prepared him for burial, wrapped him in a sindōn, placed him in the tomb, and sealed the tomb. Why the women show up this morning, therefore, is open to speculation.

We can speculate that the burial preparations weren't completed to their satisfaction prior to the beginning of the Sabbath; therefore, the women had come to finish those aspects of the burial processes that they would have been allowed to perform on a male corpse once it was

² Witherington, Ben, III. "Biblical Views: Making Sense of the Unlikely Easter Story." *Biblical Archaeology Review* 37.2 (Mar/Apr 2011): 30.
<http://members.bibarch.org/publication.asp?PudID=BSBA&Volume=37&Issue=2&ArticleID=16>(accessed 3/30/2015)

shrouded. Or, they simply wanted to anoint Jesus while his soul was still present and aware of their honorific efforts. Finally, we may have to admit that Mark, living in Rome among more sophisticated, acculturated Jews and having multiple resurrection traditions available to him, may not have understood the ins and outs of Palestinian burial practices, so he honored all his sources by working them in to his gospel.

However, that is not the story. While en route, the women wondered how they would dislodge the heavy stone that sealed the tomb to allow them to perform their ministrations. This is interesting because at this time in Palestine it was customary for the tomb not to be sealed for the first three days to ensure that the deceased was in fact dead and able to get out if not. When they arrived, the stone was dislodged, and there sat a young man dressed in a white robe, only this time the garment is a stolē, a loose outer garment worn by kings, priests, and persons of rank.

‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, (That is, ladies, don’t worry, you have the right tomb, but he ain’t here.) Look, there is the place they laid him. ⁷But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you. (Please note the women are included in the ones who are to go, to tell, and to meet Jesus in Galilee.)

Why didn’t the women do what the young man told them to do? One could speculate that per custom women were not considered valid witnesses; therefore, they wanted to avoid the embarrassment and humiliation of not being believed. Maybe these women didn’t want to be associated with the desecration of a tomb and the dead, which was a very, very serious offense under Roman and Jewish law.

So, here they are, amazed at the young man and his message, amazed at the empty tomb, but in fear of the repercussions of telling anyone what they had seen and heard. So, they said nothing, and thus ends Mark’s Gospel. No, yes but Matthew, Luke, or John. Our, first gospel ends here, and we have all we need to conclude who Jesus was and is.

I say again, I think our first gospel writer leaves his audience in their charged religious, politically correct environment to evaluate all the evidence; such as, Jesus’ mighty works and wonders, his teachings, the empty tomb, and his predictions of his resurrection to draw their own conclusion as to who Jesus was well beyond the prying minds and influences of others.

It is obvious that Mark knew about the resurrection event and who Jesus was and is, although some in his audience may not have had a clear understanding of who Jesus was in his role as the suffering Son of Man and resurrected Messiah of God. However, we are left with the question: If the women didn’t tell anyone, and given all the indications that the thick-headed disciples wouldn’t have figured it out, how did Mark and his community learn about who Jesus really was and is? I ask this because Paul and his message, although he was living in Rome for some time before his death circa 67 C.E., had been thoroughly discounted among many Jesus believers. His writings and thoughts were not rehabilitated until well after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. toward the end of the first century. Therefore, who told what to whom?

I think there are some deeper questions at work here for Mark’s audience and for us today. One being, is Mark’s audience and are we going to be like those women, simply standing in awe and enamored with an empty tomb but afraid to tell anyone that Jesus is our resurrected, living Lord out of fear of not being believed or ridiculed in our highly charged, politically correct environment? Or, are we going to be like the disciples, who don’t really understand who Jesus was and is and therefore have nothing worth sharing?

Who is this Jesus? Do you know? However, a bigger question is that if we say we know who Jesus is, what difference does he make in our life, beyond some vague hope in death? If people can't answer these questions, then they need to look elsewhere for the answers; they need to go to Galilee and meet Jesus where it all started. This is where he will be waiting to begin a journey with us - a journey that will revolutionize our lives and the world. It is in meeting Jesus in the Galilees - metaphorically the out-backs, the back-waters of our hearts and minds, that we will find the proof of the risen, living Christ, not in an ancient, empty tomb. Folks, the empty tomb is not proof of a living Christ-you are, we are.

If we say we know who he is, and we are being quiet about it; that is, telling no one, don't be afraid, it's okay now - we are safe. We may speak openly of him to all we meet. But, be especially conscientious in telling Peter and all the other doubters and deniers that Christ is alive and waiting for them to come to him in their respective Galilees.

Are you still afraid, after all he has done in your life and in the world? Don't be, he lives, he lives within our hearts and minds. And, after all, it is the human consciousness that creates reality, not the other way around.

Whom have you told?

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