

SERIES: Easter 2006

SERMON: The Not Quite Empty Tomb

SCRIPTURE: John 20:1-9

SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus

DATE: April 16, 2006

All but four of the major world religions are based upon mere philosophical propositions. Of the four that are founded upon a great person, only one claims an empty tomb for its founder. The father of Judaism, Abraham, died about 2000 BC. He was buried in the Cave of Machpelah by his sons, Isaac and Ishmael. The father of Buddhism, Gautama Buddha, died approximately 450 BC and his body was cremated. His ashes were divided among various kings from India and Sri-Lanka. Each of the kings put the ashes in giant pagodas that were built in memory of Buddha. The father of Islam, Mohammed, died on June 8, AD 632, at the age of 61 at Medina, in what is today Saudi Arabia. Millions of devout Muslims visit his tomb every year to this day.

The hundreds of millions of followers of Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam all agree that their founders still lie in the dust of the ground. But when Mary Magdalene, along with the other Mary and Salome, arrived at Jesus' tomb before dawn on the third day after He died, an angel met them and asked, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, for He has risen!"

For the first and only time in human history a religious leader had vindicated his truth claims by means of the ultimate evidence of deity—He had conquered death! Over Abraham's tomb is the word OCCUPIED! Over Mohammed's tomb is the word OCCUPIED! Over Joseph Smith's tomb is the word OCCUPIED! Over Mary Baker Eddy's tomb is the word OCCUPIED! But over Jesus' tomb the word is carved by the finger of God—EMPTY! He is not here, for He is risen!

And yet that first Easter morning, when Mary, and later Peter and John peered into the darkness of that tomb, it wasn't *quite* empty. As a matter of fact, what they found there was enough to cause the Apostle John, whose fragile faith had been sorely tried, to believe (John 20:8).

But instead of proceeding immediately to what the disciples found in the tomb, I want us to take a few moments to examine the extent to which the enemies of Jesus went to make sure that the predictions He had made about His resurrection did not, in fact, come to pass. They well knew that if Jesus rose from the dead, or even if His disciples were successful in stealing His body and making it look like He had risen from the dead, they would never be able to keep this pesky little religious sect He founded from spreading. So, what they decided to do is to make the tomb of Jesus as secure as possible.

The tomb of Jesus was as secure as humans could make it.

Four physical aspects of the tomb were given special attention: the tomb itself, the stone, the seal, and the guards.

1. The tomb. In John 19:41 the tomb of Jesus is described for us as a new tomb in which no one had ever been buried. The other Gospels add the information that it had been hewn out of solid rock. Matthew tells us that it was Joseph of Arimethea's own tomb and inasmuch as he was a rich and powerful man, one can be sure this tomb was secure. No ordinary grave robber would be allowed to violate *this* man's resting place.

2. The stone. The stone that was placed at the entrance to a Palestinian tomb was used as protection against both man and beast. Normally there was a depression directly in front of the opening, and while one man might be able to roll the stone into the depression, it took many to roll it out. The Gospel writers take pains to inform us that the stone in front of Jesus' tomb was unusually large and consequently very heavy. Mark observes that when the women came to the tomb early Sunday morning they were debating among themselves how they might move the stone. Obviously it was too large for three women to move.

3. The seal. Tombs in Palestine were not normally sealed because the stone was usually enough to keep any grave robbers out; besides Jewish people normally didn't bury anything valuable with their loved ones, like the Egyptians routinely did. There had to be good reason for the Romans to take such action, and the reason in this case is clearly stated in Matt. 27:62-66:

The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. "Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again. So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first.'" "Take a guard," Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.

I would suppose that since the normal way of sealing a tomb was by means of a cord laid across the stone, set in wax at both ends and stamped with the Roman seal, this time several such cords may have been used. Anyone attempting to move the stone would break one of the seals and the vandalism would be obvious.

4. The guards. The Jews were going to leave nothing to chance. They were going to keep that body in the grave until the fourth day no matter what, so they asked for Roman guards to be posted day and night. Commanding these guards would have been a centurion. The soldiers would have been well-trained and quite aware that the punishment for sleeping on one's post or allowing a prisoner to escape, even a dead prisoner, was immediate execution.

There was no danger of these soldiers collaborating with Jesus' disciples. The Roman seal affixed to the stone before Joseph's tomb was far more sacred to them than the memories of a man who "went around doing good." Soldiers cold-blooded enough to gamble over a dying victim's cloak are not the kind to be hoodwinked by timid Galileans or to jeopardize their necks by sleeping on duty.

In summary, everything that human ingenuity could think of, from the tomb to the stone, the seal, and the guard, was arranged to make sure that the body of Jesus did not get out of that grave before Monday morning. Ironically in going so far to prevent theft, Jesus' enemies inadvertently provided additional witness to the fact that a miracle actually took place, for there was no other possible explanation of what happened next.

Despite all their precautions, we find secondly that . . .

On that first Easter morning some things were missing from the tomb.

1. The stone was rolled away. We read in John 20:1: "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance." Only Matthew tells us how the stone was rolled away. In chapter 28:1-6 he writes,

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said."

So the stone was not rolled away by any man or group of men, but by an angel of God. Furthermore, it was not rolled away to let Jesus out, but rather to let the disciples in.

2. The guards were missing. (Matt. 28:11-15). When the angel first appeared the guards were stunned, as most of us would have been. Utterly powerless and perhaps even unconscious for a time, they shortly "came to" and hastily left the area of the tomb, presumably because of fear. I would give a lot to have been privy to the conversation of these guards. I imagine they had a vigorous discussion of the options open to them, which were few. One option was probably to flee, but where does a Roman soldier hide in Palestine? A second option would be to turn themselves over to Pilate's mercy, but Pilate was not known for his mercy! Their execution would have been immediate.

A third option—the one they seized—was to seek help from the Jewish religious leaders, and this is the action they took. (After all, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend.") They reasoned that the Jews hated Jesus so much that they would have a vested interest in suppressing the evidence of His resurrection. If so, they reasoned correctly, for the religious leaders readily agreed to establish an alibi for the soldiers. There is something pitiful, even humorous about it. They are told to say, "His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep." If they were asleep how did they know who stole the body, or even what happened to it?

3. The body of Jesus was gone. This, of course, was the most significant thing missing from the tomb. Luke tells it best: The angels said to the women, "Why do you seek for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!" The missing body was a profound reality that could not be explained in any other way but resurrection. If the body of Jesus was not really resurrected, His disciples could not have made thousands of converts in the city of Jerusalem less than two months after His death by proclaiming that He *had* risen from the grave. The Jewish leaders could have muzzled these disciples forever simply by finding the body of Jesus wherever

the disciples had allegedly hidden it, but there is no record that they even looked for it, because in their hearts they knew there was no natural explanation for the missing body.

It's important to consider these things that were missing from the tomb—the stone, the guards, the body.

However, we must not overlook the fact that one thing was *not* missing from the tomb.
(John 20:3-8)

It was NOT *QUITE* EMPTY! Would you turn with me to John 20:3-8:

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple (John), who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)

Isn't it curious that whereas the fact that the body of Jesus was missing did not produce immediate faith in the disciples, the sight of the graveclothes left there caused the Apostle John to believe? There was something so striking about these graveclothes that they caused him to accept the resurrection, whereas all the predictions Jesus made that He would rise again did not, nor did the OT prophecies, nor did the report of the angels, nor even the eyewitness account of the women themselves that the body of Jesus was gone.

What was so special about those graveclothes? I want us first to examine the words of John 20 a bit more closely. Peter and John are informed by Mary that Jesus' body is missing. The two disciples run to the tomb, with John, who being considerably younger, arrives first. He looks at the graveclothes, but being a bit timid he doesn't enter the tomb.

Peter arrives soon after, and consistent with his bold, brash personality, he immediately enters the tomb. He too "sees" the graveclothes. Finally, John also enters the tomb, "sees" the graveclothes and believes. Each time the word "to look" or "to see" appears, it is a different word in the original Greek. In verse 5 the most common word for seeing is used, which means nothing more than "to notice." John notices the graveclothes. In verse 6, "saw" = to theorize or reason. Peter not only notices the graveclothes but begins to reason as to *why* they appear as they do. In verse 8, "saw" = to see with understanding. John realizes there is only one possible explanation for the phenomenon before him, and that is the fact that Jesus has risen. And he believes.

Well, let me ask again, "What was it about these graveclothes that would change a man from gloom and depression to faith?" In order to answer that we need to understand something about Jewish burial methods. In Palestine bodies were neither embalmed nor cremated. They were wrapped in linen bands that enclosed dry spices and placed face up without a coffin in tombs.

The face and neck were generally left bare, but the upper part of the head was covered by a cloth twirled about it like a turban.

What do you think we would have seen had we been there in the tomb at the moment Jesus was resurrected from the dead? Would we have seen Him stir, rub His eyes, sit up, yawn, and begin to struggle out of His bandages? If so, then the linen wrappings would have been scattered around or found in a pile. But that is not at all what happened. That would have amounted to a resuscitation, not a resurrection.

No, if we had been present in the tomb at the moment of the Resurrection, I think we would have noticed that the body of Jesus simply "vaporized" through the bandages, transformed into a resurrection body with an entirely different life principle. What would have happened to the graveclothes? The linen cloths would have collapsed upon themselves once the body was gone due to the weight of the spices that were in them, and they would have been lying undisturbed where the body of Jesus had been, like an empty caterpillar's cocoon. The cloth which surrounded the head would have retained its concave shape, lying by itself separated from the other clothes by the space where the face and neck had been.

This is consistent with what John says he and Peter see when they enter the sepulcher. The turban is not piled on top of the other linens as one might expect if the body had been unwrapped by a grave robber or even if the person had been resuscitated and had shed the clothes Himself. Instead John says it was still "wrapped together," or perhaps better, "twirled about itself." Contrast this with Lazarus' experience. He came out of the tomb wearing his graveclothes, and Jesus had to tell the bystanders, "Loose him and let him go."

The subsequent facts prove that Jesus indeed rose from the dead.

If all that we have shared so far does not convince a skeptic of the truth of the bodily resurrection, there is perhaps little hope that anything will. But the fact of the matter is, there is still more evidence. The events that followed that early morning discovery of a not-quite-empty tomb confirm that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead.

1. His post-resurrection appearances. We read about these at the end of each of the four Gospels, as well as in the first chapter of Acts. But the only place we find a summary of these appearances is in I Cor. 15:3-8, where the Apostle Paul writes,

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, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep (i.e. died). Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also.

2. The transformed lives of the Apostles. I think this is perhaps the single most powerful piece of evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. The following description of the change

that occurred in the lives of the apostles after the resurrection is striking:

On the day of the crucifixion they were filled with sadness; on the first day of the week with gladness. At the crucifixion they were hopeless; on the first day of the week their hearts glowed with certainty and hope. When the message of the resurrection first came they were incredulous and hard to be convinced, but once they became assured they never doubted again. What could account for the astonishing change in these men in so short a time? The mere removal of the body from the grave could never have transformed their spirits, and characters. Three days are not enough for a legend to spring up which would so affect them. Time is needed for a process of legendary growth. It is a psychological fact that demands a full explanation.

Think of the character of the witnesses, men and women who gave the world the highest ethical teaching it has ever known, and who even on the testimony of their enemies lived it out in their lives. Think of the psychological absurdity of picturing a little band of defeated cowards cowering in an upper room one day and a few days later transformed into a company that no persecution could silence--and then attempting to attribute this dramatic change to nothing more convincing than a miserable fabrication they were trying to foist upon the world. That simply wouldn't make sense.

3. The silence of His enemies. It is an astounding fact that nowhere do Jesus' enemies challenge the claim of the Resurrection. They bribe, they badger, they persecute, they imprison, but never do they challenge the central fact that Jesus actually rose from the dead. The evidence is simply too overwhelming.

Conclusion: Frank Morrison was an English lawyer who in 1930 wrote a bestseller called, *Who Moved the Stone?* As a young scholar Morrison was quite skeptical of the miraculous claims of Christ and was convinced that the resurrection was nothing but a fairy tale, a happily-ever-after ending which actually spoiled the story of this great teacher. Morrison planned to write an account of the last tragic days of Jesus, allowing the full horror of the crime and the full heroism of Jesus to shine through. He would, of course, omit any suspicion of the miraculous, and would utterly discount the resurrection.

But when he began to study the facts with care, he had to change his mind, and he ended up writing one of the finest treatises in support of the resurrection that has ever been written. You see, God does not expect us to believe without evidence; He has given perfectly adequate evidence of the resurrection for all who will honestly consider the facts. If people fail to believe, it is because they *will not believe*, not because the evidence is lacking. Tragically, should Jesus return today, the response of most people would probably be the same as it was in Jerusalem during Passion Week. Millions would reject Him outright. Some would condemn Him to death. If He should rise again from the dead, most would laugh and call it trickery. Human nature has not changed.

At the same time there are many today who believe, as there were on that first Easter morning. They have seen the evidence and have responded to it. These know that their faith rests, not on wishful thinking but upon the power of God. Furthermore, they know that faith in the risen

Christ brings forgiveness of sins and eternal life. I would urge you this morning to place your faith in Jesus. Trust Him with your life, your future, with everything. He is risen! **HE IS RISEN INDEED!**