

## Arguments for the Empty Tomb

Was Jesus' tomb really found empty, or is this just a myth? The empty tomb is absolutely central to the Christian faith because the entire truth of Christianity rests upon Jesus having been raised from the dead. This makes inquiry into this historical question all the more important.

As it turns out, the empty tomb is widely considered to be an established fact of the ancient world. Not all scholars agree as to what caused the tomb to become empty, but as far as the tomb itself actually being left without the body of Jesus, this is pretty well-established even among critical scholars.

### Academic Consensus

According to a comprehensive survey of New Testament scholars, it is large consensus (roughly 75%) that Jesus' tomb somehow became empty. A study by New Testament scholar Gary Habermas published in the peer-reviewed Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus found that:

*approximately 75% favor one or more of these arguments for the empty tomb, while approximately 25% think that one or more arguments oppose it. Thus, while far from being unanimously held by critical scholars, it may surprise some that those who embrace the empty tomb as a historical fact still comprise a fairly strong majority.*

The reason why so many believe the tomb as found empty is because of historical evidence. One needs to explain how Jesus' tomb became empty, and then why the disciples, and the skeptics James and the enemy Paul, claimed that Jesus had appeared to them in his resurrected body.

Paul informs us in his early creed that Jesus also appeared to 500 others. This is a belief that several early followers were martyred for and never, as far as our historical data tells us, recanted their faith that Jesus' had in fact appeared to them. Whatever the case, they certainly believed it.

It is extremely difficult to object to the empty tomb on historical grounds; those who deny it do so on the basis of theological or philosophical assumptions."

Exegete, apologist, and professional philosopher William Craig concludes that there is "powerful evidence that the tomb of Jesus was actually found empty on Sunday morning by a small group of his women followers. As a plain historical fact this seems to be amply attested"

### The empty tomb is attested in early, independent sources

All our canonical gospels (Mark 16, Matthew 28, Luke 24, John 20) mention the empty tomb, Paul implies it in an early creed (1 Cor. 15:1-11), and it is further implied by Peter's sermon in Acts. There are as many as three, or even four independent traditions within the Gospels that attest to the empty tomb. This certainly heightens the probability of the tomb being found empty.

## Arguments for the tomb being found empty

### 1. Women witnesses

It's quite remarkable that the authors of the Gospels penned that women were the ones to first discover and report the empty tomb. At that time and in that culture, the testimony of women was not seen to be as credible as the testimony of men. If they were making this up and wanted people to believe it, they wouldn't have cited Jesus' women followers as being the ones to discover the empty tomb.

In fact, the Jewish historian Josephus says that women weren't even permitted to serve as witnesses in a Jewish court of law. Now in light of this fact, how remarkable it is that it is women who are the discoverers of Jesus' empty tomb.

As scholar Gary Habermas says:

“By far the most popular argument favoring the Gospel testimony on this subject is that, in all four texts, women are listed as the initial witnesses. Contrary to often repeated statements, First Century Jewish women were able to testify in some legal matters. But given the general reluctance in the Mediterranean world at that time to accept female testimony in crucial matters, most of those scholars who comment on the subject hold that the Gospels probably would not have dubbed them as the chief witnesses unless they actually did attest to this event.”

In other words, if the authors were simply making up fictional tales then they would have almost certainly put men as the discoverers of the empty tomb. This persuasively suggests that the authors are exercising fidelity when it comes to their report of history.

### 2. Enemy validation

Secondly, there is enemy attestation. Evidence found in Matthew 28:11-15 and reports by Justin Martyr and Tertullian tells us that the Jewish leaders tried to explain that the tomb was empty because Jesus' disciples stole his body. This suggests that the Jewish authorities acknowledged the fact that Jesus' body was no longer in the tomb.

They didn't object to the tomb being empty, they tried to explain this fact away, which suggests to us it really was empty. Historian Paul Maier explains that this early Jewish anti-Christian polemic is:

“positive evidence from a hostile source. In essence, if a source admits a fact that is decidedly not in its favor, the fact is genuine” (9).

### 3. The empty tomb account lacks embellishment

Thirdly, in its primitive form the empty tomb narrative is theologically unadorned. This means that the story lacks later theological motifs that a late legend might be expected to contain. This suggests that the empty tomb account is early and more probably than not factual.

According to William Craig the empty tomb is credible as “it was not an apologetic device of early Christians...”. There is no significant theological or religious embellishment, no signs of legendary development, and no exaggerations. What we

see is a couple women followers discovering the empty tomb and being told by someone (who they perceived to be an angel) that Jesus is no longer there.

This kind of simplicity, given how crucial the empty tomb is to Christian doctrine, is evidence of this being a historical fact as opposed to a mythologized tale.

#### **4. Christianity would be debunked if someone had reported the tomb still contained the body of Jesus**

Fourthly, one of the most powerful arguments that favors Jesus' empty tomb is the location and events surrounding it. Our gospels all agree that Jesus was buried in a tomb that was located in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the place that most scholars agree was where early Christian preaching first took place, and thus subsequently led to the birth of the church.

However, any Christian preaching at this very early time would run into a bit of an issue if Jesus' tomb was not empty. If Jesus' body was still in the tomb then Christianity would have buckled before it could have even got going. The easiest way to disprove the early Christian message of a resurrected savior would be to go to the tomb where Jesus was laid, and expose it.

Jerusalem would have been the last place that Christianity would have taken off if Jesus was still in his grave. Paul Althaus comments that the resurrection proclamation:

“could not have been maintained in Jerusalem for a single day, for a single hour, if the emptiness of the tomb had not been established as a fact for all concerned.”

Through a historical analysis of weighing the evidence and arguments, one is on good grounds in accepting the historicity of Jesus' empty tomb. The empty tomb fits naturally with the earliest accounts we have available, seems to be more plausible than not given the surrounding circumstances, and is further supplemented by early and independent confirmation in historical sources.

So here is someone who claimed to be the Son of God, was seen working miracles, healing the sick, raising the dead, who prophesied his own death and resurrection, was crucified, and then after three days his tomb was found empty. What is the best explanation for the historical fact of the empty tomb of Jesus?

The best explanation comes from the testimonies of the eyewitnesses themselves. That Jesus of Nazareth had risen from the dead, leaving an empty tomb behind.