

Exploring Popular Theories Explaining the Empty Tomb

If we are not confident that Jesus literally rose from the grave to atone for our sins, our faith for salvation is on shaky ground. But the good news is that Christ's bodily resurrection is a historical fact. We have ample reason to believe that this pivotal event is factually true, and this gives us ample reason for great confidence in our hope of eternal salvation.

The evidence of the empty tomb following the crucifixion does not by itself prove that Jesus rose from the dead. Yet it does require explanation.

The Stolen Body Theory

One explanation offered within hours of the empty tomb's discovery was the theory that the disciples of Jesus had stolen the body. It seems plausible at first glance. However, the most cursory consideration will quickly show this theory creates more problems than it solves.

- Roman soldiers were executed for sleeping on duty. How plausible is it that all the guards at the tomb would have decided to take a nap, knowing it could cost them their lives?
- Even if the Roman guards had slept, consider what it would have taken for thieves to remove the body from the tomb. The circular stone used to seal the tomb weighed between one and two tons. Thieves would have had to sneak past the guards, roll the large stone up a grooved incline, enter the dark tomb, and exit with the body . . . all without waking a single member of the guard!
- It would have taken considerable bravery to go up against a detachment of Roman soldiers. Yet the historical record shows that in the days following the death of Jesus, the disciples were a depressed and cowardly group. Why would a group of men who had run and hidden when Jesus was alive suddenly and courageously decide to steal his body and begin propagating a story that would certainly bring on them the very treatment they had fled just three days earlier?

You can be sure that if Jesus' body hadn't been resurrected, the religious and political leaders of the day could have quickly and effectively quashed the rising sect of Christianity by locating Christ's corpse and wheeling it through the streets of Jerusalem. It would have destroyed Christianity practically before it started. But that never happened.

The Swoon Theory

Some people have tried to explain the empty tomb by suggesting that Jesus never really died. It supposes that Jesus was indeed nailed to the cross and suffered tremendous pain. But when he was removed from the cross, he wasn't quite dead; he was merely in shock.

Then, Jesus, aided by the cool air of the tomb, by the reviving effects of the burial spices he was wrapped in, and by the many hours of quiet rest in the tomb, rose from his own burial slab, cast off his shroud, and left the tomb. When he met his disciples, they mistakenly thought he had risen from the dead . . . when, in fact, it was nothing more than a surprising resuscitation.

- Jesus had undergone a vicious beating that ripped his back to shreds. He was then nailed by his hands and feet to a cross. When the crucifixion detail came to break the legs of Jesus, they discovered he was already dead. Nonetheless, to be sure, “one of the soldiers . . . pierced his side with a spear, and blood and water flowed out” (John 19:34). The Roman governor expressed surprise that Jesus was already dead and demand confirmation. *Only after receiving a firsthand report* did Pilate release the body into the hands of Joseph, thus fully verifying the fact the Jesus was dead before he was buried.
- Jesus was buried in a tomb whose entrance was blocked by a stone weighing as much as one to two tons. Assume Jesus had been taken from the cross in a “swoon,” and the cold, damp tomb had revived him sometime later. We must then assume that he managed—from the inside of a tomb designed to be opened only from the outside—to roll a two-ton circular stone up the slotted incline, while somehow propping the stone to prevent it from rolling down again and closing the tomb. All this had to be done by a man who, hours before, had been flogged, pierced with a crown of thorns, hanged on a cross by nails through his hands and feet, and stabbed in the ribs with a Roman spear. And it had to be done quietly enough to escape the notice of the soldiers who were guarding the tomb.

If Jesus revived from a deathlike swoon, there is no reason to believe that he later ascended into heaven. But if Christ didn’t ascend, where did he go? Is it reasonable to believe that Jesus withdrew from his followers to live out the rest of his life in seclusion and die in obscurity?

Such a theory would necessitate the belief that while the young church was preaching the news of Christ’s resurrection, Jesus himself lived in some solitary retreat, unknown even to his closest followers, while his absence perpetuated the legend of Christianity. This scenario would make Jesus Christ—whose teachings extolled the highest standards of morality—the greatest deceiver of all time and his resurrection the greatest hoax in history.

That would require believing Jesus knowingly pursued an insane course of action: contriving his own resurrection to gain a renown he would never witness or enjoy.