

# The Resurrection: Tabloid story or History?



## An Inspection of the Resurrection

As a child I learned many ‘inspiring’ stories about our religious holidays. I learned that a jolly fat man lived in the North Pole and flew around the world with reindeer, climbing down chimneys to give gifts to good girls and boys on Christmas. I learned about the Easter bunny that gave out eggs and chocolates to the same good girls and boys at Easter time. As I grew older I realized that these stories were cute but not true – I could look back and smile on them – but I would (and did) outgrow them.

I also learned other ‘stories’ about our religious holidays. These stories had shepherds seeing angels, wise men following stars, a baby born in a manger – stories that form the basis of the Christmas celebration. Perhaps the most dramatic was the story of how Jesus died on a cross, but that three days later he came back to life again – stories forming the basis of Easter.

These second set of stories, taken at face value, seem as fantastic as the first set. The question I had when I got a little older and realized that the first set of stories were not ‘really’ true was – Do I know that the second set are really true? After all, both sets are intertwined with religious holidays, both inspire wonder – and both are equally incredible! This is especially true of the Easter story which claimed that three days after his death, Jesus underwent a physical resurrection and came to life again. This is probably the most audacious story in all religion, one perhaps fit for the tabloid headline – Dead Man Comes Back to Life. Could it be true? Or even credible? Was there any reasonable evidence to substantiate it?

Hard questions to answer. But surely it is worth some adult thought since it touches on our mortality. After all, the brightest, strongest, mightiest, most powerful people throughout history have all fallen captive to death. And you & I will die one day too. If someone has defeated death then it may have implications that should awaken our attention. So let me briefly share what I have learned in studying and thinking through this question.

Perhaps the best way to try to answer this question is to work through all the possible alternatives and see which alternative makes most sense – without prejudging by ‘faith’ any supernatural explanation. That Jesus lived and died a public death that has altered the course of history is certain. One need not even go to the Bible for that. There are several references to Jesus and the impact he made on the world of his day in secular history. Let’s look at two. The Roman governor-historian Tacitus made a fascinating reference to Jesus when describing how Nero martyred 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians (in AD 65) as scapegoats for the burning of Rome. Here is what he says writing in 112 AD:

‘Nero.. punished with the most exquisite tortures, the persons commonly called Christians, who were hated for their enormities. Christus, the founder of the name, was put to death by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea in the reign of Tiberius; but

the pernicious superstition, repressed for a time broke out again, not only through Judea, where the mischief originated, but through the city of Rome also’ (1) \*

The interesting point about this statement is that Tacitus corroborates that Jesus was: 1) a historical person; 2) executed by Pontius Pilate; 3) by 65 AD (time of Nero) the Christian faith had spread across the Mediterranean to Rome from Judea. And with such an intensity that the emperor of Rome felt he had to deal with it. Notice as well that Cornelius Tacitus is saying these things as a hostile witness since he considers what Christ started a ‘pernicious superstition’.

Josephus was a Jewish military leader/historian who wrote to a Roman audience. In this writing he summarizes the history of the Jewish nation from its beginning up to his time. In so doing he covers the time and career of Jesus with these words:

‘At this time there was a wise man ... Jesus. ... good, and ... virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned Him to be crucified and to die. And those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that He had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that He was alive’ ... (2)\*

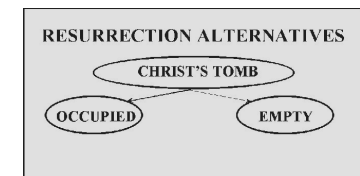
So it seems from these glimpses back into the past that the death of Christ was a well-known event and the issue of his resurrection was being forced unto the Roman world by his disciples. Luke, a physician and historian provides further details as to how this faith advanced in the ancient world. Here is his excerpt from Acts:

‘The priests and the captain ... came up to Peter and John ... They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead...They seized Peter and John... put them in jail...When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished... "What are we going to do with these men?" they asked’ .. (3)\*

‘Then the high priest and all his associates,... arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. ...they were furious and wanted to put them to death....They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.’ (4)\*

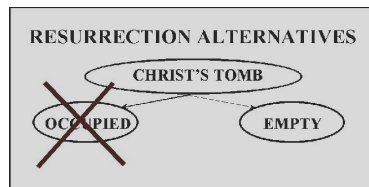
One can see from this account that the civic leaders were going to great lengths to stop this ‘pernicious superstition (as Tacitus called it). We should note that these events were occurring in Jerusalem – the same city where only a few weeks earlier Jesus had been publicly executed and buried.

Having surveyed the pertinent historical data we are in a position to work through the possible explanations that surround the alleged resurrection of Christ. To start with, we have two (and only two) possible alternatives concerning the body of the dead Christ.

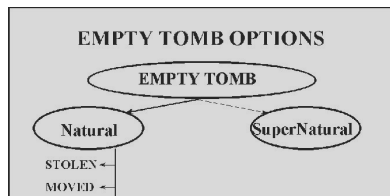


As the figure shows, the body of Christ was either in the tomb or was not. Let us assume that his body was still in the tomb. As we reflect on the unfolding events recorded in history, however, we are quickly confronted with an oddity. Why would the civic leaders have to go to such extremes to stop such exaggerations of an alleged resurrection if the body was still in the tomb, a few minutes walk from where the disciples were publicly proclaiming his resurrection? If I had been one of those civic leaders, I would have waited until Peter or John had reached the climax of their speech concerning the resurrection and then publicly paraded the body of Christ before all – audience and disciples. I would have discredited the fledgling movement without having to imprison, torture and finally martyr them! And consider – thousands were converted

to belief in the physical resurrection of Christ in Jerusalem at this time. If I had been one of those in the crowds – listening to Peter, pondering and wondering if I could believe his incredible message (after all, this belief came with a price of persecution) I would have at least taken my lunch break to go down to the tomb to take a look for myself. If the body of Christ was still in the tomb this movement would not have gained any adherents in such a hostile environment with such incriminating counter evidence on-hand. So Christ’s body remaining in the tomb leads to absurdities. This alternative cannot be seriously entertained.



Of course this does not prove the resurrection – there are other good explanations for an empty tomb apart from a resurrection. However, any explanation for the absence of the body must also account for the situation on-hand; the Roman seal over the tomb, the Roman patrol guarding the tomb, the large (1-2 ton) stone covering the tomb entrance, the 40 kg of embalming agent on the body. The list goes on. Space does not allow us to look at all factors and scenarios to explain the missing body, but the most contemplated counter explanation has always been that the disciples themselves stole the body from the tomb, hid it somewhere and were then able to mislead others.



Let us assume this scenario, avoiding for the sake of argument some of the difficulties in explaining how the discouraged band of disciples who fled for their lives at his arrest, could re-group and come up with a plan to steal the body that totally outwitted

the Roman guard. They then broke the seal, moved the massive rock, and made off with the embalmed body – all without leaving any trace. Let us assume that they successfully managed to do this and then entered onto the world stage to start a religious faith based on their deception. Many of us today assume that what motivated the first disciples was the need to proclaim brotherhood and love among men - and Christ’s death and (spiritual or metaphorical) resurrection was the catalyst for this message. But if you scan back to the quotation from Luke you will note that the contentious issue was “the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead”. This theme is paramount in their writings. Notice how important Paul rates the issue of Christ’s resurrection:

For ... I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died ...buried, that he was raised on the third day... he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve.. If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless ... your faith is futile...If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.... If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus for merely human reasons, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised - 'Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die'... (5) \*

Clearly (in their minds at least) the disciples placed the importance and their witness of the resurrection of Christ at the utmost center of their message. Now, let us assume that this was really false - that these disciples had indeed stolen the body so the counter-evidence of their new message would not put a stop to them. They may have perhaps been successful in fooling the world, but they themselves would have known that what they were preaching, writing and creating great social upheaval for was basically false. Yet they gave their lives (literally) for this mission. Why would they do it – IF they knew that the basis of it was false? People give their lives to causes (worthwhile and otherwise) because they **believe** in the cause for which they fight or because they expect some gain from the cause. Consider the suicide bombers in the Middle East. This is surely the greatest modern example of

extreme devotion to a cause – culminating in their own (and others’) violent deaths. Now we may or may not agree with their cause – but of all people they *surely* believe in the cause for which they are sacrificing themselves. They go to the extremes that they do *precisely because* they believe they will go to paradise after death as a reward for their sacrifice. Now this belief may be false – but at least they themselves believe it – or they would not put their own lives on such a drastic wager. The difference between suicide bombers and the early disciples are that they are not in a position to factually verify their belief, whereas the disciples were. Consider from their own words what price the disciples paid for the spreading of their message – and ask yourself if you would pay such a personal price for something that you knew to be untrue:

We are hard pressed on every side... perplexed... persecuted, struck down... outwardly we are wasting away...in great endurance, in troubles, hardships, distresses, in beatings, imprisonments and riots, hard work, sleepless nights and hunger... beaten ... sorrowful ... poor ... having nothing...  
 ..Five times I received from the Jews the 39 lashes, three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, ... , I have been in danger from rivers, from bandits, my own countrymen, from Gentiles, in the city, in the country, in the sea. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep, I have known hunger and thirst... I have been cold and naked... Who is weak and I do not feel weak. (6)

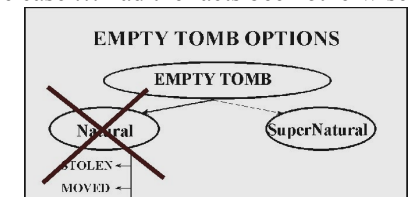
The more I ponder the unshrinking heroism of all their lives (not one cracked at the bitter end and ‘confessed’), the more I find it impossible that they did not sincerely believe the message they were proclaiming. But if they believed it – they certainly could not themselves have stolen and disposed of the body of Christ. One of the greatest criminal lawyers, who taught law students at Harvard how to probe for weaknesses in witnesses, had this remark to say about this issue:

“The annals of military warfare afford scarcely an example of the like heroic constancy,

patience, and unflinching courage. They had every possible motive to review carefully the grounds of their faith, and the evidences of the great facts and truths which they asserted” (7) \*

Related to this is the silence of the enemies of the disciples – Jewish or Roman. These hostile witnesses never seriously attempted to tell the ‘real’ story, or show how the disciples were wrong. As Dr. Montgomery states,

“This underscores the reliability of testimony to Christ’s resurrection which was presented contemporaneously in the synagogues – in the very teeth of opposition, among hostile cross-examiners who would certainly have destroyed the case ... had the facts been otherwise” (8)



In this brief study we have not had the space to consider every facet of this question. However, the unwavering boldness of the disciples and the silence of the coexistent hostile witnesses speak volumes that Christ may indeed have risen and that it is worth taking a serious and thoughtful examination. I hope you do. I found it fascinating.

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1. Tacitus. 112 AD. *Annals* XV. 44
  2. Josephus. 67AD. *Antiquities* xviii. 33
  3. Luke. 63 AD. Acts 4:1-16
  4. Luke. 63 AD. Acts 5:17-40
  5. Paul. 57 AD. I Corinthians 15: 3-32
  6. Paul. 58 AD. II Corinthians 4: 8– 6:10; 11:24-29
  7. Greenleaf. 1874. *An examination of the Testimony of the Four Evangelists by the Rules of Evidence Administered in the Courts of Justice*. p. 29
  8. Montgomery. 1975. *Legal reasoning and Christian Apologetics*. p. 88-89
- \* Underline emphasis mine



**THE NAVIGATORS**  
 TO KNOW CHRIST AND TO MAKE HIM KNOWN