

**What Happened to Jesus' Body?**

Matthew 27:62-28:15

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If someone asked you who or what do you identify with – how would you answer? Some people identify with a person. Maybe a celebrity because of their popularity like Taylor Swift or Beyonce or Justin Bieber or Prince William and Kate. Some people identify with an artist and the message they bring like Elvis, the Beatles, U2, Katy Perry, Drake or Ed Sheeran. Some identify with an athlete because of their success like Sidney Crosby or Connor McDavid. Some may identify with a leader because of their ideology. Communists still identify with Lenin whose body is preserved and on display in Red Square, Moscow. Lovers of democracy might identify with Benjamin Franklin. Some identify with a group of friends who accepts them or a world leader because of the power they hold.

Others identify with a product - a car; brand of smart phone; a neighborhood; a line of clothing; a style of dress. Some identify with a movement - the environment; the oil industry; the conservatives; the progressives; the greens; Trump Nation. Some identify with a time period or an era - the good old days; the 70's; the millennium.

Who or what do you identify with?

Now with whatever or whoever identify with, how do they measure up in the areas of hope, restoration, overcoming evil and death and doing it with purity?

Do they provide hope and inspiration for a better life? Can they promise and deliver restoration to that or those who are damaged, broken, victimized, polluted or destroyed?

Do they have the power to overcome evil and defeat it? Do they have an ability to conquer death and provide hope beyond the grave? Do they or does it deliver hope, restoration and progress with purity and holiness? Or are there questions of corruption or impurities or a record of violated people in their wake? Is there anyone who can deliver hope, restoration, victory over evil, life beyond the grave and do it with unquestionable purity?

Well Jesus was a candidate for such a high standard when he lived 2000 years ago. Many had put their trust in Him. They heard His powerful teaching. They experienced His healing touch. They hoped that He could bring deliverance. But many more rejected Him. This resulted in His crucifixion, death and burial on Good Friday. Yet 3 days later on Sunday, His followers claimed that He lived again. They claimed He could provide hope, restoration, victory over evil and death while maintaining absolute purity. But the authorities and many others claimed He was still dead and therefore irrelevant to these issues.

Today, things haven't changed much in people's response to Jesus. Disciples affirm that He lives and can provide in all of those key areas. But deniers, doubters and skeptics dismiss Jesus as having any relevance today. Where do you come down? Would the resurrected Jesus be someone you identify with? And if Jesus did in fact rise from the dead and could deliver in those massive areas of hope, restoration, evil, death and purity, how are you living in response to that?

Today, we are going to explore two possible explanations for what happened to Jesus' body because his tomb ended up empty. I want to try to represent both positions to give you an opportunity to make your own choice about which one seems stronger. Once we've looked at those two explanations, we will think about the repercussions of each and the possible impact this might have on your life this week and beyond.

It comes from where we left on in the Gospel of Matthew 2 weeks ago. We will pick up the account just after Jesus' burial and walk through 2 explanations for what happened next. Matthew 27:62-28:15. Page 704 in the Bibles in front of you.

**Matthew 27:62-28:15 (ESV)** <sup>62</sup>The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate <sup>63</sup>and said, "Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.' <sup>64</sup>Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last fraud will be worse than the first." <sup>65</sup>Pilate said to them, "You have a guard<sup>[a]</sup> of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can." <sup>66</sup>So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

**28** Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. <sup>2</sup>And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. <sup>3</sup>His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. <sup>4</sup>And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. <sup>5</sup>But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. <sup>6</sup>He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he<sup>[b]</sup> lay. <sup>7</sup>Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you." <sup>8</sup>So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. <sup>9</sup>And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. <sup>10</sup>Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."

<sup>11</sup>While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. <sup>12</sup>And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers <sup>13</sup>and said, "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' <sup>14</sup>And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble."<sup>15</sup> So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus have taken Jesus' body and placed it in Joseph's tomb. They rolled a stone in front of the tomb's entrance. Mary Magdalene and someone referred to as the other Mary sit opposite the tomb watching all this take place. So they knew where Jesus was buried. Then the Sabbath arrives at sundown that Friday evening.

Our text begins the next day – Saturday. The Chief Priests and Pharisees gather before Pilate. If you were with us before Easter, you know that the Chief Priests and Pharisees came from two different Jewish religious groups. The Chief Priests were Sadducees part of the priestly aristocracy. They basically ran the temple and ruled over this central site of Judaism. They didn't believe in a resurrection and were much more interested in power and cooperating with anyone who would help them keep power. The Pharisees were more like local pastors and preachers today. They sincerely desired to follow God. But they had gotten caught up in legalism. So they put more emphasis on following rules than relating to God. They had grown arrogant and superior to the common people. But they also clashed with the Sadducees who they thought were theological liberals yet had all the power.

But these two competing factions come together before Pilate, the Roman Governor who handed Jesus over to be crucified. This shows just how much of a threat Jesus had become to everyone. Groups normally at odds unite against Him. They come with an announcement and request. First, they announce that Jesus claimed he would rise from the dead three days after his death. We don't have any record of Jesus' claiming this before the religious leaders. Matthew only shows us times when Jesus claimed this before His disciples.

So maybe these religious leaders heard Jesus' claim to rise again in 3 days from Judas the betrayer. Or they may have had spies who somehow picked up this claim from one of the disciples. It is ironic to me however that all of a sudden they are concerned about claims of Jesus' bodily resurrection. Throughout the trial and even on the cross, the religious leaders charged Jesus with saying he would destroy the actual temple in Jerusalem and then raise it up in 3 days. Now, they have switched their concern to the actual resurrection of his body.

Of course, they don't believe this will happen. They call Jesus an imposter or deceiver. They are more concerned that the disciples will attempt to make it look like Jesus rose from the dead. One way to bolster this claim would be to take the body out of the tomb and then claim resurrection. So after giving Pilate this information, they make their request.

“Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people “He has risen from the dead” and the last fraud will be worse than the first. Pilate answers “You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can.” Whose soldiers were sent? The Sadducees did have their own temple guard. It was likely these soldiers that arrested Jesus in the Garden on Thursday night. But it’s unlikely they would need to ask Pilate permission to post a guard on a Jewish tomb with temple soldiers. So it seems more likely that these would be Roman soldiers who would affix the imperial seal to the tomb. A seal was a glob of wax applied to the edge of the stone and then molded to the wall. Then the imperial seal would be pressed into the mold. So if anyone broke the seal, everyone could see it and it would be clear that the robbers were going against the emperor.

Pilate agrees. He sends the soldiers. They seal the tomb and make it secure. Then they are commanded to stand guard over it until sometime on the third day. The religious leaders probably thought this was the end of the Jesus’ movement.

But then comes the third day. It is near dawn on the first day of the week, our Sunday. The two women who sat opposite the tomb when Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took Jesus’ body into it come back. The other gospels reveal that they came to finish the preparation for burial because Joseph and Nicodemus had to do it so quickly. Matthew doesn’t give us that detail. He only says they went to see the tomb. But they know the location of the tomb. They witnessed the burial.

But instead of anointing the dead, something dramatic happens. There is another earthquake. The angel of the Lord descends from heaven, rolls back the stone and sits on it. The last time Matthew mentioned the angel of the Lord was in the birth narratives. There, the angel guided Joseph to take Mary as his wife and take Mary and the new born Jesus to Egypt to escape Herod’s wrath. Now the angel returns at another key moment of redemptive history. Matthew tells us he rolled the stone away and sat on it. The stone was likely circular in shape. To sit on the stone implies that the angel not only rolled it away from the door but somehow out of its track and onto the ground in front of the tomb. Then he sits on the stone.

Matthew describes the angel based on the women’s account. The angel appears like lightning and his clothing is white as snow. This description is similar to appearances of angels or God in the Old Testament. And in Matthew 17 when Jesus was transfigured, his face shone like the sun and his clothes were like a bright light.

So Mary Magdalene and the other Mary witness this. But they were not alone. Those sent to guard the tomb are still there. And Matthew tells us for fear, the angel of the Lord, the guards trembled and became like dead men. Did they go into shock? Did they faint? We don't know. But they were unable to move and even speak.

Then the angel addresses the women. "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified." So these women had certainly gone to the right tomb. "He is not here. He is risen just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay." So this angel announces the incredible news that Jesus has risen. He invites the women into the tomb to actually see the place where Jesus' body once laid. From the Gospel of John, we discover that the grave clothes were still there. One commentator points out that the stone was rolled away not to let Jesus' out but to let the women in. We actually don't know how the resurrection took place or what happened. It may have occurred at the moment of the earthquake. But we do know Jesus was no longer in the tomb by the time the women came and saw the angel.

Apparently, they go into the tomb. Then the angel gives them a message to spread. "Go, tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead. And behold he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him." So the angel commissions them to reassure Jesus' disciples of what they've seen and that they must depart to see Jesus in Galilee.

The women obey. They are filled with fear and great joy. I have not personally encountered the angel of the Lord but it must have been a pretty awesome sight. Yet they are in for another great surprise. On their way they run into Jesus. He greets them with the simple word "Greetings." Something in the way he said it caused an immediate recognition. So they go up to Him and worship him. They bow before him and grasp his feet – real physical feet. Jesus then repeats the angel's instruction. "Go tell my brothers to go to Galilee and there they will see me."

Matthew then flips us back to the guards. It seems after the women left, the guards came out of their stupor. Some of them go to the chief priests – the ones who had requested their presence from Pilate. They told the chief priests all that had taken place. We don't know if they heard the conversation with the women or recognized the angel as an angel. But they could report the earthquake, the rolling stone and the empty tomb. The Chief Priests gather together to decide what to do. Exactly what they hoped didn't happen happened. So they come up with another plan. They pay the soldiers a sufficient sum of money.

They give the soldiers a message to spread – "Tell people, "His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep." The Chief Priests also reassure the guards that if this news comes to Pilate they will take care of it. So

apparently the guards leave and spread the story. This marketing strategy becomes very successful. By the time Matthew writes the Gospel maybe 20 or 30 years after the events, there is widespread retelling of the story that Jesus' disciples stole His body.

So Matthew reveals two explanations for the empty tomb.

- **Explanation 1 – Jesus' disciples stole his body while the guards slept and then spread this news.**
- **Explanation 2 – Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to witnesses.**

Let's examine these explanations a little further. Notice a few points about explanation 1. It does not deny that the tomb is empty. Through all the criticisms of Christianity over the years, one of the strongest claims to its authenticity is the fact that no one has ever produced Jesus' body. They admit the tomb no longer contained Jesus' body. But the Chief Priests think they have the answer. They pay the soldiers to say that the disciples came and stole the body while the soldiers slept.

Now how does this stand up to a little scrutiny? You have professional soldiers guarding a tomb to ensure that disciples don't come and steal the body. But somehow, the soldiers all fall asleep even though falling asleep on duty often resulted in the death penalty. Yet somehow they all sleep and enter a deep sleep. The disciples somehow get to the tomb without arousing suspicion. They roll back the stone without waking anyone up. They carry off the body although the grave clothes remain.

On top of this, the soldiers know other events happened they were present when the angel came and rolled away the stone. But they go out and spread this story. And what did these Chief Priests call Jesus to Pilate? An imposter or deceiver. But they enter into a deception themselves to get their version of events out. They have enough money to buy off the soldiers and get them to lie.

Explanation 2 certainly goes beyond the bounds of normal experience. There is much here beyond the natural realm. Not many of us experience angels showing up and giving us direct commands. Nor have we touched the feet of someone resurrected who was certainly dead 3 days ago. Yet, this version of events is told by eyewitnesses who claimed to have entered the tomb.

Now of course the charge can be made that Matthew made this all up to explain the empty tomb. But if that's so, he did a pretty poor job. First of all, if you're making up a story, you don't give the names of real people who can be

asked about the truth of the story at the time of writing this Gospel. Yet he names Mary Magdalene; the other Mary and Joseph of Arimathea. Second, if you're making up a story in 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism and you want people to believe it, you don't make women the primary witnesses. In many cases, a woman's testimony was not even admissible in court. Third, you don't make the main male leaders of the movement look like cowards. But none of the disciples is anywhere to be seen following the crucifixion. All these details seem to ring true or point to an authentic account.

Now you may be sitting there and thinking that's an interesting or uninteresting discussion. But I've got a week to get to or a job to face or children to parent or a problem to resolve. What does this have to do with my life this week?

Let's do that by thinking about the repercussions of each explanation?

### **Repercussions of Explanation 1**

This explanation or variations of it form the dominant view in the world today. A large majority of people in the world are not Christians. They either don't believe there is a God. Or they don't believe Jesus was anything more than a religious teacher if he existed at all. What if the soldiers unknowingly told the truth? What if the Chief Priests, though questionable in their motives, were correct in their charge? What if Jesus actually didn't rise from the dead and we just haven't found His body?

One of the most famous reflections on this question comes from an early Christian named Paul. Listen to what he writes in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15:12-19

<sup>12</sup>Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? <sup>13</sup>But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. <sup>14</sup>And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. <sup>15</sup>We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. <sup>16</sup>For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. <sup>17</sup>And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. <sup>18</sup>Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. <sup>19</sup>If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

I count about 7 consequences if Christ has not been raised in this passage and about 2 further down in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15.

**1 – Christian Preaching is in vain.** There is no point for me to keep on preaching. Why would I proclaim, exhort and try to persuade people to accept and follow the living Christ if He's not living.

**2 – Christians misrepresent God.** Christians have been saying for 2000 years that Christ is risen and that God raised Him. But if that's not true we have misrepresented God. We have tarnished His reputation and image. We have presented a false picture of Him.

**3 – The dead will not be raised.** If Christ has not been raised, then no other dead person will be raised from the dead. If God couldn't conquer death with His own Son, it seems He's unable to conquer death for other people. So if Christ has not been raised we can forget about any hope in seeing our loved ones again.

**4 – Christian faith is futile** – pointless – empty. We can close all churches. There is no Christianity if Christ is dead. The New Testament is based on a lie. Christianity is done. We would need to find another faith.

**5 – We are still in our sins.** You know that forgiveness thing we talk about and enjoy? Well that's gone if Christ is dead. Why? Well, He promised to rise again. He predicted that He would. So if His predictions are wrong or he's lying, then he's not a perfect, sinless sacrifice. Then He can't meet the standard God put forward as a necessary cost for our forgiveness. We'll just have to pay for our sins with our own blood.

**6 – The dead have perished.** You know the comfort we receive when thinking about loved ones in the presence of Christ in heaven? Well that's gone. Christ isn't in heaven. And people can't go to heaven to be with God because the only way they can pay for their sins is by giving up their own lives and spending eternity apart from Him.

**7 – We Christians are the most pathetic people on earth.** We have staked our lives on a lie because Christ has not risen. So to continue to live like that is dumb. It's living in denial of the truth and making a fool out of ourselves in doing it.

Two more from further down in 1 Corinthians 15.

**8 – We might as well pursue whatever we want for we might die tomorrow.** Since there is nothing after death except maybe Hell apart from God and we can't do anything about that – try to get as much as you can out of this life while you can.



**9 – There’s no point in enduring suffering for Christ.** Those martyrs who refused to confess Caesar as Lord in the Roman Coliseum wasted their lives. Those Christians in Egypt a couple of years ago who refused to renounce their Christian faith and died at the hands of ISIS made a stupid decision. Why would die for something you knew was a lie?

There are millions and millions of people who live according to explanation 1. They’ve adjusted Paul’s reasons. So of course they think Christian preaching is useless. Yes, Christians do misrepresent God claiming their way is the only way. Sure the dead are not raised but that’s no problem if there’s no afterlife. Christian faith is of course futile. Sin doesn’t really exist so we don’t have to worry about it. Christians are pathetic. They certainly will eat and drink today for tomorrow they may die. And suffering for Christ is stupid. Many of our neighbors, friends, coworkers and classmates might be totally at ease with this worldview.

But what if Explanation 2 is true?

### **Repercussions of Position 2**

Again, the Apostle Paul answers this in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15. It’s basically the reverse of every consequence we’ve just listed.

1 – Christian preaching can be life giving and hope restoring.

2 – Christians faithfully represent truth about God.

3 – The dead will be raised. So we will see our loved ones again.

4 – Christian faith is purposeful and well-founded.

5 – We are forgiven our sins.

6 – The dead who knew Christ are with Him now.

7 – We Christians should be the most purposeful people on earth.

8 – Instead of just eating and drinking to forget the futility of life, we can participate in God’s works that will go on for eternity.

9 – Suffering can be used by God for His good purposes in our lives and the world.

Paul concludes his chapter on the resurrection with this application. 1 Corinthians 15:58 – Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

If explanation 2 is true, Jesus' resurrection represents the pattern we will one day follow and is partially happening in our lives already. We have already experienced a spiritual resurrection – WE have been given new life in Christ. That spiritual life continues as we grow more and more in Christlikeness and leave our old life behind. But we also recognize that physically, we reach points where we begin to decline. Yet this is not the end. We have hope beyond the decline. We can look forward to life everlasting life beyond the grave.

If Jesus has been raised from the dead, we have found someone who measures up in all the areas we talked about at the beginning of this message. Hope, Restoration, Evil, Death and Purity. Jesus' resurrection provides hope for not only a better life but a resurrection life free from the presence of sin. The resurrection reveals God's power to bring restoration to those damaged, broken and victimized by life. The resurrection of Jesus overcomes evil and defeats it. Satan was ultimately defeated at the cross. He failed to stop Jesus in the flesh from obeying His Father perfectly to the end. So his doom is sure along with the evil that accompanies his work. Jesus resurrection defeated death. Though we still have to taste death until He comes back, death will ultimately be defeated. And He provides all this with no question about His purity.

And so you have to decide. Will it be explanation 1 or explanation 2? Sometimes when we decide to go with God or to take a step with Christ, we expect our lives to get easier. We think that coming to Christ means our problems will go away. But living as a Christian friend, family member, leader, worker, student and citizen is hard. But it is much harder to live without Christ.

Tim Keller writes this – When life gets hard, our impulse is to flee the trouble and pain and go elsewhere . . . anywhere. It could mean abandoning our position and letting someone else assume the stresses of leadership. It might mean giving in to temptation – by taking the way of least resistance, by lying, by undermining someone else to save ourselves. It might involve falling into some addiction that numbs our pain. But there is no shelter apart from God. We must continue to trust in him, because all other shelters will prove to be places of greater danger.” (Tim Keller, *Songs of Jesus*, Viking, 2015, 116).

So which shelter do you choose? Explanation 1 that Jesus is dead and you have to trust in or identify with someone or something else. Or Explanation 2 that Jesus rose and lives today? If its explanation 2, may our lives radiate

the amazement, gratitude, joy, obedience and loyalty that is appropriate to offer to the Risen, Exalted, and Crucified Lord Jesus Christ