

Go And Tell

How Did Jesus' Tomb Become Empty?

Scripture: Matthew 28:1-15

Sermon Series: *Matthew*

Topic: Jesus, Resurrection

Introduction

Everyone agrees that the tomb of Jesus was empty on the third day after his crucifixion. Where there is widespread disagreement is regarding exactly *how* the tomb came to be empty. History has given us two answers to this question. The first answer comes to us from those who believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God and they tell us that the reason the tomb was empty is

because Jesus was bodily resurrected from the dead by the power of God. The second answer comes to us from those who do not believe that Jesus was the Christ, but rather a fraudulent pretender and they tell us that the tomb was empty because Jesus' followers came by night, stole his corpse, hid it someplace that has not been found, and then propagated the greatest lie humanity has ever known.

These are essentially the only two options since Jesus' dead body has never been found. He either actually bodily rose from the dead and that is why his body has never been found, and thus the resurrection story is true, or he didn't rise from the dead and his body has yet to be found, and thus the resurrection story is false. The question of the bodily resurrection of Jesus is a question about which we cannot equivocate.

The State of Theology¹

For the past decade, Ligonier Ministries—founded by R.C. Sproul—in partnership with Lifeway Research, has every two years released a nationwide study of what those who



¹ Source: <https://thestateoftheology.com/> accessed 25 October 2025.

call themselves Evangelicals² actually believe. A new study was recently released. You should read it.

Question 5 in that study is, “Biblical accounts of the physical (bodily) resurrection of Jesus are completely accurate. This event actually occurred.”

Amazingly only 45% of respondents strongly agreed, while 20% somewhat agreed, 11% were not sure, 8% somewhat disagreed, and 16% strongly disagreed. This is sadly amazing.

This means that 55% of those who are not ashamed to call themselves Evangelical Christians are not absolutely convinced that Jesus actually, physically, and bodily rose from the dead.

Matthew aims to help us answer this question. What happened at the tomb of Jesus? How did it become empty? Where did Jesus’ body go? Matthew will lay before his readers two sets of eye witnesses of what happened at Jesus’ tomb. These two groups will each testify to a different reasons for the empty tomb. They will see the same evidence, they will both be told what to say in response to what they have seen, and they will both obey those who commanded them. They will both go and tell what they were told to tell. One group will tell the truth while the other will tell a lie.

The Message of the Women (vs.1-10)

The first group of eyewitnesses of the empty tomb are two women. What they see and experience at the tomb shapes the message they go and tell.

The Names of the Two Women

Matthew begins by naming the women who will become the carriers of this miraculous message. We know these women. We’ve seen them before. In fact, we last saw them sitting near Jesus’ tomb as Joseph and Nicodemus buried Jesus (Mt 27:61).

Matthew 28:1 (ESV) 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.

Now after the Sabbath. It is now Sunday morning. The Sabbath is over and the sun is rising on *the first day of the week*, which is Sunday. These women had obeyed the law and rested on

² Evangelicals were defined by Lifeway Research as people who strongly agreed with the following four statements: 1) The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe. 2) It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior. 3) Jesus Christ’s death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin. 4) Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God’s free gift of eternal salvation.

the Sabbath (Lk 23:56), but now that the Sabbath had ended, and a new day was dawning, they could go to the tomb.

Mary... and ...Mary went to see the tomb. The two women who together went to the tomb were *Mary Magdalene* and *the other Mary*, who is the mother of James and Joseph (Mt 27:56). They went to *see the tomb*. They were returning to the spot "opposite the tomb" (Mt 27:1) where they previously sat while watching Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus prepare and lay Jesus' body of Jesus. This probably means they were going to sit shiva, which is the Jewish practice of observing seven days of mourning and grieving after the burial of a closed friend or family member.³ When these two women arrived at the tomb, they saw something amazing.

Meeting a Miraculous Messenger

These women arrive at the tomb and meet a miraculous messenger.

Matthew 28:2-4 (ESV) ² 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. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men.

And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven. We find Matthew's characteristic word, *behold*, which he so often uses to get our attention. In these final 20 verses of this chapter he uses this word six times.⁴ Look up! There is something to see here! There was a "*great earthquake*" at the moment of Jesus' death and now there is another at the arrival of this "*angel from heaven*" at Jesus' tomb. The very earth was trembling at this magnitude of this moment. The language appears to indicate that the earthquake happened while the women were in route to the tomb.

An angel... came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. After arriving at the tomb, these women saw this angel *sitting on top of the stone* that once had covered the entrance to the tomb in which Jesus had been buried. "Sitting on the stone" is a sign of victory over death. Like the lumberjack who sits on the tree he has just felled or like a cowboy who sit upon the horse has broken, so this angel sits on stone that he has rolled back.

His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. This angel is glorious and great. His description is virtually identical to the description of Jesus on the mount of transfiguration (Mt 17:2). This is no ordinary person. This is a heavenly being. The glory of the heavenly kingdom has broken into this world and this miraculous messenger has clearly come from the God of heaven for he is still reflecting God's glory.

³ Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, vol. 1, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 1070.

⁴ Matthew 28:2, 7 (twice), 9, 11, 20.

And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. As is almost always the case in Scripture, when men see angels, they are utterly terrified. These guards saw this glorious angel, they shook with fear, and fell down immovable on the ground, *like dead men*. What these men saw with their eyes struck terror in their hearts. There is nothing in this to indicate that they lost consciousness, but rather that they were paralyzed with fear. These guards who were supposed to be brave, are suddenly scared motionless. These men who were sent to guard a dead man now see the glory of God and they become so fearful that they become like dead men. This angel has not come to speak to these soldiers, but rather he has come to speak to these two women, who unlike these brave soldiers are able to endure the presence of this glorious angel.

Matthew 28:5-7 (ESV) ⁵ But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷ 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."

Do not be afraid. It seems that, on day one, in the required class, How To Be Angel 101, these words are first thing they are taught to say when sent on mission to earth to visit God's children. They all say this. They say this to God's children, but not to those who are not God's children. These women are followers of Jesus and this angel speaks to them. He does not speak to these guards.

For I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. These women came to the tomb because they thought Jesus was there. They came to tomb *seeking* to be near *Jesus*. They did not come to a tomb expecting to find a living, resurrected Jesus, but rather they came to the tomb to find a deceased Jesus still dead in the tomb. The Jesus they were seeking was the *Jesus who was crucified*. In their minds, Jesus was dead. Here again we another confirmation of the fact of Jesus' crucifixion. This time it is an angel from God who affirms the fact of Jesus' bodily crucifixion and burial.

He is not here, for he has risen, as he said (v.6). Not only does the angel affirm the crucifixion and burial of Jesus, but he also affirms the resurrection from the dead of Jesus. Jesus died. Jesus was buried in a tomb. And then on the third day, Jesus was raised from the dead. This angel confirms it. There is also a slight rebuke here. They should have been seeking a resurrected Jesus for "*he has risen, as he said*." Jesus had previously said he would rise from the dead on multiple occasions.⁵ They should have paid attention to the words of Jesus and believed what he had taught them.

Come, see the place where he lay (v.6). The angel now invites them inside the tomb to inspect it for themselves. He wanted these two women to see this empty tomb with their own eyes.

⁵ Matthew 12:40; 16:21; 17:9, 23; 20:18-19; 26:32, 61.

Inside they would have seen the discarded burial shroud and then linen strips that Jesus left behind (Jn 20:5-7). Clearly the reason he came and *rolled back the stone was not to let Jesus out, but rather to let them in!* Jesus was already gone. He had already been resurrected and the stone could not keep him inside the tomb. These two women looked inside the tomb and saw that it was indeed empty. The body of Jesus was not to be found here. The angel explains to them why the tomb was empty. These women did not witness the resurrection of Jesus, but rather they witnessed that the place where his body lay, was now vacant. The reason the tomb was empty was because *"he had risen"* from the dead, *"as he said"* he would do. These women would not know this if this angel had not told them.

Go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead (v.7). The angel tells these two ladies what to say and to whom to say it. He tells them to *"go quickly."* This news is important and urgent. They are not to waste time, but move fast. He sends them *"to his disciples"* and he wants them to be told that *"he has risen from the dead."* This is the crucial piece of information that they are to be told. The angel does not explain *how* this happened, but simply *that* this happened. Jesus truly has been raised from the dead. The resurrection has truly happened. Jesus, who was crucified, dead, and buried is dead and buried no longer. He has risen!

Behold he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you (v.7). Their message is to be one of hope. **Behold.** Pay attention! The women are to remind the disciples of what Jesus said to them after the Last Supper while they were walking to the Mount of Olives, *"After I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee"* (Mt 26:32). This is a promise to the disciples that they will soon see the resurrected Jesus in person. The angel does not want these women to forget this, and so he emphasized the point say, *"See (or 'behold'), I have told you."* The intent is to remove all doubt from them. An angel sent from heaven has given them a command and promise. This is the word of God. It will certainly take place.

Jesus Met Them

As these two Marys obeyed the word of the angel, they met the resurrected Jesus himself.

Matthew 28:8-10 (ESV) ⁸ So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."

So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy (v.8). These two women obeyed exactly what this angel told them to do. He told them *"go quickly"* (v.7) and so *quickly* they went. These women were obedient women. Matthew reveals the emotions of these two women. They left the tomb quickly experiencing a mixture of *fear and great joy*.

Their *fear* probably stems from the fact that their entire worldview has been upended. They came to the tomb expecting to find a corpse, and instead they found a very alive angel and a very empty tomb. They walked to the tomb in silence and yet the ground under their feet had been shaken. They went expecting to find a sealed tomb, but instead they found it open and empty! Unusual things were happening. Battle-hardened guards lay paralyzed while they have chat with heavenly warrior.

Their *joy* obviously stemmed from the fact that they have been told that Jesus has been raised from the dead. This is wonderful news, but how could it be? Do they dare hope that this could be true? They had thought Jesus had been God's messiah, but his unexpected death had devastated their hopes. Do they dare to hope again? And yet his tomb was empty! Where was his body? Was he truly raised from the dead? Was God among them after all?!

Ran to tell his disciples (v.8). So excited were they that they *ran* to the disciples. Yes, they were obeying the angel, but more likely their joy was giving gas to their feet. If this happy news was true—and there was an angel from heaven telling them that it was, and holy angels don't lie—then the disciples needed to know this and fast. So they *ran*.

And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" (v.9). As they were running, they ran into Jesus. *Behold*, they saw him and met him as they were running. *Greetings!* No doubt this was language that Jesus customarily used. They'd heard this voice before! This was Jesus!

And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him (v.9). They instinctively ran to him and "*took hold of his feet.*" They had to touch him. How many times had they sat at his feet and listened to him teach? They *worshipped him*. They both fell down before him in humble worship. They could not help themselves. They were touching the pierced feet of a resurrected man! They handled him. He was not a spirit. This was not a hallucination. These were warm feet of a living man! His were pierced feet! These were the feet of Jesus. The angel was right. He had risen from the dead.

Note that *Jesus does not rebuke them for worshiping him*. When Cornelius fell down in worship before Peter, he rebuked him (Acts 10:25-26). When the people of Lystra attempted to worship Paul and Barnabas, they rebuked them (Acts 14:11-15). When John fell down at the feet of a mighty angel and worshiped him, the angel rebuked him (Rev 19:10). Jesus does not rebuke these women for worshiping him. You remember the words of Jesus to Satan, "*You shall worship the LORD your God and him only shall you worship*" (Mt 4:10). Only God is to be worshiped, but Jesus here allows these women to worship him. Who is this man who would allow these women to worship him?

"Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to do to Galilee, and there they will see me" (v.10). He said the same thing the angel said. Their *fear* was still present. Jesus calmed their fear. His thoughts were first for them. He wanted to calm their anxiety and quiet their fear. Jesus pours courage into them, essentially saying, "Keep calm and carry on."

He repeats the message the angel gave them. The only thing that is different is that Jesus used the word '*brothers*' rather than 'disciples.' Jesus still considers these men to be

member of his family. Those who deserted him in his darkest hour, Jesus now calls '*brothers*,' not merely disciples. All those who abandoned him, he now calls 'brothers.' All those who were ashamed to be called by his name, he now names 'brothers!' This is so graciously amazing! And he wants to see them and he wants them to know this. So he reaffirms the message that he will see them in Galilee! Galilee. The place where it all started is the place where he will now meet them. Galilee of the Gentiles. That place where the light first dawned, is now to be the place where the resurrected Jesus will allow his brothers to see him again.

They ran to tell his brothers. Matthew does not explicitly say it, but we can certainly assume it, that after Jesus left them, they kept running to carry their message. These women ran and told the disciples that Jesus was risen. They carried the message they were charged to carry. They told the message they were given to tell.

These two women are the first group of eyewitnesses who are at the tomb of Jesus.

The Message of the Guards (vs. 11-16)

The second group of eyewitnesses of the empty tomb are soldiers. What these guards see and experience at the tomb of Jesus shapes the message that they go and tell.

Matthew 28:11 (ESV) While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place.

While they were going. When the women left the tomb so did *some of the guard*. All of the guard did not leave, but only *some*. Perhaps some stayed behind to keep watch over the tomb. Or perhaps the some that did not go had decided they'd seen enough to believe that they ought not oppose Jesus. Perhaps they were afraid because the very thing they had been assigned to do, they had failed to do.

And told the chief priests all that had taken place. But while the women were running to the disciples to tell them what had happened, these men were going to the chief priests to tell them what had happened. They told of the earthquake, the angel, the two women, the conversation between the angel and the two women, the stone being rolled back, and the fact of the empty tomb, and the women running to tell the disciples what the angel said.

Matthew 28:12-13 (ESV) ¹² And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers ¹³ and said, "Tell people, His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep."

When they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel (v.12). All that the soldiers told them was reason enough to *assemble the elders* and *take counsel*. What would they do with this eyewitness testimony of these soldiers? This had to be well thought through. This was terrible news. The very thing that the guards had been posted to prevent is the thing which

now the guards have reported has happened. The tomb is empty and the word is going out that Jesus has been raised from the dead. There can be no refuting that the tomb is empty. This will certainly be known to all.

They gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers (v.12). Jesus is getting really expensive. They had to pay to effect Jesus' death and now they have to pay again to try to keep him dead. They had to bribe Judas to betray Jesus, and now they have to bribe soldiers to lie about his resurrection. This had to be an impressively large sum of money paid to three or four soldiers because if it was discovered that they failed to keep a dead man in his tomb, then could lose their lives for dereliction of duty. And so the chief priests and elders tell these soldiers what to say to people.

"Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep'" (v.13). They come up with a reason that explains the empty tomb, but denies the resurrection of Jesus. You may recall the story of the rich man who died and went to hell and in his torment he begged Abraham to send the deceased man Lazarus to his brothers to warn them of the torment of hell, arguing that if someone returned from the dead and warned them then they would believe and turn away from their sin, but Abraham said, *"If they will not listen to Moses and the Prophets, then neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead"* (Lk 16:31). What happens among the chief priests and elders demonstrates that Abraham was correct. They refuse to believe even when they have unbiased, independent testimony to the resurrection of Jesus.

This lie is actually foolish, because if anyone thinks for just a moment they will have to ask, how is it that grave robbers could be identified if the guards were actually sleeping? If the soldiers were in fact sleeping, then they would not have seen who it was who took the body. And how is it that these sleeping guards would not have heard two or three persons grunting and groaning and straining as a large stone, sitting inside a stone trough, was rolled away from the entrance to a tomb? Are we really to believe that the grinding of stone upon stone would not have awakened sleeping guards?

And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble. One wonders how true this is. If Pilate decided to execute his soldiers for failing to carry out their duty, then no chief priest or elder of Israel would be able to stop him. However, it may be that they are insinuating that they would bribe Pilate also. Pilate was a lover of money and they may be hinting that they would *"satisfy him"* by bribing him and thus, *keeping the soldiers out of trouble.*

Matthew 28:15 (ESV) So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

Conclusion

Two groups of eyewitnesses at Jesus' empty tomb see the same information and end up telling two different stories to explain why the tomb was empty. Both the guards and women saw the angel. Both saw the stone rolled back. Both saw that Jesus' body was not inside the tomb. Both heard the words of the angel explaining that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Both told these facts to those to whom they were sent; the women to the disciples and the soldiers to the chief priests and elders. The disciples believed this good news that Jesus was resurrected, but the chief priests and elders refused to believe it. The disciples told the truth about Jesus while the chief priests and elders told a lie about Jesus.

To those who believed that Jesus was resurrected "*as he said*" he would be, Jesus revealed himself. These two women saw, heard, and touched Jesus' pierced feet. And soon so will the disciples. These same disciples who abandoned Jesus are the one whom Jesus calls "*my brothers*." Jesus forgives those who have fallen.

What do you believe? Do you believe the story of the resurrection is true or false? Did Jesus truly, bodily rise from the dead? Or is the absence of his corpse simply due to clever concealment by Jesus' disciples?

We must all **go and tell** some story about Jesus. What story we you tell? Will you tell others that he was resurrected on the third day? Or will you tell others that this is all nothing more than a clever hoax?

There's no denying that tomb of Jesus was empty on the third day after his death. How will you explain that?

Discussion Questions

1. What is the significance of the fact that there were two women who saw the empty tomb and at least two soldiers?
2. Why did the two Mary's go to the tomb on Sunday morning? What do you think was going through their minds? What did they expect to find?
3. It was argued in sermon that the soldiers did not lose consciousness but rather heard everything that the angel said to the women, though they "became like dead men." Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?
4. The angel said Jesus was risen from the dead "just as he said." Can you recall times when Jesus predicted his death and resurrection? What does this reveal about Jesus?
5. What does the fact that Jesus allowed the women to worship him say about what Jesus believed about himself?
6. What evidence do the women have that Jesus was actually raised from the dead?
7. Why did Jesus want his disciples told that he would meet them in Galilee?
8. What is the significance of Jesus calling his disciples, "my brothers?" How might the disciples have felt when the two Mary's told them that this is what Jesus called them?
9. What do you think was going through the minds of the guards? Even though they were paid to tell a lie, what do you think they actually believed about why the tomb was empty?
10. If you were one of the soldiers, what would you have done?
11. What does it reveal about the heart of mankind that these chief priests and elders did not believe in the resurrection of Jesus despite the testimony of the soldiers? What does this tell you about the hearts of all people?
12. What from this portion of Scripture do you find most personally encouraging?
13. What questions do you have?

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