

SESSION TWO

*THE EMPTY
TOMB ACCOUNTS*

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I. THE GOSPELS' ACCOUNT OF THE EMPTY TOMB STORY

A. Historical Reliability of the Gospels

1. Sources

- a. Who wrote the Gospel accounts?
- b. Are the writers trustworthy?
- c. How early were they written?

2. Dates

- a. How close were the Gospels written in relation to each other?
- b. Can the dates be identified with a historical context?
- c. How close are the dates to the Resurrection?

3. Eye witnesses to the empty tomb¹²

- a. Are they trustworthy, honest, and accurate?
- b. Were the eyewitnesses present at the empty tomb?
- c. Do they have hidden ulterior motives?
- d. Can their stories be corroborated with other evidence?

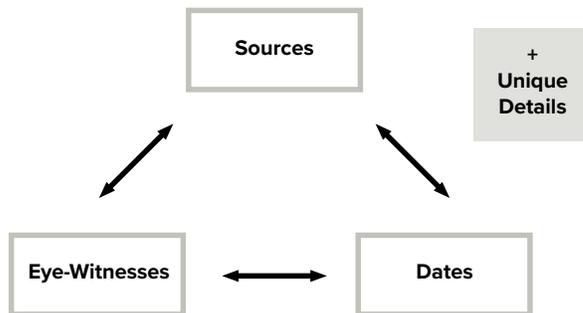
4. Unique Details

- a. Do unique details given by each Gospel writer contradict or corroborate other aspects of the story?
- b. Do differences found among the empty tomb stories discredit the story itself?
- c. What is the importance of women in this story?

¹ J. Warner Wallace, *Cold-Case Christianity: A Homicide Detective Investigates the Claims of the Gospels*, Updated and Expanded Edition. David C. Cook: 2023, 86, 91.

² Lee Strobel, "Good Reasons to Trust the Gospels As Eyewitness Accounts," J Warner Wallace Interview, 9/1/2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=EB-t4FsxS8s

What makes the Gospels historically true?



B. Sources for the Gospel Accounts³

1. Gospel of Mark⁴
 - a. Internal evidence – records Peter’s teaching^{5 6}
 - b. External evidence

2. Gospel of Matthew⁷
 - a. The influence of Mark’s Gospel appears present
 - b. *Hypothetical Q*⁸
 - c. Eye-witness of Matthew

3. Gospel of Luke⁹
 - a. The influence of Mark’s Gospel appears present
 - b. *Hypothetical Q*
 - c. Paul, himself

4. Gospel of John¹⁰
 - a. Eye-witness of John

³ D.A. Carson & Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2005), 77-133; 140-156; 172-177; 186-187; 201-211; 229-254.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 172-177; 186-187.

⁵ Wallace, *Cold-Case Christianity: A Homicide Detective Investigates the Claims of the Gospels*, 184.

⁶ Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 173.

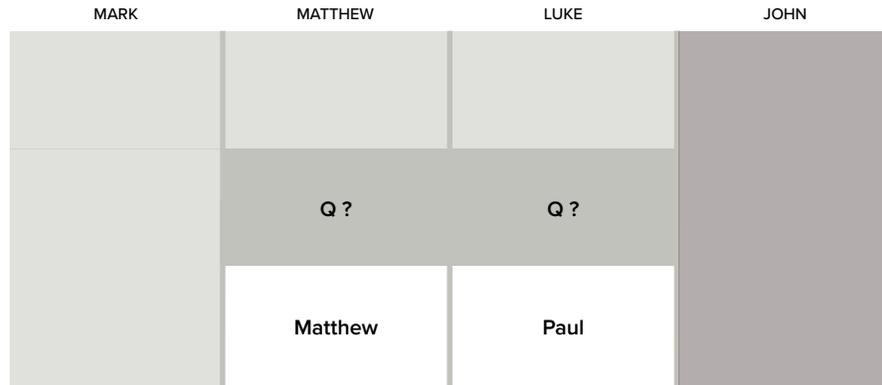
⁷ *Ibid.*, 140-156.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 98-101.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 201-211.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 229-254

Sources for the Gospel Accounts

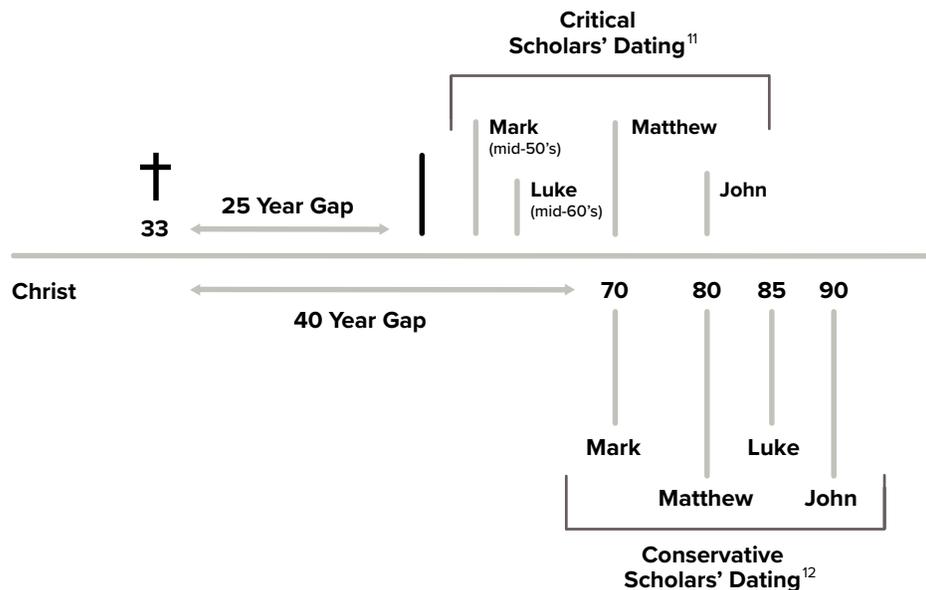


C. Dates for the Gospels Compared to the Resurrection

1. Conservative scholars dating of the Gospels
2. Skeptical scholars or liberal dating of the Gospels
3. Time interval between the Resurrection and the empty tomb story recorded in Mark

INSIGHT

Historically, a 40-year gap of time between Christ's Resurrection and the writing of Mark is remarkably short compared to all other surviving ancient documents.



¹¹ If one elects to use this late dating of the Gospels as determined by some critical scholars you would be taking the "minimal facts" approach for the sake of argument and then defeating their skepticism despite these late dates. These late dates place only a 40-year time gap between the Resurrection and the writing of Mark which is an extremely short period of time by historical standards.

¹² Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 156, 182, 210, 267.

4. Comparison of the time interval gap to other historical timelines
 - a. Alexander the Great
 - b. Tiberius Caesar

II. OBSERVATIONS AT THE TOMB RECORDED BY THE GOSPEL WRITERS

A. Approach to the Tomb

1. Mark 16:1-3
2. Matthew 28:1
3. Luke 24:1
4. John 20:1-4

Approach To The Tomb			
MARK 16:1-3	MATTHEW 28:1	LUKE 24:1	JOHN 20:1-4
After Sabbath very early, 1st day of the week	After Sabbath dawn, 1st day of the week	Very early, 1st day of the week	Early, 1st day of the week
Mary Magdalene Mary (Mother of James) Salome	Mary Magdalene Other Mary	Women	Mary Magdalene
Bought spices		Took spices	
Concerned about the stone			Saw that the stone had been removed Ran to Peter and the other disciple (John) Peter and other disciple (John) ran to the tomb

B. Arrival at the Tomb

1. Mark 16:4-7
2. Matthew 28:2-7
3. Luke 24:2-8
4. John 20:5-17

Arrival at the Tomb			
MARK 16:4-7	MATTHEW 28:2-7	LUKE 24:2-8	JOHN 20:5-17
Stone rolled away	Stone rolled away (Angel, earthquake)	Stone rolled away	“Other” disciple looked in tomb
Entered tomb		Entered tomb; no body	Peter entered tomb
Young man in white robe sitting	Male angel’s appearance (like lightening) sitting on stone	Two men in clothes (like lightening)	Saw linen strips and cloth from Jesus’ head Cloth separate from the linen Other disciple entered, saw, and believed.
Alarmed “Don’t be alarmed” He has risen! Go tell his disciples and Peter. He is going to Galilee	Guards shook and “became like dead men” “Do not be afraid” He has risen. See where he laid. “Go quickly and tell his disciples.” He is going to Galilee	Women bowed down. He is risen! Recall His words. Son of man must be delivered.	Mary wept outside tomb Two angels in white seated in tomb “Why are you crying?” “They have taken my Lord” Turned and saw Jesus, but didn’t recognize him, “Rabboni!” Go and tell my brothers

C. Departure from the Empty Tomb

1. Mark 16:8
2. Matthew 28:8-10
3. Luke 24:9-12
4. John 20:10; 18

BURIAL PRACTICES

First-century burial practices are consistent with many of the events described in the empty tomb stories.

(See Session Two, Appendix C, p. 83-84)

Departure from the Tomb

MARK 16:8	MATTHEW 28:8-10	LUKE 24:9-12	JOHN 20:10;18
“Trembling and bewildered”	Afraid, but filled with joy	They told all things to the eleven (and others).	Disciples left
The women fled. They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.	Run to tell the disciples Jesus met them, “Greetings”	Women listed (Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, & others)	After Mary’s encounter with Jesus... She left to see the disciples: “I have seen the Lord.”
	Women worshipped him	Did not believe the women (nonsense)	
	Go tell my brothers to go to Galilee	Peter runs to the tomb; sees strips of linen	

III. TEXTUAL SIMILARITIES OF THE EMPTY TOMB STORY

- A. All four agree that the events took place early in the morning on the first day of the week on the third day after Jesus’ execution.
- B. All four agree that Mary Magdalene was at the tomb.
- C. Matthew, Mark, Luke agree that another woman was there too.
- D. Mark and Luke add a third woman.
- E. All four agree that an unusual stranger met and spoke to the women.
- F. All four end with an empty tomb.
- G. Synoptics agree on the words of the angel, “He is not here, he is risen.”
- H. All agree that the stone presented an apparent problem that was solved.
- I. All except Mark describe Jesus appearing alive to His followers.
- J. Matthew and John agree that Mary Magdalene met Jesus.
- K. All except Mark agree that Mary goes to tell the male disciples.

INSIGHT

The four Gospels provide a complementary, not a contradictory account of the empty tomb.

IV. TEXTUAL DIFFERENCES IN THE EMPTY TOMB STORY¹³

- A. Only Matthew mentions an earthquake.
- B. Only Luke records the disbelief of the disciples when the women inform them.
- C. Only Luke records Peter running to the tomb.
- D. Mark's version abruptly ends at 16:8.
- E. Only Mark mentions Salome approaching the tomb.
- F. Only John describes the grave clothes.
- G. Only Matthew mentions the guards.

V. UNIQUENESS OF THE EMPTY TOMB STORY

A. Women play a prominent role

1. Impossible to imagine women were artificially inserted in the stories; adds credibility to the story.
2. Women were not accepted as legal witnesses.

Who Were the Women in the Story?

Mary Magdalene	Mary	Mary	Mary	Joanna	Salome
from Magdala: Jesus delivered her from seven demons	Mother of Jesus	Mother of James the Younger/ Lessor	Wife of Clopas and Jesus' aunt	Wife of Chuza and Financer	Mother of James and John, sons of Zebedee

B. About the Resurrection

1. Gospels do not say much about the Resurrection.
2. Jesus did not say much about the Resurrection.
3. The Resurrection account does not grow as the Gospels are written or between each Gospel.

¹³ When evaluating textual differences, scholars use highly restrictive research standards. By contrast, others simply ask, "What really happened?" For example, J. Warner Wallace, in his book, *Cold-Case Christianity: A Homicide Detective Investigates the Claims of the Gospels*, (2023), 201-210, reports that because of these differences the eyewitness accounts are credible. The differences between the stories actually fill in the detail omitted by one or more of the Gospels and provide "unintentional support" in their accuracy.

C. **Rise in Christianity**

1. Striking mutation within Jewish Resurrection belief rules out possibility it was spontaneously generated from a Jewish context.
2. Empty tomb stories and appearances are both required to explain the rise in Christian belief.

D. **We see John's transformation at the tomb (John 20:8).**

E. **Empty tomb plus Jesus' appearances substantially advances Resurrection belief.**

VI. **MAIN ARGUMENTS FAVORING THE EMPTY TOMB¹⁴**

A. **Women were the first witnesses to discover the empty tomb**

1. Strongest argument favoring the empty tomb¹⁵
2. All four Gospels record women discovering the empty tomb.
3. Low view of female testimony in ancient Mediterranean society strengthens empty tomb argument by authenticating the story.¹⁶
4. Ehrman argues woman may have fabricated reports about the empty tomb.¹⁷ If Ehrman is correct, how would anyone (including the disciples) believe the women since they were not known to be credible witnesses?

B. **Jerusalem Effect — Jerusalem was the site of early Christian teaching. An occupied tomb could have been easily discovered.**

1. Jerusalem would have been the least likely location for initial teaching of the empty tomb story as the tomb could be easily checked.¹⁸
2. Proclamation of the empty tomb story in Jerusalem would not have lasted a single day; some believe this to be the strongest argument for the empty tomb.^{19 20}
3. If any corpse had been discovered in Jesus' tomb, the empty tomb claim of Jesus would have been falsified.²¹

◆ **THE PRINCIPLE OF EMBARRASSMENT**

A criterion that looks at ancient writings to see if there are hard, embarrassing, or unfavorable details about the author(s) or with the story's purpose. If such details exist, positive conclusions can be made about the integrity of the author(s).

¹⁴ Gary Habermas, *On the Resurrection: Evidences*, (Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2024), 597-624.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 607.

¹⁶ Carolyn Osiek, "The Women at the Tomb: What Are They Doing There?" *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* [Online], Vol 53, No 1/2 (13 December 1997, 103-118.

¹⁷ Ehrman, Bart D., *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee*. (United Kingdom: Harper Collins Publishers, 2014), 166-168.

¹⁸ Habermas, *On the Resurrection: Evidences*, 610.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), 127-128.

²¹ Habermas, *On the Resurrection: Evidences*, 612.

C. The empty tomb accounts are multiply attested.

1. Affirmed up to four times in the independent Gospel sources (Mark, Matthew, John, and Luke)²²
2. Two or more sources in agreement during ancient times render a fact indisputable.²³

D. The early pre-Pauline creedal tradition or “Received Text” in 1 Corinthians 15:3 implies the empty tomb.

1. Four-fold sequence: dead, buried, raised, appeared – early conviction Jesus’ burial place was not occupied.²⁴
2. Verbs occur in context of “standing up, rising” (*anastasis* in Greek) suggesting bodily events which would result in an empty tomb.^{25 26}
3. Resurrection language that Paul uses (Romans 6:3-4; 8:11) assumed an empty tomb.^{27 28}

E. Peter and Paul’s early sermons (Acts 2:29-32 and Acts 13:28-37) mention the empty tomb.

1. Peter’s early sermon in Acts 2:29-32 implies Jesus’ body was placed in a tomb from which he was raised.
2. Paul’s early sermon in Acts 13:28-32 helps answer the question about Paul’s belief in the empty tomb.

F. An early pre-Markan passion narrative appears to have existed that included the empty tomb story.

1. Habermas states the majority of contemporary scholars agree, but others state this view is indeterminate.^{29 30}
2. Mark 16:1-8 appears to derive from this early narrative

G. Jews and pagans interpreted Paul’s teaching of the Resurrection as a body raising to a new life and leaving an empty tomb behind.

1. Predominant position of second temple Judaism was a personal embodied hereafter.³¹

²² Habermas, *On the Resurrection: Evidences*, 614.

²³ Paul L. Maier, *In the Fullness of Time*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1991), 197, as quoted in Habermas, *On the Resurrection: Evidences*, 614.

²⁴ Habermas, *On the Resurrection: Evidences*, 616.

²⁵ Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee*, 186.

²⁶ Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, 83-84.

²⁷ John Granger Cook, *Empty Tomb, Resurrection, Apotheosis*, (Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 1-53.

²⁸ John Granger Cook, “Resurrection in Paganism and the Question of an Empty Tomb in 1 Corinthians 15”, *New Testament Studies*, 63; 2017, 56-75.

²⁹ Habermas, *On the Resurrection: Evidences*, 620

³⁰ Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus, A New Historiographical Approach*, (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 215-216.

³¹ Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus, A New Historiographical Approach*, 621

2. When Paul speaks of Resurrection he refers to a body being raised leaving an empty tomb behind.³²

H. First century Jewish leaders could not disprove that Jesus' tomb was empty.

1. Their explanation that Jesus' disciples stole the body actually admitted the tomb was empty (Matthew 28:11-15).
2. Many scholars reject the story of the guards at the tomb.³³
3. Jewish tradition does not mention that Jesus' body was left on the cross to rot or to be buried in a common grave.

I. Additional arguments for the empty tomb

(See Session Two, Appendix D, p.83)

VII. CONCLUSIONS

- A. The truth of the empty tomb story rests on the historical reliability of the Gospel accounts. Sources, dates, eyewitnesses, and unique details of each book can be historically verified and assist in our understanding of the empty tomb.
- B. Differences in the textual accounts of the empty tomb do not mean errors. Imperfect corroboration among Gospel writers adds credibility and authenticity to the accounts. No collusion occurred. Four Gospels give us a complementary, not a contradictory account. Many of these differences reflect a writer's textual emphasis and viewpoint.
- C. Strong and credible arguments for the empty tomb exist. Two of these include the role that women played in the discovery of the empty tomb and the fact that the earliest sermons about Christ took place in Jerusalem, near where the empty tomb could have been falsified, but wasn't.

VIII. STUDY QUESTIONS

- A. Identify the individual sources that describe the empty tomb. Why is multiple attestation (multiple sources) important for historical verification?

³² Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, 31, 82-83, 273.

³³ Habermas, *On the Resurrection: Evidences*, 623.

B. How would you demonstrate that these individual resources are early compared to other ancient sources?

C. Who were the eyewitnesses to the empty tomb? What evidence do you have that they are credible witnesses or that their reports are accurate?

D. What are the similarities in the various empty tomb reports? What are the differences? How do the similarities and the differences support one another as a credible historical report?

E. Why is the empty tomb so important to establish the reports of Jesus' Resurrection?

F. How would you describe the main arguments for the empty tomb to a person who has not considered the evidence before?

