

The Resurrection: True or False
The Wrong Tomb Theory
Matthew 27:57-61
Pastor Jon Haakana

Once again we've heard the doubting words of a man we are calling Allen the Atheist. During our midweek Lenten services this year we are looking at theories that have been created to refute the Scriptural record of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Instead, we are using the Bible to refute these theories. Again, we are doing this not to convince ourselves, but rather, to be able to give answer to anyone who seeks a reason for the hope that we have and the truth we have become convinced of. And as we make our way to the cross and the empty garden tomb this Lenten and Easter season, it will give new meaning and appreciation for this most important miracle of God.

Today, we look at the Wrong Tomb Theory. This theory states that the women, in their grief and sorrow, simply came to the wrong tomb, as there may have been many similar tombs in Jerusalem. Because of Jesus' hasty burial and the fact they came in the dim morning light, the women were not sure exactly which of the many rock-hewn tombs in the area was Joseph's. When they examined the wrong one, which was empty, they were startled by a gardener or grave worker (whom they thought was an angel) who had guessed their mission and tried to correct their mistake. "He is not here" the gardener advised, and then pointed to the correct sepulcher, "See the place where he lay." But the women panicked, fled, and later announced an empty tomb.

There is another version of this theory, even more ancient than this theory, called the "lettuce theory," which proposes that a gardener was upset with the curiosity-seekers trampling over lettuce seedlings he had planted around Joseph's tomb. So, he removed the body of Jesus and interred it elsewhere. But visitors continued to come to the now-empty sepulcher and proclaimed the resurrection. Crude as this hypothesis sounds; it was, in fact, one of the earliest non-Christian explanations for the resurrection, even mentioned by the 2nd century church historian Tertullian.

The synoptic gospels all point out that, three days earlier, the women had made a careful note of the position of the tomb, in order that they might return later to anoint the body. Matthew tells of Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary" directly observing the burial of Jesus on Friday evening, when they had specifically gauged the size of the stone, so it seems extremely unlikely that they would have erred. If they had, Joseph of Arimathea or the guards assigned to the sepulcher would certainly have corrected them.

Luke's account of the burial of Jesus states "the women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it" (23:55). The

resurrection account in John adds that Peter and John ran right to the tomb, looked inside and saw the strips of linen and the burial cloth that was folded separately.

The verses following our text in Matthew 27 added the chief priests and the Pharisees surely knew where Jesus was buried because after the Day of Passover they went Pilate again, this time to request that the tomb be sealed and a guard be posted. They said, "So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, His disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first" (27:64).

The "lettuce theory," which I mentioned earlier, is humorous at best as the gardener would certainly have some explaining to do for the owner of the sepulcher. The gardener would also have certainly been stopped by the posted guard.

There are several other problems with the theory that the women and the disciples went to the wrong tomb on that Sunday morning, three days after the death of their Lord. It doesn't provide a reason why Jesus' followers, and even His enemies, claimed that they encountered Jesus after His death. In Matthew's resurrection account, after the women encountered the angel and Jesus in the garden, they left to tell His disciples. We then read that "some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened" (28:11).

Then there's the problem with believability. The women who discovered the empty tomb also had followed Joseph and saw where Jesus was buried. They knew which one to look for. Also, after returning to tell the disciples what they had seen and experienced, they too must have gone to the wrong tomb. And although many tombs looked alike, Jesus' tomb would have been heavily guarded.

And the biggest problem with this theory: If Jesus' followers went to the wrong tomb that means His body was still in the right tomb. If the Jewish leaders or the Romans wanted to stop Christianity or disprove the resurrection declaration, all they had to do was open the right tomb to show that Jesus' body was still there. But they didn't because they couldn't.

If you go to Jerusalem today and make your way to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher you will see the place where many believe that Jesus was crucified and then buried. Golgotha, known as the "place of the skull" was in the area of some abandoned stone quarries and the tomb was located in a garden nearby. Around A.D. 135 the Roman Emperor Hadrian put down the second Jewish revolt. He then tried to erase from the city anything having to do with their history. One thing he did was to cover the quarry

that held what Christians believed was Jesus' tomb. He then built a temple to Roman gods on top of the quarry.

Two hundred years later the emperor of Rome, Constantine the Great was a Christian and is often credited with converting the Roman Empire to Christianity. His mother, Helena, travelled to Jerusalem and was shown the temple and told its history. Constantine ordered an excavation and soon the tombs were found. Apparently one of them was distinguished from the others (marked) as Jesus' tomb. He then built the Church of the Holy Sepulcher around the site. After all the changes and happenings over the years, there is no way to know for sure if the traditional tomb of Jesus really is the tomb He was buried in. But there is good reason to believe that these tombs are the actual burial grounds of Jesus.

Constantine and Helena knew and had become convinced of what we believe and teach: that Jesus Christ was born, lived, died and rose again for our salvation and the salvation of the whole world. Jesus came to our world to be among us and to die for us because it was the only way that we could be rescued from the sin that plagues our souls and permeates our world. He went to the cross to be our Redeemer. He rose from the tomb to be our Savior. We may not know exactly where his tomb is today, but we know one thing for sure; He is not there! "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; He is risen! HE IS RISEN....Amen!