

2007 Resurrection Sunday

“The Jesus Family Tomb”?

John 20:1-8

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Scripture

Last month the Discovery Channel aired a television documentary titled, “The Jesus Family Tomb.” HarperSanFrancisco released a book by the same title at the same time.

The documentary (and book) claims that a tomb discovered in Jerusalem in 1980 contains the family burial plot of Jesus Christ.

Spearheaded by a well-known TV director named Simcha Jacobovici, and produced by “Titanic” director James Cameron, “The Jesus Family Tomb” is a slick and suspenseful narrative about the 1980 discovery of a first-century burial cave that contained ten bone boxes, which are known as ossuaries.

With the help of statisticians, archaeologists, historians, DNA experts, robot-cameras, epigraphers and CSI experts from New York’s Long Island, Jacobovici puts together a case in which he argues that the bones found in the tomb belong to the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, Jesus, and other family members. Moreover, Jacobovici argues that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married, and that one of the ossuaries contains the bones of Judah, the son of Jesus and Mary Magdalene!

Now, what we are to make about such claims?

Christians believe that Jesus is alive, and that he rose from the dead on the third day, physically and bodily. The apostle Paul said to the Corinthians, “And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith” (1 Corinthians 15:14).

There are many reasons to dispel the notion that the bones found in Jerusalem in 1980 belong to Jesus. The main reason is in fact that Jesus rose from the dead three days after his crucifixion.

Jesus’ tomb was indeed found, not in 1980, but, three days after he was crucified. And when Jesus’ followers found it on that first Resurrection Sunday morning, he was not there—he was raised from the dead, just as he said!

Let me draw your attention to John 20:1-8, an historic eyewitness account of the first followers of Jesus who went to his burial tomb on what we now call Resurrection Sunday:

¹ Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. ² So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

³ So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. ⁴ Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷ as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. ⁸ Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (John 20:1-8).

Introduction

In the television documentary titled, "The Jesus Family Tomb," the thesis is proposed that Jesus' body was stolen by his followers and then re-buried in another family tomb—the tomb that was discovered in 1980.

Now, I admit that I have conspiracist tendencies, and it is intriguing to consider such a theory. However, one must consider the facts. One fact to consider is how the followers of Jesus could maintain a consistent story—saying that Jesus had risen from the dead, when in fact he was buried in another tomb.

When people question the veracity of Jesus' resurrection, Chuck Colson responds with one word: *Watergate*. Colson was the "Hatchet Man" of the Nixon administration who once said in 1972, "I would walk over my grandmother for Richard Nixon."

Colson notes that when the Watergate scandal broke in

March of 1973, twelve of the world's most powerful men couldn't hold a lie together for two weeks. After John Dean turned State's evidence against Nixon to try and save himself, the whole house of cards crumbled within days.

In contrast, the feeble dozen that followed Jesus were anything but world-class powerbrokers, yet they never wavered after seeing their risen Lord. Each spent the rest of their life maintaining and propagating the truth that Jesus Christ was the Son of God who conquered death and the grave. And each died because of that ironclad conviction.

Even with the world's most powerful resources, twelve men couldn't keep a lie from destroying their kingdom in 1973.

Two thousand years earlier, the truth of Jesus' resurrection couldn't keep a small band of men from dying for what they knew to be true and the truth about that kingdom has literally changed the world.¹

Lesson

So, today, I would like to show you what really happened on that first Sunday morning after Jesus' resurrection. In our text for today, the apostle John **saw and believed** that Jesus was not in the tomb—he was in fact raised from the dead!

But what was it that led John to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead?

I. The Events of the Resurrection Morning

The time element sheds light on the experiences of Peter and John at the tomb. Critics have stressed the so-called discrepancies in the Gospel accounts, but a correct understanding harmonizes the accounts.

Jesus had been crucified and buried on Friday. He lay in the

¹ *Faith & Family Values*, March/April 2006, 10.

tomb until his Resurrection, which certainly took place before dawn on Sunday morning. At this point the women came to the tomb from Jerusalem bearing spices to anoint his body. There were at least four women, and probably more. Matthew says that the group included Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, that is, Mary the mother of James. Mark adds that Salome was present. Luke says that Joanna was also along with the others. These women started out while it was still dark and arrived at the tomb in the early dawn when it was difficult to distinguish objects.

On reaching the tomb, the women were astonished to find **the stone removed from the entrance**. We must imagine them standing about, afraid to go too close and wondering what had happened. Who moved the stone? Had the tomb been pilfered? Had the body of Jesus been stolen? Had Joseph of Arimathea removed it to another place? What were they to do? At last they decided that the disciples must be told, and Mary Magdalene was dispatched to tell them. At that point, not one of them imagined that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

After a while it began to grow lighter and the rest of the women grew bolder. They decided to look into the tomb. There they saw the angels. The women immediately drew back in fear.

But an angel said, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples" (Matthew 28:5-7).

Mary Magdalene meanwhile found the two chief disciples, Peter and John, presumably at John's house where the beloved disciple (John) had taken Jesus' mother on the day of the crucifixion (John 19:27).

Peter and John quickly ran to the tomb, leaving Mary behind.

Outrunning Peter, John arrived at the tomb first, stooped to look through the narrow opening, and saw the grave clothes. When John saw the grave clothes, he saw them only in a cursory manner and from outside the tomb. The Greek uses the most common word for seeing (*blepo*); it suggests nothing more than sight.

Then Peter arrived, out of breath and in a hurry; he brushed John aside and burst right in to the tomb. Peter scrutinized the grave clothes carefully. The Scripture uses a special word for what Peter did—*theoreo*. From *theoreo* we get our words “theory” and “theorize,” and it means, “to examine with care.”

Moreover, it tells us what Peter saw. Peter **“went into the tomb. He saw [*theoreo*] the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus’ head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen”** (John 20:6-7).

At this point, John entered the tomb and he saw what Peter had seen. This time the Greek word is *oida*, meaning, “to see with understanding.” And John believed in Jesus’ resurrection (v. 8).

After this, the appearances of Jesus began. Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene who arrived back at the tomb after John and Peter had returned to the city. Next he appeared to the women, then to Peter alone, then to the Emmaus disciples, and finally, later that night, to all the disciples—except Thomas—as they were gathered together in the upper room.

All the disciples who saw the risen Jesus believed. But John believed first, and, interestingly, he did so *before* he actually saw Jesus.

Now, what was it that made John believe? What did he see that convinced him of Jesus’ Resurrection from the dead?

II. Jewish Burial Customs

It is helpful at this point to know something about Jewish burial customs.

Every society has its distinct burial customs, and this was as true of ancient cultures as it is today. In Egypt, for example, bodies were embalmed. In Rome and Greece they were often cremated.

But in ancient Israel and Judea they were neither embalmed nor cremated. They were wrapped in linen strips intermingled with spices and placed face up without a coffin in tombs. A separate

cloth was sometimes wrapped around the head, although in most cases the person's face was left exposed.

The tombs were generally cut from the rock in the Judean and Galilean hills. Many of these tombs exist today and can be seen by any visitor to modern Israel.

The Bible tells us that Jesus was buried in accordance with Jewish burial customs (John 19:40).

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took the body of Jesus from the cross and prepared him for burial. They washed him and wrapped his body with strips of linen and spices. Seventy-five pounds of spices were used (John 19:39). Jesus' body was encased with myrrh and aloes and strips of linen. Then a separate linen cloth was wrapped around the upper part of his head like a turban.

The body of Jesus was then lovingly placed in the tomb, where it lay until early Sunday morning.

III. The Resurrection of Jesus

Now, what would we have seen had we been there at the moment at which Jesus was raised from the dead?

Would we have seen Jesus stir, open his eyes, sit up, and begin to struggle out of the strips of cloth? Is this what we would have seen?

Not at all. That would have been a resuscitation, not a resurrection. It would have been as if he had recovered from a swoon or had merely been raised from death as he had raised Lazarus. He would have been raised in a natural body rather than a resurrection body. That was not the case at all.

If we had been present in the tomb at the moment of the Resurrection, we would have noticed that the body of Jesus disappeared as it was changed into a resurrection body and passed through the grave clothes and out of the sealed tomb just as it was later to pass through closed doors.

Theologian John Stott says that the body was "vaporized, be-

ing transmuted into something new and different and wonderful.”²

What happened next? The linen strips collapsed once the body disappeared because of the weight of the spices that were in them, and they would have been lying undisturbed where the body of Jesus had been.

The cloth that surrounded Jesus’ head might well have retained its round shape, but it certainly lay by itself separated from the body cloths by the space where Jesus’ neck had been.

This is exactly what John says he and Peter saw when they entered the tomb. The eyewitness account reveals it perfectly.

John was first at the tomb, and as he reached the open tomb in the murky light of the early dawn he saw the grave clothes lying on the rock. There was something about them that attracted his attention.

First, it is significant that they were there at all. John stresses the point, using the word for “**lying**” at the emphatic position in the sentence. We might translate, “He saw, *lying* there, the strips of linen” (v. 5).

Furthermore, the grave clothes were undisturbed. The word that John uses (*keimena*) occurs in the Greek papyri of things that have been carefully placed in order. One document speaks of legal documents saying, “I have not yet obtained the documents, but they are lying collated.” Another document speaks of clothes that are “lying (in order) until you send me word.” Certainly John noticed that there had been no disturbance at all in the tomb.

At this point Peter arrived and went into the tomb. Undoubtedly Peter saw what John had seen, but in addition he was struck by something else. The cloth that had been around the head was not lying with the other cloths. It was lying in a place by itself (v. 7). John says that it was “**folded up by itself, separate from the linen**” (v. 7). There was a space between it and the cloths that had enveloped the body. When John saw this he believed.

What did John believe? I imagine that he might have ex-

² John R. W. Stott, *Basic Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1959), 52.

plained it to Peter like this: "Don't you see, Peter, that no one has moved the body or disturbed the grave clothes? They are lying exactly as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea left them on the eve of the Sabbath. Yet the body is gone. It has not been stolen. It has not been moved. Clearly it must have passed through the cloths, leaving them as we see them now. Jesus must be risen from the dead—just as he said he would!"

John Stott says, "A glance at these grave clothes proved the reality, and indicated the nature, of the resurrection."³

How foolish in the light of such evidence are some of the explanations of the events of that first Resurrection morning. Jacobovici, in "The Jesus Family Tomb," argues that the body of Jesus was stolen and put into a different tomb, the one discovered in 1980. Apart from the fact already mentioned (that the apostles were killed for teaching that Jesus rose from the dead), the presence of the grave clothes in the first tomb is inexplicable. They would have been removed along with the body. But they weren't removed because Jesus had already risen from the dead.

Others have taught that Jesus revived in the tomb and escaped after having unwound the linen cloths. In that case the linen cloths would have been displaced. Even if we can imagine that Jesus replaced the cloths where they had been and somehow moved the stone, there is a problem with the spices, for these would have been scattered about the tomb. Of this there is not the slightest suggestion in the Gospel.

No, none of these explanations will do. The disciples saw everything in order, but the body was gone. Jesus had indeed been raised from the dead, and in a resurrection body.

Conclusion

Friends, the body of Jesus was gone, but the grave clothes were still there. The presence of the grave clothes in that tomb pro-

³ *Ibid.*, 53.

vides irrefutable evidence that Jesus was raised from the dead.

What's the significance of this? There are three lessons that arise out of this narrative.

First, God the Father has provided perfectly adequate evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The evidence consists of the claims of those who saw Jesus between the day of his resurrection and the day of his ascension into heaven, the disappearance of the body, the changed character of the disciples, the authenticity of the records, and the evidence of the undisturbed grave clothes. The evidence is there for all to examine.

But the evidence of the grave clothes alone was sufficient to quicken faith in John.

My conclusion is that God has provided perfectly adequate evidence for the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

God does not expect us to believe without evidence. But he has given us evidence. He also gives us his Spirit to help us understand it. When people do not believe, assuming they have looked at the evidence, it is because they do not want to acknowledge Jesus as Lord.

At the same time, there are those who do believe. You have seen the evidence and have responded to it as God has enabled you to do so by his Spirit. You are comforted to know that your faith rests, not upon wishful thinking, but upon the power of God and his visible activity in history by raising Jesus from the dead.

Second, the experiences of Peter and John at the tomb also indicate that the body of Jesus was resurrected. Jesus was born with a natural body and was raised with a resurrection body. In this body Jesus lives, seated at the right hand of God where he intercedes for his own until the moment when he will return again for judgment.

Today we need not think of Jesus as the vulnerable Jesus of history. Jesus died, but he rose from the dead. He was buffeted and spat upon and cursed 2,000 years ago, but that will not be repeated.

There are people who think of Jesus as a figure hanging on a cross. Others have a mental picture of Jesus in a garden praying, or

wandering about doing good.

None of these pictures is exactly accurate for those who live today.

Paul saw Jesus on the road to Damascus, but it was not the lowly Jesus he saw. It was the resurrected and exalted Lord Jesus, surrounded by a light so bright that it blinded the apostle.

John saw the resurrected and living Lord triumphant among the candlesticks that represent the churches.

Today, we who believe worship a risen, powerful, exalted Lord Jesus Christ. This same Lord Jesus Christ will return one day to take his own to be with him in glory.

Third, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead gives us hope for a new and abundant life today. Jesus said, "I have come that [you] may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10b). Because of the resurrection of Jesus, we can be assured that a new and abundant life can be ours today.

Some of you may be discouraged or hurt or disappointed or weary or guilty. I recently read that ten percent of the British people believe they would be better off dead, according to a survey. One in four people said they were unhappy in their jobs, while one in three felt exhausted, unappreciated, or underpaid.

Christine Webber, the psychotherapist who carried out the survey, said: "Sadly, it comes as no surprise to me that so many people are unhappy at home and work. It seems that people's lives do not live up to their extremely high expectations. It is particularly worrying to see so many people dwelling on morbid thoughts, with a large proportion just plainly exhausted by life."⁴

Is that a description of you? I have good news for you! Because of Jesus' resurrection, you can have a new life today! You can have an abundant life today!

All you need to do to receive this new life is to believe that Jesus really rose from the dead, ask him to forgive your sins, and trust him for the gift of abundant and eternal life. Amen.

⁴ Sally Pook, *London Daily Telegraph* (10-16-00).

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Our Father in heaven, I thank you for raising Jesus from the dead.

Throughout history people have tried to disprove the resurrection of Jesus. “The Jesus Family Tomb” is just the latest attempt to do so.

But, when we examine the evidence for Jesus’ resurrection provided to us in your Word, we are struck by the powerful testimony that is left there for us.

Help every one of us here today to see and believe, as the apostle John did.

Grant the gift of faith and repentance to everyone who calls out to you today. Open their spiritual eyes and enable them to trust in Jesus Christ alone for the gift of eternal life.

And all of this I pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

CHARGE:

If you would like to talk about what it means to be a Christian today, please speak to me following the service. I have a little booklet that I would love to give you. It is called *Which Way to God?* And it describes how you can come be sure that you are a Christian.

And now, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.