

THE EMPTY TOMB? SO WHAT?
I CORINTHIANS 15:17

“If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.”

INTRODUCTION:

- A. When I was a kid I didn't know anybody personally who had died.
 - ❑ Then a grandmother died
 - ❑ Then a grandfather
 - ❑ Then a great grandmother
 - ❑ And the parade of death continued through the years...
 - ❑ Except for one of Merilee's grandmothers in Florida, our complete collection of grandparents are now gone. So are many friends; dozens of them.
 - ❑ Death is a much greater reality to me now than it was 35 years ago.
- B. British comedian and actor **Dudley Moore** died on Wednesday. You've seen the news stories. He died of progressive supranuclear palsy (PSP). When he announced his illness in 1999, he said, *I understand that one person in 100,000 suffers from the disease and I am also aware that there are 100,000 members of my union, the Screen Actors Guild, who are working every day. I think, therefore, it is in some way considerate of me that I have taken on the disease for myself, thus protecting the remaining 99,999 members from this fate.* (CNN.com/Entertainment, “Actor Dudley Moore dies at 66,” March 28, 2002)
- C. But those 99,999 union members? They haven't escaped the bullet, they've only temporarily dodged it. Like George Bernard Shaw quipped, *The statistics on death are quite impressive: One out of one people die.* If it's not XXX, it will be cancer or pneumonia, or a big truck.
- D. So, is anybody doing anything about this universal dead-end called death?!
- E. Happily, the answer is “Yes.” It's why Jesus left heaven to come here. It's why He died on the cross. It's why He rose from the dead. It's what Easter is all about. It's why Christians make such a big deal about the Empty Tomb.

I. DOES ANYBODY ELSE CLAIM AN EMPTY TOMB?

- A. Nobody Else Did in Bible Times
 - 1. What about the Jews?
 - ❑ **Acts 4:2**, “They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead.”
 - ❑ The divide between the Pharisees and the Sadducees
 - ❑ The Old Testament possesses a dim glimmer of resurrection hope. There are several stunning resurrection passages in the Old Testament but they are few and far between. You'll find them in Job, Psalms and Daniel.
 - ❑ A few dead people were brought back to life in the Old Testament; specifically three: the son of the widow of Zarephath, the son of the Shunnamite woman, and an unnamed corpse thrown into the grave of Elisha. I suppose it would be more accurate to refer to these as “resuscitations” rather than “resurrections.”
 - These three individuals came back to life, but they came back to mortal life just like everybody else and they all died again one day.
 - The problem of continued mortality
 - When we talk about the resurrection of Jesus, we are talking about a new body that can never die again. And we're talking about a body that is physically real, but which possesses some amazing supernatural characteristics. For instance, on two occasions, Jesus entered a room with a locked door to talk with the Apostles (**John 20:19, 26**).
 - Likewise the future resurrection body of all God's people. Later in this chapter, it tells us specifically how special a resurrection body is: ... *the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.* 53 *For the perishable must clothe itself*

with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. (I Corinthians 15:52-53)

2. What about the Gentiles?
 - ❑ Paul preached about the resurrection in Athens. This is how his Gentile audience responded: *“When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, ‘We want to hear you again on this subject.’” (Acts 17:32)*
 - ❑ Paul presented the resurrection to political dignitaries in Ceasarea. This is what the Roman, Festus, thought of it: *“You are out of your mind, Paul!” he shouted. “Your great learning is driving you insane.” (Acts 26:24)*
 - ❑ Even some first-century church people had trouble believing in the resurrection: *But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? 13 If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. 14 And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. (I Corinthians 15:12-14)*
 - ❑ In ancient pagan mythologies there was belief in the resurrection of herogods...These supposed resurrections were often associated with the change of seasons and fertility rites. The Greek Adonis is an example of this.
 - ❑ But as far as normal human beings were concerned, the Greek philosophers had no belief or interest in the resurrection of the body. They believed in the immortality of the soul, which they believed was divine, but they viewed the body as evil and good riddance to it.

B. Nobody Else Does Today

1. No other world-class religion is based on a resurrected founder. In this regard, Christianity is totally unique.
2. In the past 1900 years over two dozen individuals have claimed to be the Messiah of the house of Israel. Today they are all dead and mostly forgotten:
 - One was executed by the Romans.
 - One was assassinated by his father-in-law.
 - One was rejected and just disappeared.
 - One converted to Islam and died in exile 10 years later. (Will Varner, “Who Is the True Messiah?,” *Israel My Glory*, April/May 1990, 6)
3. The Pharaohs had their pyramids loaded up with food, treasure and family members and servants so they could enjoy their Phase-II life, but when archaeologists and tomb raiders got into the tombs, they found no parties in progress; they found shriveled mummies and untouched treasure troves. 18-year-old King Tut lay in his royal sarcophagus for 3000 years until he was unpacked in 1922.
4. “Here is the complete record:

Confucius’ tomb	-	occupied
Buddha’s tomb	-	occupied
Mohammed’s tomb	-	occupied
Jesus’ tomb	-	EMPTY”

-G. B. Hardy

PS on Mohammed’s tomb: He died June 8, 632 A.D. His tomb is at Medina and is visited by thousands of devout Muslims every year.

5. Since the empty tomb is so unique and so essential to Christianity, it was the first place its enemies attacked. The record is in **Matthew 28, 11** *While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. 12 When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, 13 telling them, “You are to say, ‘His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ 14 If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” 15 So the soldiers took the*

money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.

6. And skeptics have continued through the past 1,973 years to attack the credibility of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If they can dismiss the resurrection, they can dismiss the whole of Christianity.
 - They say that the women and the Apostles got confused in their grief and went to the wrong tomb.
 - They say that Joseph of Arimathea, or someone else, moved the body to an unmarked grave during the night.
 - They say that Jesus only swooned on the cross, revived in the coolness of the tomb, and walked out on His own.
 - They say that the whole resurrection story is just a myth the early Christians made up after they experienced hallucinogenic visions of Jesus.
7. The fact remains that the resurrection of Jesus is an historical occurrence, as unique as it is. We know of it from history just as we know from history that Alexander the Great was an alcoholic, that Socrates committed suicide with poison hemlock, and Sacajawea helped guide Lewis and Clark to the Pacific.
8. Each of the four Gospels record resurrection appearances of Jesus, but here in this **15th chapter**, Paul pulls it all together. Here is the historical record in summary: *5 and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. 6 After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, 8 and last of all he appeared to me also...*

II. DOES CHRISTIANITY HAVE ANY VALIDITY WITHOUT AN EMPTY TOMB?

- A. It Creates a Big Problem for Jesus
 1. **Matthew 16:21**, *"From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."*
 2. Repeatedly, Jesus predicted His resurrection:
 - **Mark 9:9**, *As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.*
 - **Mark 9:31**, *he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise."*
 - **Mark 10:33**, *"We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, 34 who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."*
 - I like an Everett Harrison comment about Jesus' predictions: *As a sportsman would say, he called his shot, then proceeded to make it good.* (Everett Harrison, *A Short Life of Christ*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1968, 248)
 3. If Jesus was wrong about His resurrection, how do we believe Him about anything else He said?
 - I guess we could still celebrate His Golden Rule because most human hearts resonate with that sentiment as universally true: *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*
 - We still would enjoy His stories about the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan.
 - But why would we believe what Jesus said about things like...
 - Heaven
 - Future judgment

- Earthly Self-denial in exchange for heavenly rewards
- 4. In fact, not only would non-resurrection be a big problem for Jesus, it's a big problem for **God the Father**. Peter declared in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost that, *God raised him from the dead (Acts 2:24) and, Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.* (Acts 2:36)
- 5. It is also a problem for the **Holy Spirit: Romans 1:1**, *Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God-- 2 the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures 3 regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, 4 and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead:*
- 6. *After stepping down from office, President Thomas Jefferson set out to rewrite the Bible. He had always been enthusiastic about the moral teaching of Jesus, but he was also troubled by the supernatural events of the New Testament. So with scissors and a New Testament, Jefferson attempted to separate the "real" message of Jesus from all the "unnecessary." He omitted every supernatural incident – including the Resurrection. And the closing words of his new version of the Bible read, "There they laid Jesus, and rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulcher and departed." (George Sweeting, "Dead or Alive?" Moody Monthly, April 1987, 28)*
- 7. But Jesus doesn't offer us that option. Again and again He claimed that what he taught and what He did were inescapably tied together. If Jesus didn't do any miracles, and if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, you can admire his moral teachings, but you sure don't have to obey them. No resurrection equals no authority.

B. It Creates a Big Problem for Preachers

- 1. *"Anyone can be sentimental about the Nativity; any fool can feel like a Christian at Christmas. But Easter is the main event; if you don't believe in the resurrection, you're not a believer." – John Irving*
- 2. *Preach as a dying man to dying men.*
- 3. The New Testament speaks more than one hundred times of our Lord's resurrection
- 4. *Our world is like a convoy lost in darkness on an unknown rocky coast, with quarreling pirates in the chart room and savages climbing up the sides of the ship to plunder and do evil as the whim may take them. Where is the Captain? The ship is driving for the rocks, and man cannot stop it. (H. G. Wells, The Mind at the End of Its Tether)*

III. DOES MANKIND NEED AN EMPTY TOMB?

A. What Do We Do With Our Sins?

- 1. *"Our generation is lost to the truth of God, to the reality of divine revelation, to the content of God's will, to the power of His redemption, and to the authority of His Word. For this loss it is paying dearly in a swift relapse to paganism. The savages are stirring again; you can hear them rumbling and rustling in the tempo of our times." (Carl F. H. Henry)*
- 2. Well, how have we been doing? Social evolutionists would like us to believe that we are getting better as a world culture. I think we've certainly had enough time to show whether we are making any progress or not. Let's look at just the record of the twentieth century: *With more than a hundred million killed in war, another hundred million slaughtered in political repression, and countless millions slain in ethnic and sectarian conflicts, the twentieth century was the most murderous and one of the most evil centuries in all history.* (Os Guinness, *Long Journey Home*, Waterbrook Press, Colorado Springs, 2001, 151)
- 3. *Billy Graham on one occasion told of a meeting he had with German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, at one time mayor of Cologne, imprisoned by*

Hitler for his opposition to the Nazi regime, and later chancellor of the West German Federal Republic from 1949 to 1963....he picked up the broken pieces of his country and helped to rebuild it in a fractured world. On this occasion, he looked the evangelist in the eye and said, "Mr. Graham, do you believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead?" Graham, somewhat surprised by the pointedness of the question answered, "Of course I do." To that confident reply Chancellor Adenauer said, "Mr. Graham, outside of the resurrection of Jesus, I do not know of any other hope for this world." (Ravi Zacharias, Can Man Live Without God? Word Publishing, Dallas, 1994, 164-5)

4. What do we do with our sin?
 - We could dumb it down...

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved as stunted self-concept like me,
I once was stressed out, but now am empowered,
Was visually challenged, but now I see. (Doug Marlette)*
 - We could embrace it...

I was drawn to the darker side of life, but it's really just human nature. I started to learn that everything that's considered a sin is what makes you a human being. All the seven deadly sins are man's true nature. To be greedy. To be hateful. To have lust. Of course, you have to control them, but if you're made to feel guilty for being human, then you're going to be trapped in a never-ending-sin-and-repent cycle that you can't escape from, and you're going to be miserable. Ultimately you'll be living in your own hell. So there's no need to worry about going to hell, because hell will be on earth. (Rock musician Marilyn Manson)

B. What Do We Do With Our Dying?

1. "Though you forget the way to the Temple,
There is one who remembers the way to your door;
Life you may evade, but Death you shall not,
You shall not deny the Stranger."

– T. S. Eliot
2. **Woody Allen** said this about death: *It's not that I'm afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens.* I like his sense of humor but I don't think he really meant it.
3. Old Job was far more to the point. **Job** asked the question of the ages, *If a man die, will he live again? (Job 14:14)*
4. This chapter is here to answer that question:
 - First of all, it starts out with the dark possibility that Jesus didn't really rise from the dead. In that case,
 - Verse 18, We are **lost**
 - Verse 19, We are **pitiable**
 - Then, having gotten that out of the way, the chapter continues on a more cheerful note...
 - Verse 20, the resurrected Christ is the firstfruits of all God's people who have died. When a Jew approached the harvest of his crops, he would take the first sheaf of grain and offer it as a sacrifice to God. In so doing he dedicated the whole harvest and himself to God. The firstfruit offering was a token of more to come. **(Leviticus 23:10ff)** In the same way, the resurrection of Jesus is a promise of more to come...namely, you and me!
 - Verse 22, Adam infected all of us with death; Jesus infects all of us with life.
 - Verse 25-26, *Because Jesus conquered His grave, He is going to conquer my grave: he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*

5. **Benjamin Franklin** (the epitaph he wrote for himself which are engraved on his tombstone in the cemetery of Christ's Church in Philadelphia): *The body of Franklin, printer, like the cover of an old book, its contents torn out and stripped of its lettering and gilding, lies here food for worms. But the work will not be lost, for it will appear once more in a new and more elegant edition, revised and corrected by the Author.*

CONCLUSION:

- A. *M. Lepeaux on one occasion confided to Talleyrand his disappointment at the ill success with which he had met in his attempt to bring into vogue a new religion which he regarded as an improvement on Christianity. He explained that despite all the efforts of himself and his supporters his propaganda made no way. He asked Talleyrand's advice as to what he was to do. Talleyrand replied that it was indeed difficult to found a new religion, more difficult indeed than could be imagined, so difficult that he hardly knew what to advise. "Still," he said after a moment's reflection, "there is one plan which you might at least try. I should recommend you to be crucified and to rise again on the third day."* (Calvin Miller, *The Book of Jesus*, Simon and Schuster, 1996, 462-3)
- B. Because if you die and rise again on the third day, you can promise something like this...
*51 Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed--
52 in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. 53 For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. 54 When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." 55 "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" 56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

"Make no mistake:
if He rose at all It was as His body;
If the cells' dissolution did not reverse,
the molecules reknit,
the amino acids rekindle,
the church will fall."
-Novelist John Updike

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March 31, 2002