

THE RESURRECTION

By Louis Cassels

*What really happened? A distinguished
UPI newsman examines the facts
surrounding history's most extraordinary event.*

After Jesus was crucified, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus removed Christ's body from the cross and buried it in Joseph's personal tomb, located in a private cemetery not far from Golgotha. They rolled a large stone across the entrance of the tomb and departed.

The Jewish laws of Sabbath observance were strict. They forbade any kind of manual labor, including the preparation of a corpse for burial. Jesus' body was placed in the tomb just before the Sabbath officially began. The job of anointing it with embalming spices—customarily performed by female relatives and friends—had to wait until the Sabbath was over.

Early Sunday morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene and two other women set out for the tomb to embalm the body of Jesus. They arrived just at sunrise. The stone had been rolled away from the entrance. The tomb was empty.

That is the story the Gospels tell. If you find it hard to believe, so did the people who first heard it. When the terrified women ran back to the house where the disciples were in hiding, their report was

at first dismissed as “nonsense.” Even in our time, some Christian theologians have expressed the belief that Jesus' body remained in the tomb and eventually rotted away like all other human bodies; that when the disciples proclaimed His return from death, they meant only that He had come to life again in their minds and hearts.

This “demythologizing” interpretation has great appeal for all who find themselves unable to accept the possibility that God might intervene in the operation of nature to raise a dead man to life.

But however congenial it may be to the mindset of our age, the concept of a purely spiritual resurrection is difficult to square with the historical facts as we know them, not only from the New Testament but from other sources.

It is clearly established history that within a short time after Jesus' crucifixion, His disciples began to proclaim that He had risen from the grave. And they made the claim publicly in Jerusalem.

It was obviously in the interests of the Jewish and Roman authorities to spike this story. And they could have done so, quickly and

conclusively, simply by showing that Jesus' body was still in the tomb. Their failure to employ this perfect refutation strongly suggests that they were unable to produce the body.

Of course, an empty tomb does not by itself mean that its occupant has returned to life. The body could have been secretly removed by Jesus' followers to give credence to their preaching of a resurrection.

What's wrong with the stolen-body theory? Its basic fallacy is that it would mean that Jesus' followers were telling a deliberate lie when they said He had been raised from death by an act of God. And any such idea contradicts all that we know about human nature. As New Testament historian Daniel P. Fuller has pointed out, the disciples “preached the risen Jesus at the risk of their lives” and “men do not risk their lives for what they know to be a fraud.”

Another explanation is that Jesus did not really die on the cross, but merely went into a deathlike coma, either from shock or from drinking wine spiked with a drug.

This explanation raises far more questions than it answers. For example: Were Roman legionnaires so naïve as to hand over a condemned criminal to His friends without first making sure He was dead? The Gospels record that they did make sure: Even though Jesus appeared to be already dead, they plunged a spear deep into His side to snuff out any possible spark of life.

Suppose that Jesus *had* revived in the tomb. He would have been in critical condition from six hours of torture on the cross and loss of blood from the spear wound. Could such a half-dead man have rolled away a heavy stone and made His way unaided back to Jerusalem?

In fact, the early Church attached so little evidential importance to the empty tomb that it made no attempt to harmonize the accounts given by the four Gospels of the circumstances attending its discovery. Each Gospel has a slightly different version of who accompanied Mary Magdalene, what was said and done at the cemetery, and what happened after that. Some feel that those discrepancies cast doubt on the authenticity of the story. But their effect on a man like myself, who has spent his life in the newsgathering business, is exactly the opposite.

Any time you collect eyewitness accounts of an event—particularly a startling and unexpected event—you can expect a good deal of variance, and even direct contradiction, on the specific details. If I read four different accounts of a dramatic happening and found them all in complete agreement, I would be fairly sure that somebody had been tampering with the original reports to make them dovetail. By the same token, the variations in the Gospel accounts arise in a reporter the intuitive conviction that they are faithfully preserved records of an actual event. This is not only my personal feeling; other newsmen tell me they have the same reaction.

The empty tomb, however explained, is secondary evidence. It is quite clear in the Gospels that the disciples themselves would never have been convinced by the empty tomb alone that Jesus had returned to life. They believed in the resurrection only because they saw Jesus and talked with Him, not

once, but on numerous occasions following His death.

The oldest written record of Jesus' appearances to His disciples is found in a letter which the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth about 56 AD. In it he cataloged the people who had seen the risen Jesus: first, Peter; then all the apostles; then "more than 500 of His followers at once, *most of whom are still alive.* ..."

The italics are mine. I think it's tremendously significant that Paul was prepared to rest his claim on the testimony of several hundred eyewitnesses who were alive and available for questioning at the time he wrote.

But even eyewitness reports can sometimes be discounted

or explained away as mass hallucination. This diagnosis of hallucination is only convincing, however, when the people involved are nervous, high-strung, imaginative types. But the disciples were exactly the opposite. These farmers, fishermen, and tax collectors were so devoid of imagination that Jesus often had to explain His parables to them before they could grasp the point.

The ultimate evidence of the resurrection, of course, is the existence of the Christian Church.

The centrality of the resurrection story to Christian faith was most forcefully expressed by the apostle Paul. "If Christ has not been raised from the dead, then we have nothing to preach, and you have nothing to believe," he told the Corinthian Christians. "If Christ has not been raised, then your faith is a delusion. ... More than that, we are shown to be lying against God, because we said of Him that He raised Christ from death. But the truth is that Christ has been raised from death" (1 Corinthians 15:14–15, 20 paraphrased).

From the earliest days, the Church has attached basic importance to the assertion that Jesus returned to life after He was crucified, dead, and buried. Why? It was not as a spectacular miracle that the resurrection impressed the disciples. They had seen Jesus do many extraordinary things, and they did not doubt God's ability to resuscitate a corpse if He chose to do so.

What mattered to the disciples was that God did choose to do so in the case of Jesus. To the disciples—and to millions of Christians since—the Resurrection is God's stamp of approval on the things Jesus did and said. It vindicates Christ's claim to a special relationship with God—and stands as history's most extraordinary event.



**Men do not
risk their lives
for what they
know to be a
fraud.**

—Daniel P. Fuller

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