

The Mystery of the Empty Tomb:

What really happened after the Crucifixion

What the scriptures tell us about the Resurrection miracle

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The story of the Resurrection of Jesus is at the very heart of our Christian faith. Versions of the story are found in all four Gospels, although each Gospel contains only portions of the entire narrative. *The individual accounts from each Gospel appear to have been based on eyewitness stories, each with its own subtle differences.* These accounts can be consolidated to construct a more complete understanding of the resurrection miracle.

The four Gospel Resurrection accounts share common story elements. Each account begins with the death of Christ on the cross; establishes Jesus' body was placed in an impenetrable rock tomb sealed with a large stone; witnesses to an empty tomb; and concludes with some of the extraordinary events experienced by Christ's followers on Easter Sunday, including encounters with a risen Jesus Christ.

The Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ is a fitting conclusion to the "greatest story ever told". The resurrection story itself might appropriately be described as "the mystery of the empty tomb".

In the modern literary form of mystery storytelling we are used to piecing together disparate eyewitness testimonies and observational clues to reconstruct what happened and "solve the mystery". And so we, as modern Christians, need to employ a similar deductive mindset as we examine the Resurrection events and testimonies recorded in the four Gospels, and an additional non-canonical work- the Gospel of Peter.

What really happened at the resurrection? Here is what the scriptures tell us about this most wonderful miracle, and the mystery surrounding it.

How are we certain that Christ actually died on the cross?

The centurion in charge of the crucifixion vouched to Pontius Pilate that Jesus was dead.

Mark 15:44 "Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph."

The Roman guard speared the right side of Jesus' torso, piercing his heart and lungs (a fatal wound if Jesus was not already dead).

John 19:34 “One of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. **He who saw this has testified, so that you also may believe.”**

This observation of blood and water separately coming from the wound is confirmed by modern medical understanding of a wound that penetrated the lungs and heart.

Jesus’ legs were not broken because the soldiers were sure he was already dead.

John 19:33 “But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.”

What we know about the tomb

The tomb was nearby to where the crucifixion took place.

John 19:41 “Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.”

The tomb was in a garden.

The owner of the tomb was Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy and connected follower of Christ.

Matt 27:57 “When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it **in his own tomb**, which he had hewn in the rock. Then he rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb, and went away.”

Luke 23:52 “This man [Joseph] went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning.”

Gospel Peter 23 “But the Jews were glad and gave his body to Joseph that he might bury him, since he had seen all the good things he did. He took the Lord, washed him, wrapped him in a linen cloth, and brought him into his own tomb, called the Garden of Joseph.”

The actual entrance to the tomb was less than five feet tall, as all those who looked in had to stoop.

John 20:5 “The other disciple bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there..”

John 20:11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb..”

A large circular stone was rolled in place to seal the entrance to the tomb.

Mark 15:46 “Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb.”

The stone was sealed in place by the Jewish council leadership.

Matt 27: 66 “So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone.”

Gospel Peter 32 “The elders and scribes came with them [the soldiers] to the crypt. Everyone who was there, along with the centurion and the soldiers, rolled a great stone and placed it there before the entrance of the crypt. They smeared it with seven seals, pitched a tent there, and stood guard.”

The entrance to the tomb was guarded by Roman soldiers, beginning the morning after the crucifixion.

Matt 27:62 “The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said “Sir, we remember what that imposter said while he was still alive, ‘After three days I will rise again’. Therefore command the tomb to be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell people ‘He has been raised from the dead’, and the last deception would be worse than the first.” Pilate said to them “You take a guard of soldiers, go make it as secure as you can””

Gospel Peter 29 “The elders became fearful and went to Pilate and asked him “Give us some soldiers to guard his crypt for three days to keep his disciples from coming to steal him. Otherwise the people may assume he has been raised from the dead and then harm us.” So Pilate gave them the centurion Petronius and soldiers to guard the tomb. “

From the tomb entrance, the entire length of the ledge where Jesus’ body had lain was visible.

John 20:12 “Mary bent over to look into the tomb, and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.”

What physical evidence was left on Sunday morning?

The stone that had sealed the tomb had been rolled away!

The linen cloth that had covered the body of Christ was inside the tomb, as was the facecloth.

Luke 24:12 “But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves..”

John 20: 6 “Then Simon Peter went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.”

Many of us would like to believe that the “Shroud of Turin” is that burial cloth, as it contains a residual image of a crucified man with wounds exactly as described in the Gospel accounts; the shroud’s authenticity has not been proven.

Why was Jesus body taken down from the cross so soon after his death?

The feast of the unleavened bread/Passover Sabbath would begin at sundown, and any unburied body would have to remain so for several days.

John 19:31 “Since it was the day of Preparation, the Jews did not want the bodies left on the cross during the Sabbath, especially because that Sabbath was a day of great solemnity.”

Mark 15:42 “When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is the day before the sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.”

Who knew the location of the tomb where Jesus was interred?

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus transported the body of Jesus from the crucifixion site to the tomb.

John 19:38 “Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed the body. Nicodemus, who had first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so because... the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there”

The women followed the body.

Mark 15:47 “Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James saw where the body was laid.”

Luke 23:55 “The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how the body was laid.”

Matt 27: 61 “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.”

The Chief priests and Jewish elders sealed the tomb, and set the guard of Roman soldiers.

Matt 27:66 “So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone.”

Gospel Peter 31 “The elders and scribes came with them to the crypt... Early in the morning, as the Sabbath dawned, a crowd came from Jerusalem and the surrounding area to see the sealed crypt.”

The eleven disciples were in hiding and probably did not know the tomb’s location, until guided to the empty tomb by the women on Easter Sunday morning.

Gospel Peter 26 “But I and my companions were grieving and went into hiding, wounded in heart. For we were being sought out by them as if we were evildoers who wanted to burn the temple. Because of these things we fasted and sat mourning and weeping, night and day, until the Sabbath.”

Why did the women come to the tomb on Easter Sunday?

Sunday, the first day following the weekly Sabbath, was the first daylight opportunity for the women to bring spices to anoint the body of Jesus. And they knew exactly where the tomb was located.

Mark 16:1 “When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb.”

The Sabbath was over at sunset on Saturday evening, so the women could go out to purchase spices that they planned to anoint the body of Jesus with the next morning. This was the first opportunity for the women to acquire the appropriate burial spices, in either a Thursday or Friday crucifixion scenario.

Luke 24:1 “On the first day of the week, at early dawn, they [the women] came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared.

Who rolled away the stone from the entrance to the tomb?

According to the soldiers on guard, an angel came down from heaven and rolled away the stone from the tomb entrance. The angel then sat on the stone, paralyzing the guards with fear.

Matt 28:2 “And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightening, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.”

Gospel Peter 35 “But during the night on which the Lord’s day dawned, while the soldiers stood guard two by two on their watch, a great voice came from the sky. They saw the skies open and two men descend from there; they were very bright and drew near to the tomb. The stone cast before the entrance rolled away by itself and moved to one side. The tomb was open and both young men entered. When the soldiers saw these things, they woke up the centurion and the elders- for they were also there on guard. As they explained what they had seen, they saw three men emerge from the tomb, two of them supporting the other.”

The stone had already been rolled away when the women arrived on Sunday morning, although they anticipated difficulty in getting someone to remove the stone.

Mark 16:3 “They [the women] had been saying to one another “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb? When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.”

When was the stone rolled away?

Sometime before dawn on Easter Sunday, the stone was rolled away.

John 20:1 “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.”

The stone was already gone when the women arrived, in several accounts.

Mark 16:2 “And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb... they saw the stone had already been rolled back.”

Luke 24:1 “At early dawn...they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body.”

What did the angels inside the tomb communicate to the women?

Mark 16:5 “As they [Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Salome] entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to

them,” Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.”

Matt 28:5 “But the angel said to the women “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him. This is my message for you.”

Luke 24: 4 “when they [Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and others] went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again”

Gospel Peter 55 “When they [Mary Magdalene and the women] arrived they found the tomb opened. And when they came up to it they stooped down to look in, and they saw a beautiful young man dressed in a very bright garment, sitting in the middle of the tomb. He said to them “Why have you come? Whom are you seeking? Not the one who was crucified? He has risen and left. But if you do not believe, stoop down to look, and see the place where he was laid, that he is not there. For he has risen and left for the place from which he was sent.”

To whom did Jesus appear on Easter Sunday?

He appeared to two disciples on the road to Emmaus, as they departed Jerusalem.

Luke 24:13 Now on the same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all the things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near... When he was at table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.”

He appeared to some of the disciples in a closed room, probably in Jerusalem.

John 20:19 “When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said “Peace be with you”. After he said this he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.”

Luke 24:36 “While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said “Peace be with you”. They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.”

He appeared to Mary Magdalene outside the tomb.

John 20:16 “Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew “Rabbouni!” Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

Mark 16:9 “Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene. She went out and told those who had been with him, while they were mourning and weeping. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.”

Matt 28:9 “Suddenly Jesus met them and said “Greetings!” And they took hold of his feet and worshiped him”

Why did Jesus’ closest followers and disciples have difficulty recognizing him after the Resurrection?

John 20:14 “When she [Mary] had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him “Sir if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

Luke 24:15 “While they [Cleopas and another disciple] were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”

We can surmise that his disciples and close friends didn’t expect to see Jesus, as they believed him dead. Clearly Jesus’ face and body looked different after the resurrection, although he retained some evidence of the wounds from the crucifixion.

What was the response from the Jewish elders and priests to the disappearance of Jesus’ body from the tomb?

The Jewish leaders paid the Roman soldiers a large sum of money to lie and say that the disciples stole the body of Jesus. They intervened with Pilate to protect the soldiers from Roman punishment for failure to perform their guard duty.

Matt 28: 11 “Some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened. After the priests had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers, telling them “You must say ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep’. If this comes to the governor’s ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” So they took the money and did as they were directed.”

Gospel Peter 45 “Those who were with the centurion saw these things and hurried to Pilate at night, abandoning the tomb they had been guarding, and explaining everything they had seen. Greatly agitated, they said, “He actually was the Son of God.” Pilate replied, “I am clean of the blood of the Son of God; you decided to do this.” Then everyone approached him to ask and urge him to order the centurion and the soldiers to say nothing about what they had seen.... And so Pilate ordered the centurion and the soldiers not to say a word.”

The Jewish establishment was never able to produce the body of Jesus to silence the emerging Christian evangelism.

How does Jesus' prediction that the Son of Man would be three days and nights in the tomb fit with the story timeline?

Luke 24:45 "Then Jesus opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day..."

The Jews of that time counted sundown as the start of the new day. Sundown in late March/early April occurs around 5:45 PM modern time in Jerusalem.

Jesus' resurrection occurred on Sunday, the first day of the week (which in Jewish timekeeping started at sunset on Saturday evening). All four Gospels have the tomb empty, the stone rolled away, and Jesus resurrected *around daybreak* on Sunday morning. Jesus was crucified before the Passover meal earlier that week. Jesus was placed in the tomb around sunset. There definitely was a weekly Sabbath on Saturday (which began at sundown on our Friday), and there may have been a second festival or Passover High Sabbath in the timeline as well.

Matt 28:1 "After the sabbaths [plural in original Greek], as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb."

A compelling case can be presented for a Thursday crucifixion in the year 30 CE: In this scenario the body of Jesus was placed in the tomb about sundown Thursday, technically the start of Hebrew Friday. Our Thursday evening would begin the Hebrew first day of the annual feast of unleavened bread (a solemn Sabbath per John 19:31); our Friday evening would begin the weekly Sabbath. So there would have been two Sabbaths in tandem that year. The resurrection would have occurred at daybreak Sunday- the third day! (April 9, 30 CE)

A Friday crucifixion leaves too little time in the tomb; and a Wednesday crucifixion with a *predawn* Resurrection means 3 days and 3-4 nights in the tomb.

Are there any astronomical events that tie to the crucifixion?

Acts 2:16-20 "This is what is spoken through the prophet Joel... And I will show portents in the heaven above, and signs in the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. **The sun shall be turned to darkness** and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day."

The sun was turned to darkness for three hours during the crucifixion! This could not possibly refer to a solar eclipse, as there always is a full moon at Passover; so the moon could not have been between the earth and sun at the time of the crucifixion.

There was a partial (60%) **lunar eclipse** that occurred on Friday April 3, 33 CE. This date might fit with a Friday crucifixion. In Acts Peter refers to a blood moon (**Acts 2:20**), a common description of a lunar eclipse. There was also a total lunar eclipse a year earlier on Monday April 14, 32 CE. Both dates would be 14 Nisan, and be Passover dates.

In what year did the crucifixion and resurrection occur?

Based on the overlap years when both Pontius Pilate and Caiaphas ruled, these events must have occurred between 26 and 34 CE. Pilate was governor 26-36 CE. The best estimate of the dates of Crucifixion (14 Nisan), using **modern astronomy Passover determination rules**, suggest these years:

For a Wednesday Crucifixion- 28 CE and 31 CE (April 28, 28 CE) (April 25, 31CE)

For a Thursday Crucifixion- 27 CE, 30 CE, and 34 CE (April 10, 27CE) (April 6, 30CE) (April 22, 34CE)

For a Friday Crucifixion- 27 CE, 30 CE, and 33 CE (April 11, 27CE) (April 7, 30CE) (April 3, 33CE)

Impossible years: 26 CE (Sun); 29 CE (Sun-Mon); 32 CE (Mon)

Passover is celebrated at twilight on the 14th day of the Jewish lunar month Nisan; Nisan begins with the first new moon sighting after the vernal equinox. ***In Jesus' time, setting the date 1 Nisan was a matter of interpretation by the local priests.***

It is most likely that Passover, which begins at twilight, was celebrated the (calendar) day Jesus died on the cross. Jesus was crucified on the "Day of Preparation" for a "Sabbath of great solemnity", as the first day of the annual feast of unleavened bread/Passover would have been.

How old was Jesus at his death?

Based on Jesus' birth in March or April of 7 BCE, Jesus would have been between 33 and 40 years old at his death. If you accept the (modern) Thursday crucifixion timeline in 30 CE, Jesus would have been 36 years old.

Postscript: the mystery illuminated

If we knew what year Jesus was resurrected, we could reconstruct the events of Holy Week without confusion. Similarly, if we knew how many "sabbaths" were referred to in the different gospels, we might be able to zero in on the year. What we do know is that the crucifixion occurred on the Preparation Day for the Jewish Passover ritual in April.

Much of our confusion stems from the difference in the definition of the day: in Jesus' time the Jews defined sundown as the beginning of a new day (a day consisted of a nighttime portion followed by a daytime). So the crucifixion occurred on one day, and Jesus was placed in the tomb at sunset, which was the start of the next day. When we worship on "Good Friday", we would correctly be commemorating Jesus' burial in the tomb on (Hebrew) Friday, but his death on the cross under a Jewish calendar would have occurred during the daylight portion of Thursday, the same "Maundy Thursday" that the Last Supper was first celebrated. *When the modern calendar we use adopted midnight as the demarcation between days, these subtle timelines regarding Holy Week events became lost or confused.*

The gospels try to distinguish between the ordinary weekly sabbath (sunset Friday to sunset Saturday), and the annual feast sabbath. **Once we assume the Passover sabbath was not celebrated on the same day as the weekly sabbath, the mystery is resolved.** Then the "three days in the tomb" makes sense!

Our conclusion: **The Resurrection occurred April 9, 30 CE.**

Holy Week Timeline: Modern calendar vs Hebrew calendar

Event	Modern day- Midnight change	Hebrew day- Sunset change	How modern Church observes
Last Supper	Wednesday evening	Thursday evening	Thursday evening
Crucifixion	Thursday day	Thursday day	
Jesus in Tomb	Thursday sunset	Friday evening	Friday evening
Passover celebration	Thursday evening	Friday evening	
End of weekly Sabbath	Saturday sunset	Saturday sunset	
Resurrection	Sunday morning	Sunday day	Sunday morning

Astronomical Dates for the Crucifixion (14 Nisan Daytime)

Year CE	Date of 1 st visible new moon after Vernal Equinox	New Moon Phase	New Moon Phase Age Days	Date of Crucifixion	Day of Week
27	March 27 /or March 28	0.95% 4.36%	0.79 1.84	April 10 /April 11	Thurs or Fri
28	April 14 /or April 15	1.18% 4.54%	0.96 2.01	April 28 /April 29	Wed or Thurs
29	April 3 / or April 4	0.75% 3.25%	0.81 1.85	April 17 / April 18	Sun or Mon
30	March 23 / or March 24	0.71% 3.14%	0.91 1.95	April 6 / April 7	Thurs or Fri
31	April 11 / or April 12	1.15% 4.28%	1.08 2.12	April 25 / April 26	Wed or Thurs
32	March 31	3.70%	1.64	April 14	Mon
33	March 20	1.87%	0.96	April 3	Fri
34	April 8	1.93%	1.08	April 22	Thurs

The modern record for naked eye crescent moon sighting age is 0.65 days. Modern amateur astronomers would certainly be able to detect an 18-20 hour old new moon in April, when there is maximum vertical separation from the setting sun.

Alternate theories on the 3 Days Time Jesus was in Tomb

	Thursday Crucifixion	
	[Thurs before sunset]	
Thursday Night	Friday Day	Passover High sabbath
Friday Night	Saturday Day	Weekly sabbath
Saturday Night	Sunday Morning	
	Friday Crucifixion	
	[Fri before sunset]	
Friday Night	Saturday Day	Simultaneous sabbaths
Saturday Night	Sunday Morning	