

THE EMPTY TOMB

During the Lenten season, most Catholics would have no problem finding things to reflect on, to ponder in their hearts, to fill their thoughts and strengthen their faith. In fact, if you just close your eyes, and list things that come into your mind when asked about Easter, you would have a list that fills quite a few pages of your internal memo pad!

If I was asked, however, to identify one thing that a person could ponder that would relate the full Easter message, it would be the *Empty Tomb*.

As Christians, we know that without the Resurrection, there would have been no Salvation. Christ's Resurrection is our symbol for hope. It is our certainty in eternal life. It is our assurance that the pathway to heaven is open for each one of us. But, next to the mystery of the Trinity, it is one of the most difficult mysteries to truly comprehend.

Our reflections on the Resurrection must almost certainly begin with faith, and if you are like me, there are times when I find myself reasoning out of faith as waves of doubt threaten to overtake my reflections. Sometimes "we need more powerful help, a divine light, which illumines from within, without the need of passing through our reasonings, [which are] so limited and rude."¹ That divine light comes from the empty tomb - a fact which the evangelists present "as part of the message of the Resurrection"² - without which we could not accept so confidently the reality of the resurrected spiritual body of our Lord, Jesus Christ³.

And here's where reasoning can lead to no other path except the path of faith. The empty tomb is considered historical fact. Although there are many reasons for this, here are three that appear in most lists:

- If the tomb had not been empty, the Christian message about Jesus' resurrection would have been difficult to preach. In the early years, the first preaching was in Jerusalem. If there was a body in the tomb, would so many in Jerusalem have embraced Christianity and the message of the Resurrection?
- The Romans did not want Jesus made into a martyr "so they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard."⁴ If the tomb was not empty, the Romans would have produced the body and the Christian message would have ended then.
- Instead, the Romans created a story that "his disciples came during the night and stole him away while [the guards] were asleep."⁵ Yet we know that the disciples, after Jesus' death, suffered terrible persecution in proclaiming their faith in Jesus' resurrection. It would be hard to imagine that one would suffer and die so terribly for a lie.

The empty tomb must be historical fact.

The tomb could only be empty for only one reason: Jesus had been raised from the dead – body and spirit. And we know from our readings during Pentecost that Jesus appeared to many – including St Paul. It was through these appearances that the disciples came to believe. “Having seen the risen Jesus, they understood that the reason why the tomb was empty was because he had been raised from the dead.”⁶

The empty tomb connects us to God’s kingdom in heaven in that we die here in this world but are not abandoned by God but are instead transformed and continue our journey into a new world. Because of the empty tomb, we know that God has not rejected our world but instead the Holy Spirit has transformed the whole earthly body of Jesus into the “new world to which our own risen bodies will be joined.”⁷ Without the evidence of the empty tomb, the appearances would not have brought the early Christians to believe “that after death the righteous will live for ever with the risen Christ.”⁸

I think often of the empty tomb – when reflecting on the Glorious mysteries of the rosary and particularly throughout Lent – and I imagine standing outside the tomb that morning. Would I hover back, unsure of what lies before me? Waiting to see what would unfold. Or would I stand close and look in. Observing as a witness the image of the empty tomb, knowing that something glorious has happened. Or would I run into the tomb, embracing with an open heart filled with faith the knowledge that the tomb would be empty and our risen Christ would be opening the gates of heaven. Would I race out of the empty tomb shouting to all who would hear that ‘Christ is risen!’ Some days, I know I am hovering. Often I am observing. But, in the moments when I feel the love of Christ and the light of faith filling my soul, I know that I am racing out of that empty tomb with joy overflowing!

So ponder the empty tomb when doubt fills your soul and be absolutely confident in the love God has for us that He would send His only Son to die for us and rise from the dead in His glorified body to open the way for our salvation in heaven.

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¹ Father Gabriel of St Mary Magdalen, OCD, *Divine Intimacy* (London: Baronius Press Ltd, 2008), 896.

² Roch A Kereszty, *Jesus Christ: Fundamentals of Christology* (New York: Society of St. Paul/Alba House, 2002), 60.

³ *Ibid*, 41, reference only.

⁴ Matthew 27:66.

⁵ Matthew 28:13.

⁶ Raymond E. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973), 127.

⁷ Keretsky, 64.

⁸ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 989.