

# WHAT WE LEARN FROM A TOMB!

## Steps to a New Life:

Luke 24:1-6a, 13-32

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Bethany Church

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Several years ago, two British Broadcasting Company producers decided they needed fresh material for an Easter Sunday program. They wanted to stimulate discussion on the nature of the Resurrection. Supposing, they asked, someone actually found the bones of Jesus lying around Palestine: What would that do to Christian faith? So they began poking around Jerusalem looking in bone boxes called ossuaries.

You might not know this, but we have a historical gift. For a short period, beginning just decades before Christ's birth and ending with the sacking of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., Palestinian Jews used a two-stage burial process. First, they would wrap their deceased in linen and spices and lay them on shelves in caves. Of course, they'd cover the cave openings so that the bodies wouldn't be violated by animals. A year later, they collected the bones and put them in ossuaries. Because the bones were preserved in these stone boxes, we've learn lots of things. For example, these bones helped us discover the customary crucifixion practices in Jerusalem. We know some things about Jesus' crucifixion because of the bone collections. Did you know that some ossuaries have prayers to Jesus carved on them? The boxes with these prayers are dated only two decades after Jesus' death, and you must realize that most Jewish people would

have considered prayer to anyone but Jehovah idolatry. These are amazing testaments in Jerusalem to early belief in Jesus' resurrection.

When the BBC producers found ossuaries with the names Jesus, Joseph and Mary carved on them, they thought, "We have a story." On Palm Sunday 1996, the London *Sunday Times* ran a feature that suggested their discovery threatened the basis of Christianity. In truth, their discovery was like finding the names Ole, Lena and Lars on tombstones in a Norwegian cemetery; but that didn't stop the discussion. One caller on a radio program declared:

*I expect to go to heaven when I die, and I won't be taking my bones with me; so I don't see why Jesus shouldn't have done the same.*

Did it matter that Jesus left no bones? Did it matter that Jesus rose from the dead and was changed in body? What beyond that realization would cause a doubting Thomas to finally exclaim, "My Lord and my God!"? If that is not true, Thomas' words are idolatrous. They would have been a terrible mistake. The Apostle Paul wrote the believers in Corinth:

***If Christ was not raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your trust in God is useless. And we apostles would all be lying about God, for we have said that God raised Christ from the grave... And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless, and you are still under condemnation for your sins. In that case, all who have died believing in Christ have perished! And if we have hope in Christ only for this life, we are the most miserable people in the world. (1 Corinthians 15:14-15, 17-19, NLT)***

What does it matter? Why did it matter so much to Paul? First, understand that it did happen. Four historic documents are meticulous in their description. Consider Luke.

The scene is breathtaking. Near dawn a bunch of women (Luke 24:10) go to Jesus' tomb. They find the stone covering the entrance rolled aside, and the body of Jesus missing. Crushed by the crucifixion, now they see the body is missing and chaos ensues. The reports and reactions vary. The different gospels offer us glimpses. What's clear is this. *First, the tomb was empty.* That fact was acknowledged by everyone, even by opponents of the resurrection. A single body,

easily identified, could have put all the uproar to rest. None was ever produced. *Second, a sizable group of people who witnessed the crucifixion became convinced that Jesus rose from the dead.* These were not stupid people. They were not unfamiliar with death. They were not prone to believe reports of a resurrection. They were shaped as much by their experience as we are. Like us, none had witnessed a resurrection before. Such a notion was beyond their experience and expectation. *Third, some of these people testified that they encountered initially angels.* Later they encountered Jesus. Many encountered Jesus only. One crowd of 500 saw Jesus. That is the historical record. *These eyewitness reports persisted despite persecution and martyrdom.* Indeed, the reports gained validity as witnesses remained insistent under duress. No one broke rank. Not a single eyewitness recanted, pointed to a body or explained away the resurrection. The resurrection was contemporary news, not legendary story telling.

Why did it matter? What did it mean? That was on the mind of two men walking to the village of Emmaus. They had the reports and didn't know what to make of it. Wistfully they said, ***“We had thought he was the Messiah who had come to rescue Israel.”*** That is the central issue. Is Jesus the Messiah, the one God has anointed to rescue you? Is Jesus the one God has anointed to rescue your family? Is Jesus the one God has anointed to rescue your neighbors? Is Jesus the one God has anointed to rescue the nations: America, Iraq, France, Russia, China, North Korea, India and Pakistan? Is Jesus the one? What kind of rescue does he perform?

According to Luke and the testimony of these men, the resurrected Jesus walked with them and listened as they pondered these reports and voiced their disillusionment. Jesus was so exasperated. His stomach must have been in knots. He exploded:

***You are such foolish people! You find it so hard to believe all that the prophets wrote in the Scriptures. Wasn't it clearly predicted by the prophets that the Messiah would have to suffer all these things before entering his time of glory?***  
(Luke 24:25-26, NLT)

Jesus observed a terrible lack of understanding. People didn't realize that God sent Jesus to rescue the world from the principality of death. Jesus came to remove the rule of evil and death in this physical world. Those were the enemies, not the Roman occupiers. God had been planning this, predicting this and revealing this in the Scriptures.

Evil is not merely a spiritual thing. Beyond its work in people's hearts, it breaks relationships, cripples creatures, tortures lives, removes human beings like you and me from this physical world and ravages the land. Evil kills and destroys. God did not send Jesus merely to comfort us in this affliction. Jesus is not one more method of coping. It is not Jesus is good for me, and something else might be good for you. That is a denial of history and a denial of reality. You and the world about you are caught in the grip of evil and death, and everyone needs rescue. It is a fact of history that God has acted on this planet, in real time, in real places, with real people. In real time, God sent Jesus to remove the hold of evil and death on the world. Because there is no box with his bones, because there is valid testimony of his resurrection, and because power over evil and death is released and experienced through faith in him, the world's rescue has begun. The hope is being realized. The future has come, and we have a mission.

An empty tomb in Jerusalem reveals that God is not a God of death and pain. God is a God of life, liberty and eternity. An empty tomb points to Jesus as the step to new life, the step to eternal life, the step to triumph over evil. He is the way. He is the truth. He is the life. Will you call upon Jesus? Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Two men walking with an unfamiliar man found their hearts burning as that stranger opened their eyes to this plan. As they began to eat with him, they realize the resurrected Jesus was with them. He left then. Now, however, he's come again. The spirit of the ascended Jesus is with us now. Are your hearts burning? He won't leave if you receive him. Receive him.