

Luke 24:1-12 “What Really Happened in that Tomb?”^{**1}

Main Idea: Luke invites us to consider three different responses to the empty tomb in Luke 24:1-12.

- I. Consider the women’s response to the empty tomb (1-10).
 - A. Surprise #1: The tomb was open (1-2).
 - B. Surprise #2: The body was gone (3).
 - C. Surprise #3: Two strange messengers appeared (4-7).
 1. They revealed what Jesus did.
 2. They reminded them of what Jesus said.
 - Jesus predicted His crucifixion.
 - Jesus predicted His resurrection.
 - D. Surprise #4: The women became the first witnesses (8-10).
 1. They remembered (8).
 2. They spread the word (9-10).
 - II. Consider the disciples’ response to the empty tomb (11).
 - A. They didn’t believe the witness.
 - B. They couldn’t make sense of it.
 1. This gives us proof for the resurrection.
 2. This shows us why we need patience in working with people.
 - III. Consider Peter’s response to the empty tomb (12).
 - A. He inspected the evidence.
 - B. He reflected on the event.
- Take Inventory: What are we going to do with the empty tomb?
1. We need to wonder.
 2. We need to believe.
 3. We need to tell.

What really happened in that tomb? Today we gather to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, and we’re going to think carefully about what happened inside that tomb.

Some would say, does it really matter? In our day, many (both critics and professing believers alike) would say, *who cares?* That’s because, when it comes to matters of faith, it doesn’t have to be true to believe it. The important thing is that what you believe helps you. So go ahead and believe in Mohammad, or the Jesus that Joseph Smith introduced in Mormonism, or the Jesus of the Bible, or the Easter bunny for that matter. Faith is a personal thing, and you’re entitled to believe in whomever or whatever you want. So we’re told.

But the reality is, the *facts do matter*. I’m not interested in my doctor saying to me, “Oh, take whatever medicine you want. It’s all legitimate, as long as you *believe it’s good for you.*” No, faith is only as good as the reliability of its object.

Please know this. Christianity rests upon the fact of Jesus’ literal, historical, and physical death *and* resurrection. If He didn’t leave that tomb on Sunday morning, we will never leave the ground after we die, no matter how sincere our belief (that’s what 1 Corinthians 15 says).

But the truth is, Jesus did leave the tomb, and He left it in a body that had died which had been raised from the dead! How do we know? There is documented, historical evidence. All four biographers of Jesus’ life present the details of Jesus’ resurrection. Our focus in this message will be on the third account, the one recorded by Luke.

^{**} Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For a related message, see a sermon preached at WBC on 3/31/02.

As far as we know, Luke never saw Jesus personally. Luke became a Christian several years after Jesus had returned to heaven. Luke was a doctor, a man very interested in research and given to detail. About thirty or so years after Jesus' resurrection, Luke conducted an investigation of the life of Jesus. He did so to help a friend named Theophilus come to know Jesus. That's what he said in his prologue to this biography (1:3-4), "Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught."

Luke was far from a post-modernist. The facts do matter. Before you believe in something or someone, you'd better do your homework. Luke wrote this account so Theophilus—and each of us—would know the certainty of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

In Luke 24 the good doctor takes us on a trip to the tomb. In the narrative of Luke 24:1-12, Luke invites us to consider three different responses to the empty tomb.

I. Consider the women's response to the empty tomb (1-10).

We meet these very special women in verses 1-3, "On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus."

The event occurred, says Luke, on the *first day* of the week. That's Sunday. The previous week began with a bang when on Sunday Jesus entered the city to the wild applause and palm-branch-waving of the crowd. By the end of the week, the city did a 180 and nailed their Messiah to a cross.

Luke says that very early on the following Sunday morning "the women" headed for the tomb. Later in verse 10 he names some of them. There was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and some others. Luke just mentioned the same women at the end of chapter 23, and verse 55 says they were from Galilee.

Luke 8:2 tells us that Mary Magdalene had once been controlled by seven demons until Jesus set her free, which He also did with some other women, including Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household. Out of gratitude these women began to follow Jesus and helped support Him and His disciples out of their means, as Luke explains in 8:3.

Some have tried to explain away the resurrection with statements like, "Jesus didn't come back to life. The women went to the *wrong* tomb. That's why they didn't find the body."

But that objection doesn't hold. Luke provides a very important detail back in 23:55, "The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and *saw the tomb* and how his body was laid in it."

Notice that. They *saw* the tomb on Friday. In fact, they not only saw the tomb but also *how his body was laid in it*. What's more, verse 56 says they left that day with the intention of returning so they could anoint the body with spices and perfumes.

So why didn't they prepare the body on Friday? There wasn't time. Jesus died at 3:00 in the afternoon. By the time Joseph of Arimathea obtained permission from Pilate, took down the body from Golgotha, wrapped it, and moved it to the tomb he owned, it

was near sundown. The Sabbath began when the sun went down on Friday evening. Work was forbidden until sundown on Saturday evening. The women, then, went home on Friday, prepared the spices, and then began their Sabbath rest. They'd have to wait to finish their work until Sunday morning.

Matthew Henry helps us visualize the women's actions. "As soon as ever they could, after the sabbath was over, they came to the sepulcher, to embalm his body, not to take it out of the linen in which Joseph had wrapped it, but to anoint the head and face, and perhaps the wounded hands and feet, and to scatter sweet spices upon and about the body; as it is usual with us to strew flowers about the dead bodies and graves of our friends, only to show our good-will towards the taking off the deformity of death if we could, and to make them somewhat the less loathsome to those that are about them."²

I admire these women, don't you? They wanted to make sure Jesus received a proper burial. They were devoted. They didn't follow Him merely to get something out of Him—like many so often do. They were eternally grateful for how He had changed their lives and were willing to do anything they could to show their appreciation.

So when Sunday arrived, the women headed for the tomb. Luke tells us that once there they experienced four surprises. Here's the first.

A. Surprise #1: The tomb was open (1-2). "They found the stone rolled away." That was odd. Stones don't move on their own, especially huge grave-stones. And this particular stone, according to Matthew's account, had been sealed by the authorization of Pilate (27:66). The ladies moved forward for a closer look. In fact, Luke says they "entered the tomb (3)." Then they discovered a second surprise.

B. Surprise #2: The body was gone (3). Please realize that when the women went to the tomb that Sunday morning, they fully expected to find a *body*. That's why they were carrying these spices. When a body is placed in a tomb, it stays there. A dead body doesn't get up and walk away, does it?

C. Surprise #3: Two strange messengers appeared (4-7). Verse 4 says, "While they were wondering about this [the KJV says they were "much perplexed"; the Greek term *aporeo* means "to doubt;" what they saw didn't make sense to them], suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them."

The other gospel writers refer to these unique messengers as "angels," and so does Luke in verse 23. John mentions there were "two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot (John 20:12)." Luke says the brilliance of their clothing riveted the women—it "gleamed like lightning." It petrified them so much that they bowed down with their faces to the ground (verse 5).

At that point the angelic messengers broke the silence and spoke to the women (5-7). According to the Law it took at least two witnesses to substantiate a legal matter (Deut 19:15). That seems to be the purpose here. The angels gave the women two messages.

1. *They revealed what Jesus did.* In verse 5 they asked, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" Now there's a great question! What would you expect to see in a tomb? A dead body. What would you *not* expect to see? A living person. Why are you looking for someone who is alive in a cemetery?

² Henry, Matthew, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Bible*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers) 1997.

Verse 6, “He is not here; he has risen!” In the Greek the verb “has risen” is passive (“has been raised”). This implies that God is responsible for this event. God intervened. God raised His Son.

Paul said the same thing in Ephesians 1:19-20, “That power is like the working of his mighty strength,²⁰ which he exerted in Christ when *he raised him from the dead* and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms.”

Jesus had raised others from the dead—like Lazarus and Jairus’ daughter—but, of course, in time those individuals died again. This was different. In His resurrection, Jesus conquered death and never experienced death again.

Is that significant? Yes! Some of you put some seed in the ground recently, didn’t you? What happens to that seed? You put it into the ground and it produces a harvest, more seed.

The Bible says that Jesus became the “first-fruits” of a new humanity. 1 Corinthians 15:20-24 explains, “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.²¹ For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.²² For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.²³ But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.²⁴ Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.”

So the messengers revealed what Jesus did. “He has risen,” they said.³

2. *They reminded them of what Jesus said.* That’s verses 6-7, “Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee:⁷ ‘The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’”

I get the sense that the angels expected Jesus’ followers to know this was going to happen. “Don’t you *remember* what the Lord told you? He told you what would happen on the third day. Why didn’t you believe Him?”

Ironically, the chief priests and Pharisees remembered. According to Matthew 27:63, they went to Pilate and asked for a guard to keep watch at the tomb. Why? “Sir,” they said to Pilate, “we *remember* that while he was still alive that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise again.’ So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day.”

So Jesus’ enemies remembered the prediction. “Now *you* remember,” the angels told the women. Remember what? Two things.

•Jesus predicted His crucifixion. Jesus didn’t die because His plan went haywire. He revealed ahead of time that He *must* be delivered. He *must* be crucified. That’s why He came to earth.

But why? Why did God’s Son have to die? The answer goes back to Genesis 3. The first man and woman sinned and brought death upon the human race. Remember what God did right after Adam and Eve sinned? As the guilty man and woman stood there in their shame, God provided them with something. What was it? Genesis 3:21 says He made garments of skin for them and clothed them. And in so doing He gave them an object lesson. In order to get rid of sin’s shame, a death had to occur. In Genesis 3, an animal died, but this was only a temporary covering. Later, the Jews offered thousands of lambs, but this too provided only a temporary covering. And a picture.

³ By the way, the stone wasn’t rolled away to let Jesus out, but to let the witnesses in. If you can overcome death you don’t need help moving a grave-stone.

In eternity past God devised a plan to rescue a sinful people for His glory. He purposed that a substitute would die for them, and the substitute would be none other than His own precious Son.

The Son of man MUST be crucified, Jesus said. And He told His disciples that over and over during His three years with them. He was going to die for them. But He told them something else, as the angels reminded the women.

•Jesus predicted His resurrection. He told them, not once, but several times. For instance, Matthew 16:21 says, “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.”

He told them, not only that He would be raised, but when. On the *third day*.

Friends, God takes His word seriously, and He calls us to do the same. To take His Word seriously, we must *know* it—that takes a commitment to study it. We must *remember* it—that requires reflection. We must *believe* what He said—that takes faith. And we must *live* in light of what He said—that necessitates obedience.

Do you believe what God says? The test isn’t what we *say*. It’s what we *do* with what He has said. And these women passed the test.

D. Surprise #4: The women became the first witnesses (8-10). Look at verses 8-10, “Then they remembered his words. ⁹ When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. ¹⁰ It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles.”

What did the women do? Two things...

1. *They remembered (8)*. That is, they remembered what Jesus said. Oh, they knew it before, but they forgot. They needed the messengers to prompt their recall.

We’re no different. We tend to forget God’s Word—especially when life gets hard and doesn’t make sense. We need to be reminded. That’s one of the main reasons why we need the church. By God’s design, the church is where we’re to come each week to be reminded of what He said. To stay away from church is to rob yourself of something you desperately need, not to mention to rob God of the worship He certainly deserves.

The women remembered. And then...

2. *They spread the word (9-10)*. They took off from the tomb and headed to find the apostles. They had to tell someone!

It’s ironic that God chose women to be the first witnesses of the resurrected Savior. I say that because in the male-dominated world of the first century, the testimony of women wasn’t given much weight legally. And that’s one of the great proofs of the resurrection. If the church had “made up” the whole thing, they certainly wouldn’t have created a story in which the first witnesses were women.

But the Bible tells it like it is, for it has nothing to hide. The reason Luke says that women were the first witnesses is because they were, and that by God’s design.

Again, these women deserve our commendation. They took great personal risk to be there, first at the site of the cross, and later at the tomb. They did so because they loved their Master.

And that raises a question. Where were the men? On that first resurrection morning, the women were there, but where were the *men*?

Perhaps the more pressing question is, where *are* the men? Today, that is. Men, God calls us to lead our families and lead His church. We're supposed to be spiritual pacesetters. In Luke 24 the women wanted to be where Jesus was, so they took action. Frankly, we can say we want to be near Jesus till we're blue in the face, but the proof is in what we *do*. In many churches you'll look in vain to find *men*. I'm grateful that's not the case here. I'm thankful God has raised up a team of committed men who have a passion to live for the Master.

But there's so much more we could accomplish, for the glory of our Savior, if we had more men *and* women like these women in Luke 24. My friend, how important is Jesus to you? Is being near Him and serving Him your highest priority, as it was for these women?

Last Sunday evening our sister Joy shared a stirring testimony and said, "I thank the Lord for my cancer because the Lord used it to bring me back to His house. Living for His glory is now the most important thing in my life." I was challenged. Can I say that? Can you?

According to verse 9 the women shared their discovery with "the Eleven" (the remaining apostles) and "all the others" (which I'm assuming would include people like Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, perhaps Lazarus, and others).⁴ What effect did their report have?

We've considered the women's response to the empty tomb. Next Luke invites us to...

II. Consider the disciples' response to the empty tomb (11).

Verse 11 says, "But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense." We're told two things about the disciples.

A. They didn't believe the witness. They'd seen their hopes dashed in Gethsemane on Thursday night, and they'd spent the past three days in despair. So while they heard the report, they didn't believe it. Luke, in fact, tells us why.

B. They couldn't make sense of it. They called it "nonsense" ['idle tales' in the KJV]. Luke uses a word that the Greek doctors used to describe the babbling of a fevered and insane mind.⁵

The whole thing seemed far-fetched to them. Why had Jesus allowed a mob of thugs to arrest Him, jealous leaders to frame Him, and a self-seeking ruler to condemn Him? They knew He had the power to stop it all, but He didn't. In fact, it seemed like He wanted to die. But why would He die if He was going to turn right around three days later and live again? This just didn't make sense to them, so they refused to believe it.

Wiersbe is right, "Had they remembered His words, they would have saved themselves a great deal of sorrow."⁶ But as Matthew Henry suggested, "Good Christians

⁴ "It does not appear that they were together in a body; they were *scattered every one to his own*, perhaps scarcely two or three of them together in the same lodgings, but one went to some of them and another to others of them, so that in a little time, that morning, they all had notice of it." Matthew Henry

⁵ Barclay, p. 292.

⁶ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the New Testament*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books) 1992.

often perplex themselves about that with which they should comfort and encourage themselves.”⁷

Most of us have a lot in common with these disciples. Ironically, I think we can gain a couple of helpful lessons from the disciples’ response of unbelief.

1. *This gives us proof for the resurrection.* That’s right. The disciples’ initial unbelief is actually a proof for the resurrection, and here’s why.

One theory critics propose to explain the resurrection is that Jesus’ followers had hallucinations and merely *thought* they saw Jesus. But that flies in the face of the evidence. Remember, the women didn’t expect to see Jesus alive. And the disciples certainly didn’t, even when the women passed on the angels’ message. Would this many people hallucinate about the same subject at the same time?⁸

Other critics say, “The disciples stole the body and made up the resurrection story.” That’s ludicrous. Every one of these apostles would eventually die as martyrs for Christ, except for John who survived being thrown into a caldron of boiling oil. Can you imagine these eleven men being willing to die for a hoax they made up? Impossible. They wouldn’t even believe the women.

Luke makes it clear that the first skeptics Jesus faced were His *own disciples*—that’s right, His *disciples*. The incredible change that took place between Luke 24 and Acts 2 is indeed one of the great proofs of the resurrection.

2. *This shows us why we need patience in working with people.* The resurrection is a hard doctrine to believe, and we need to remember that as we witness to people.

The next time you share the good news of Christ with someone, and he balks at it, don’t give up on him. Remember that even the disciples struggled, too. You wouldn’t be here had not the Spirit of God opened your eyes. So keep loving them, and praying.

Now one of these disciples decided to check things out for himself, and it’s not surprising who it was. In verse 12 Luke invites us to...

III. Consider Peter’s response to the empty tomb (12).

“Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.” So Peter did two things...

A. He inspected the evidence. When he got to the tomb, he saw an open door and the strips of cloth, but no body. What struck Peter was the orderliness of the linen strips. If someone stole the body, would they first unwrap it and leave the linen behind? No. To Peter it looked like Jesus’ body simply evaporated and left the strips neatly behind.

The evidence made him believe, right? Not exactly. Luke says he left “wondering.” In other words...

B. He reflected on the event. You might be thinking, “Why didn’t Peter believe? I mean, he saw the evidence, didn’t he?”

I also saw the evidence when I was in Jerusalem in 1980. Thousands of people have seen it, for the tomb is still *empty*. But you need more than evidence to become a believer.

⁷ Henry, Matthew, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Bible*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers) 1997.

⁸ Wiersbe, p. 278.

Why's that? Because you can reinterpret evidence. Maybe the tomb is empty because they stole the body. Or maybe it was the wrong tomb. Or, or, or.

You see, apart from sovereign intervention, the natural mind will never believe in the resurrected Christ. That's why the Risen Lord sent His Spirit into the world, to convict and convince the sinner and open His blinded eyes (John 16:8; 2 Cor 4:6).

I can testify He did that in my life. God's Spirit opened my eyes to the truth of what Christ did, and that He did it for me, and gave me a heart to believe it and to believe in *Him*. Can you give that testimony?

Now remember something. Luke 24 isn't the end of the story for Peter. Sure, he has doubts, but the Lord isn't done with him yet. He is refining Peter, stripping away things, and preparing him for service. Yes, Peter blew it, but the Lord never gave up on him. And He won't give up on you, either, if you belong to Him (Phil 1:6).

Take Inventory: What are we going to do with the empty tomb?

Three actions are in order.

1. *We need to wonder.* Most of us live such hectic lives that we do little of this. Peter left "wondering to himself what had happened." I encourage you to do the same.

My friend, if the tomb is empty—and it is, and if the reason it's empty is because Jesus rose again and is alive—which He is, then that means that the day is coming when we will see Him. That day will be the day of judgment. This day is the day of salvation. Which means on this day we need to do some processing.

Do you have questions about Jesus? Good! There are answers, and there are resources to help you find those answers. There's the Bible—start reading it every day (I recommend the Gospel of John). And there are people who'd be glad to study it with you—let me know if you're interested. Do some *wondering*.

But don't stop there. Wondering won't take you to heaven.

2. *We need to believe.* The Scriptures give this promise, "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved (Rom 10:9)." To be right with God you must *believe* in Jesus, that He died for you and that God raised Him from the dead.

Do you believe? If not, why not now? And if you do, don't stop there.

3. *We need to tell.* Like the women did. Telling is an important evidence that we have truly believed. In fact, if we're not burdened to tell others about Christ, we ought to wonder if we really believe ourselves.

Brothers and sisters, we have a message to tell! We know the Good News, that Jesus died and rose again. Who has God placed in your life that He wants you to tell this week? Will you pray right now for an opportunity?