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The Scandal of the Empty Tomb: The Glory of the Resurrection

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“I do not think that anyone, anywhere, at any time brings dead people back to life.” That blunt assessment comes from John Dominic Crossan, a leading figure in the Jesus Seminar, and one of the most influential authors on religion in post-Christian America. Thomas Sheehan, another fellow of the Seminar, put it even more directly: “Jesus, regardless of where his corpse ended up, is dead and remains dead.”

The claim that Jesus actually rose from the dead on the third day is perhaps the greatest scandal of authentic Christianity in the face of modern secularism. The bodily resurrection of Jesus is so absolutely fundamental and necessary to biblical Christianity—and to the Gospel—that its abandonment would mean the end of Christianity as revealed in the New Testament. Jesus would be just one more Palestinian rebel; one more wisdom teacher with rag-tag disciples.

Just in time for Easter, the Jesus Seminar is out with *The Acts of Jesus*, advertised as “The search for the authentic deeds of Jesus.” True to form, the fellows of the seminar have rejected most of the content of the New Testament as legendary. Using their customary procedure of voting by colored beads (red=authentic, pink=probably authentic, grey=probably not authentic, black=definitely not authentic) the seminar found only 16% of the events they considered to be either authentic or probably authentic.

In 1993 the Jesus Seminar released their version of the New Testament gospels. Using the same color-coded system, the seminar voted that only 18% of the sayings of Jesus recorded in the New Testament are either true or probably true. Put simply, their red letter edition of the gospels shows very little red. Turning to the central issue of the resurrection of Jesus, the seminar released the following conclusions:

- The resurrection of Jesus did not involve the resuscitation of a corpse.
- Belief in Jesus’ resurrection did not depend on what happened to his body.
- The body of Jesus decayed as do other corpses.
- The resurrection was not an event that happened on the first Easter Sunday; it was not an event that could have been recorded by a video camera.
- It is not necessary to believe in the historical veracity of the resurrection narratives.

This denial of the resurrection as historical fact is now common in modern theology. By the nineteenth century, the biblical critics made a distinction between the mythic Christ and the historical Jesus. Later critics would name this division the Jesus of History vs. The Christ of Faith. With the rise of historical criticism, the resurrection and the miraculous world of the New Testament were simply out of date. As Rudolf Bultmann, the most influential New Testament scholar of the twentieth century, commented: “It is impossible to use electric light and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries and at the same time believe in the New Testament world of demons and spirits.”

We now know, claimed Bultmann, that bodies do not rise from the dead, and it is high time Christians stopped making such claims. Bultmann attempted to rescue some spiritual meaning from the disciples’ belief in the resurrection, but later critical scholars saw little worth recovering. Gerd Lüdemann, formerly of Vanderbilt University, minces no words, but simply states that “the tomb of Jesus was not empty, but full, and his body did not disappear, but rotted away.”

Marcus Borg, another fellow of the Jesus Seminar, denies that the empty tomb is necessary to the Christian faith. “I think the resurrection of Jesus really happened, but I have no idea if it involves anything happening to his corpse, and, therefore, I have no idea whether it involves an empty tomb. So I would have no problem whatsoever with archaeologists finding the corpse of Jesus. For me that would not be a discrediting of the Christian faith or the Christian tradition.”

The empty tomb does not matter? The Apostle Paul saw the case quite differently. Speaking for the modern secular naturalistic worldview, the Jesus Seminar may dismiss the resurrection as myth, claiming that, as all right-thinking moderns know, dead persons simply do not rise from the dead. Paul, who evidently would not qualify for membership on the Jesus Seminar, leaves no room for negotiation: “But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain.” [I Corinthians 15:13-14]

Paul sets himself—and the true Church—over against Bultmann, the Jesus Seminar, and all who deny or deride the empty tomb. Either the tomb is empty, or our faith is in vain. Paul wants nothing to do with Bultmann’s effort to find a spiritual meaning without a historical event, nor with the Jesus Seminar’s anti-supernaturalism. Against modern skeptics, Paul cared deeply about whether the tomb was empty.

Why do so many hate the very idea of the risen Christ? Because the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the vindication of God’s purpose in sending his Son for the redemption of sinners. A world full of degenerate moderns—who do not even see themselves as sinners—wants nothing to do with Jesus Christ as our sinless substitute, who shed his blood for the remission of our sins.

The work of the Jesus Seminar tells us virtually nothing about Jesus, but a great deal about the liberal scholars who sit around with colored beads, creating a Jesus in their own image. The Jesus invented by the Jesus Seminar is a Palestinian smart aleck who sounds like a cynical and sarcastic intellectual. Coincidence? No historical apologies are needed for the New Testament. The Jesus Seminar fascinates the media because its reports make for a good story.

But the Church knows the real story, and celebrates the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The tomb was really empty. The Jesus of history is the Christ of faith. Looking into the empty tomb, the women heard the angels ask, “Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but He has risen.”

That has been the faith of the true Church throughout the centuries. That will be the faith of the true Church when the risen Christ returns to claim his own. He is risen. He is risen indeed!

