

### Does an empty tomb matter?

Some years back the Bible Society produced an attractive Easter leaflet for children. It was headed very simply "There's no body there". And of course it was entirely true to the account of Easter Day given by St Matthew. But some might see it as contentious, because serious questions have been raised over the years about whether or not the tomb was empty - and indeed people have gone to extraordinary lengths to "prove" or disprove the story of the empty tomb. I think they are both on a wild goose chase, and that they cannot achieve what they have set out to do. It is beyond proof. We can accept the empty tomb as a matter of faith, or we can treat the story with reverent agnosticism, and reserve our judgement. Since the gospel writers chose to tell the tale that way, I don't think we are entitled to throw it out of the window. But I received great help in thinking about this from an article in Theology ages ago written, not by a radical whizz-kid of Biblical scholarship, but by a very careful and saintly scholar - Brother Barnabas Lindars, who was a Professor at Manchester. I want to tell you a little of the point he is raising, in the hope that it will be as useful to you.

He starts out by saying that many people assume that if you cast doubt on the story of the empty tomb, you are casting doubt of a serious kind on the bodily resurrection of Jesus. But that is not so - and can be shown to be so very simply. There is plenty of evidence that the earliest Christians preached the bodily resurrection. So that is authentic early teaching. But there is very little evidence that they preached about an *empty tomb*. It is a chicken and egg situation - which came first - the story of the tomb, or the belief that Jesus' body was raised? The evidence would seem to be that the tomb story *followed* the other, and not the other way round. So, far from the earliest Christians believing in the risen Jesus *because* of the tomb being empty, they came to talk about the tomb being empty because they believed in the risen Jesus. What most of us who don't live in the world of Biblical scholarship need to be reminded of time and time again, is that the gospel stories as we have them did not come to be written down until quite late in the first century. Even the earliest documents we have (Letters of Paul) come from twenty or more years after the date of Easter. You might like to look at the earliest witness we have to the resurrection - which is the argument that Paul puts forward in I Corinthians 15:3-7 (Read it). There he says Christ was buried, and rose *as written in the scriptures* - but remember, he is talking there about the Old Testament prophecies, not the accounts we have in the gospels. Those hadn't been written at this time. He then appeals to the appearances of Jesus. But he makes no reference to the empty tomb. If that story had produced belief, you would have expected him to do so.

All right, but surely the disciples, having seen the Lord, would have gone along to see whether the grave was empty or not? No doubt they would, if they were in Jerusalem. But here the evidence is very confusing, and the four gospels tell contradictory things. It is only Luke who has the whole story taking place in Jerusalem. Matthew and Mark have the appearances in Galilee. What unfortunately makes life

difficult for us is that by the time the written records came into being, the church was centred on Jerusalem, which naturally weighted things in that direction. But we know that more likely, in the earliest days of the church, the centre of activities and authority was Galilee - but we don't have the written evidence to back that up.

Professor Barnabas would ask us to sit very light to the details of the stories surrounding the empty tomb (the angels, the guards and so on) and to see these stories for their full value - which is to be a means of *celebrating* the Easter event, rather than *proving it*. They were never used like that by the earliest believers - so why should we use them that way? If I can quote the article:

"But they vividly express that faith, and through them the people of God may share imaginatively in the Easter joy."

He admits that people who are anxious about maintaining the historicity of the gospels will want to disagree. But he wisely points out that the contortions that they will have to go through in order to do that are at least a questionable as the critical procedures which have led him to his conclusions. And he ends with an even more startling thought. Suppose for a moment that we forget the division which the gospel writers make between the resurrection and the ascension. As Barnabas points out, Paul does not make that separation into two acts, as it were. So if we take the resurrection to include the assumption of his "glorious" body, as Paul calls it, then it is the heavenly body which we are all promised at the point at which we too share in the resurrection at the end of time. In the meantime, our physical bodies will be buried and crumble to dust. So he says quite powerfully that exactly the same could have happened to Jesus' earthly body without in any way it affecting the belief that he was truly alive again. It doesn't have to be like that, but it certainly permits such a view.

'There's no body' - there is a statement of joyous Easter faith, that I hope we can all share. But please don't let anyone make you think that such a statement was how people came to believe in the risen Jesus. It was the way they expressed a conviction that came to them from their experiences - the meetings with Jesus that they had in Galilee, and the spiritual encounters that Christians from the time of Paul onwards have had, and in which we share.

We are entitled to reverent agnosticism - about the empty tomb. But we either know, or we don't, that Jesus is living. Let me end with the words of a chorus, which combines such agnosticism and faith superbly:

I cannot tell how Christ my Lord should rise  
Out from the grave, that glorious Eastertide  
Or rising, pass triumphant through the skies  
To God's right hand in heaven glorified  
But this I know, his death was not the end,  
That now he lives, he lives to be my friend.