

## EMPTY BODY or EMPTY TOMB?

By

Curtis Dickinson

“Where have they laid him?” asked Mary. One dead for three days does not get up and walk away. The words of Jesus had never fully been understood. “In three days I will rise.” Rise? What does that mean? Well, maybe He meant that when He died, His spiritual nature would leave the body and rise up to heaven, leaving the empty body behind in the tomb.

That’s exactly what is generally thought by both pagan and Christian people today, that the body is only the shell inhabited by the person for a while. At death he simply shucks off the useless shell and rises to meet Jesus in Heaven! Of course, little is said about what happens if he is not acceptable to Jesus! Then one must rise to pass to some other abode. Many interpret the parable of the rich man and Lazarus to say that at death man may descend to some kind of spiritual place where his spirit is tortured by fire! This common interpretation ignores the application of the parable made by Jesus. (The parable applies to the death of the nation of Israel and the acceptance of Gentiles into the promise of Abraham, not to the literal death of two individuals.) How strange that otherwise astute scholars of scripture will hand their entire theology of death on a literal interpretation of a parable full of symbolic statements, all in order to uphold a tradition from Greek philosophy.

The import of the resurrection was not that Jesus left the body and went triumphantly to heaven as a mere spirit, but that Jesus, after having fully died, came to life in the body and, as a whole person, body and spirit, ascended to heaven, where today He is seated in power.

From the beginning, the gospel was not about going to heaven at death, but about being resurrected from death. It is literally a matter of life and death.

At the death of Jesus the apostles were dejected and defeated. They had no hope and no message. But all this was completely turned around after the resurrection. From defeat in disbelief they became bold witnesses to the point of martyrdom because they understood the implications of resurrection, not because of an empty body, but because of an empty tomb!

“...with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 4:33). “...they were proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead” (Acts 4:2).

“(Paul) preached Jesus and the resurrection” (Acts 17:18). In his defense before the king, Paul affirmed that he had been preaching the hope God had made to Israel, then asked, “Why is it judged incredible with you, if God does raise the dead?” (Acts 26:8). The center of apostolic preaching was the resurrection.

The apostles saw resurrection in contrast to death: either Jesus was dead or He had risen. This was the pattern of the sermons found in Acts. Over and over they declared to Israel, “You put Jesus to death, but God raised him up” (Acts 2:22–36, 3:13–15, 4:10, 5:30–32, 10:39–40, 13:28–33).

This doctrine of resurrection immediately became the base of Christian hope. By Christ's resurrection he "brought life and immortality to light" (II Tim. 1:10). No more is the hope of life to be confused with the pagan concepts of the spirit leaving the body to enter other realms of existence. In fact the New Testament affirms that the *only* life available is through resurrection. "IF Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain and you are still in your sins. Then they also that are fallen asleep in Christ have perished" (I Cor. 15:17-18). In the plainest words possible, the apostle states that the only hope of life is a life in the body by way of resurrection.

This is the most significant promise to the church. Jesus said, "I will build my church and the gates of hades shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). How often we hear people speak of the "gates of hades" as though this referred to all the evil forces trying to snuff out the life of the church. But "hades" refers to the grave or place of the dead. It has no reference to the devil nor to a place of evil. In Old Testament scriptures as well as New, everyone went to hades at death — that is, everyone goes to the grave. Jesus Himself was there after crucifixion. Peter quoted Psalms 16, "thou will not leave my soul in Hades," then explained David's prophecy: "He...spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that neither was he left unto Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. This Jesus did God raise up, whereof we all are witnesses" (Acts 2:27, 31, 32).

Death is the enemy that prevails over every unredeemed person. But death (hades) cannot hold the church. When Christ comes and raises all the dead, those who are redeemed by Christ shall be raised up as was Jesus, to be changed, to be clothed with immortality and life forever. Others who are raised will still be in their mortality, to suffer the punishment of final and eternal death.

Is the doctrine of resurrection too much for our faith? Apparently so, for many today. It seems easier to believe the traditions of the Greeks, that death doesn't really happen to the "real person," that it only means that he escapes the body to other realms, leaving the body empty and worthless. But death happened to Jesus, not just to his body. He said he would give up his life. His "soul" — meaning his life — was in hades, or grave. His victory was not that death was only partial, leaving His personality intact to live on in a spiritual realm! His victory was in the fact that after he had been deprived of life, He lives again by way of resurrection from the dead. It was not an empty body that testified to His triumph, but an empty tomb.

The basis of apostolic faith and preaching was resurrection. Nowhere do we read of any apostle preaching and "going to heaven" at death. This expression, so popular with Christians today, is strangely absent from the Bible. Instead it teaches that the hope and goal of every believer is to be resurrected at Christ's coming, to live in His image forever.

.....  
Copyright © Curtis Dickinson. Formatted and Posted by Ken Fortier Ministries.  
Permission is hereby granted by Mrs. Regina Dickinson to reproduce and distribute  
Curtis' articles to as many as possible. This statement is to remain attached to this article  
for permission to be valid. Vol. XXVI, Number 3.  
.....