

The Empty Tomb

Mark 16.1-8; Matt 28.1-8; Luke 24.1-12

All three Synoptic Gospels record the visit by the women to the tomb of Jesus early in the morning of the first day of the week. The women discover that the tomb is empty, and they are informed by an angelic figure or figures that Jesus has risen. The empty tomb story follows the burial of Jesus in all three Synoptic Gospels (Mark 15.42-47; Matt 27.57-61; Luke 23.50-56), which takes place on the Friday evening. In all three accounts of Jesus' burial, the women see where the body of Jesus is laid, which prepares for their visit to the tomb on the Sunday morning. Matthew, in a passage unique to him, inserted between the burial and empty tomb stories, tells of the posting of guards at the sepulchre (Matt 27.62-66). Mark's Gospel, in the best manuscripts, ends at 16.8. In Matthew, there follows a brief account of an appearance by the Jesus to the women en route to the disciples (Matt 28.9-10). Luke's Gospel continues with Jesus' appearance to the two disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24.13-35).

John narrates the visit of Mary Magdalene to the sepulchre (John 20.1), but his narrative follows a different course (20.2-18). John's empty tomb narrative is not a version of the shared story told by the Synoptists; it is a different story (it relates a another series of events).

The Shared Story

The shared Synoptic story of the empty tomb can be outlined as follows:

- Women go to the tomb in which Jesus was laid;
- the stone is (found) rolled away;
- they meet a young man/angel/two men;
- the women are told that Jesus 'is not here' but has risen;
- the women leave the tomb.

The variations in detail (including the number of women involved and their names) have often been taken as lending weight to the historical reliability of the accounts (if the story were concocted, we would expect the details to be more consistent).

Mark

Only Mark tells us that the women went out and bought the spices with which to anoint Jesus' body (v. 1). He explicitly makes the purpose of their visit, to anoint him (v. 1). Mark has the women en route to the tomb wondering, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" (v. 3).

When they enter the tomb, they encounter a young man who tells them that Jesus has risen (v. 5). The young man is almost certainly to be understood as an angel. In ancient



Jewish literature (e.g. 2 Maccabees 3.26, 33), the form of an angel is often described as that of a young man. His dress, *a white robe*, is also typical of an angel (cf. Acts 1.10). The instruction to the women to go and tell the disciples makes special mention of *Peter* (v. 7), which signals his rehabilitation after his denial of Jesus.

In Mark, the women flee the tomb and say *nothing to anyone, for they were afraid* (v. 8). The passage – and the Gospel as a whole – thus concludes, not untypically for Mark, with the failure of Jesus' followers. We are probably meant to infer, though, that their silence is temporary and that they eventually convey the message to the disciples.

Matthew

In Matthew, the women go simply *to see the tomb* (v. 1). Matthew uniquely describes the dramatic removal of the stone blocking the entrance of the tomb: there is *a great earthquake* (as at the moment of Jesus' death); *an angel of the Lord* descends, rolls away the stone and sits upon it (v. 2).

The appearance of the angel is compared to *lightning*, and the whiteness of his clothes is *as snow* (v. 3). The *guards*, who only appear in Matthew's account, shake *for fear*, and they *became like dead men* (v. 4). In response to the angel's message, the women exit with a mixture of fearfulness *and great joy* (v. 8).

Luke

The women, finding the stone rolled away, enter the tomb, but *they did not find the body* (v. 3). Luke refers to *two men in dazzling clothes* (v. 4). There can be little doubt that angels are in view: in Acts 10.30, Luke speaks in the same way (*a man in dazzling clothes*) about a figure explicitly identified as an angel (cf. Acts 10.3, 22; 11.13).

The two men say to the women, "*Why do you look for the living among the dead?*" (v. 5) and remind them of Jesus' own prophetic words: *the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again* (v. 7). This statement cleverly recycles elements of Jesus' earlier passion predictions (9.22, 44; 18.31-33) in such a way as to recall them all.

Unlike in Mark and Matthew, the women are not explicitly commissioned to go and tell the disciples. They do, though, go and report everything to the eleven and others. The disciples, however, are incredulous (reflecting a traditional prejudice against women's testimony). The disbelieving attitude of the male disciples contrasts with the faithfulness of the women (a contrast found elsewhere in Luke's Gospel: 1.5-80; 7.36-50).

The final verse of the passage (v. 12) focuses on Peter and has affinities with John 20.3-10. This verse, however, is omitted by some manuscripts and so may not be original.





Summary

The story of the discovery of the empty tomb takes the same basic shape across the Synoptic Gospels, even if the details vary. Each Gospel writer brings out his own emphasis. Mark concludes with the failure Jesus' followers, a motif of his Gospel. Matthew adds 'shock and awe' to the story with his description of the angel's descent to roll back the stone. Luke recalls Jesus' passion predictions, which have now in their entirety come true.

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