

The Empty Tomb: One Event, Two Accounts

I am not a great fan of movies, especially movies which portray events found in Scripture. This may sound odd considering I spend so much of my time studying Scripture, but it is just because I do, that I find movies taken from Scripture often disquieting. The early church fathers in the third century after Jesus had lived and died had many different traditions about his life and death which were circulating among different groups. The earliest written accounts come from letters Paul wrote to various churches and in those letters we can get a glimpse of the struggles in and around those early communities of faith. Those and the gospel accounts were written sometime during the first century, but the different communities had interpreted what they had received according to their experiences and the spirit moving among them. Each gospel contained an element of particular value to that community. Those early church fathers as they encountered these differences could have merged them and made them into one document. But instead, they saw each as a valuable revelation about God and thus a message the present and future church would need. Those documents which were discarded whose importance have been proclaimed by TV and other sources were written long after the time of Christ and his disciples--usually in the late 2nd and early 3rd century. It was this late origin and statements about the nature of Jesus Christ contrary to the experienced accounts found in the gospels which led to their non-inclusion in our canon. In reading in close proximity two gospel accounts about the finding of the empty tomb this morning, although they agree on the major point--the tomb was empty-- the details presented are different. My issue is that in portrayals done by movie directors and producers, even with the best of intentions, they merge the accounts into one smooth and seamless story which leaves those differences and what message they might have for us laying on some cutting room floor--if they bothered to consider them at all. With that as background, what is revealed to us by these two accounts? First, both accounts inform us that it was the first day of the week. For John, who has Mary Magdalene alone as the first to come on that morning, it was still dark. For Luke those who come arrive when it is early dawn. For the first arrivals, who are women who have followed Jesus, what they find is the stone rolled away and an open tomb. For John, Mary has come alone in the darkness of her grief, for Luke women who have followed him have come to perform the appropriate ritual on his body and thus have waited until dawn to come. Later Luke identifies these women as Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James. In neither account is there any attempt to explain how what they find occurred. The tomb is already empty. Resurrection has already occurred and they do not know what they have seen means. For Luke the new day has dawned, even though the followers do not yet understand. The darkness surrounding Mary and her grief are real, just as the fact that a new dawn has occurred even while the followers are in the dark. In both accounts what is told describes the sight of the burial place where the stone which should have sealed the body inside the tomb is rolled away from the opening. The descriptions testify to what was seen. Next, we are given the reactions of these first visitors to this unexpected sight. According to John, Mary Magdalene runs back to two of the disciples, Simon Peter and the beloved one saying, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." She has forgotten what Jesus had told them was to happen. These two disciples go back with her, look into the tomb and confirm

that the body of Jesus is not there; the tomb is empty except for the wrapping used on his body. John gives us a description of what is seen inside the tomb, the linen wrappings and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head. What else he tells us is that one of the disciples, seeing the empty tomb and the cloths--believed. But evidently at this point, Peter still does not believe. Both disciples then leave and go back home. But Mary remains behind--weeping. Then she enters the tomb and sees two angels who pose a question to her: "Woman, why are you weeping?" Her answer is still based in darkness--she is seeking where the body of Jesus has been taken. The women of Luke's account aren't much wiser. When they went into the tomb, they also discovered no body. But they are terrified when they see two angels sitting inside the tomb. They are then asked, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified and on the third day rise again." In John's gospel Mary, still weeping, turns and sees someone who asks her, "Whom are you looking for?" She identifies him as the gardener and again seeks to discover the location of Jesus' body. But when Jesus calls her name, "Mary", she knows him as her teacher. She has seen him. And that is what she goes back and announces to the disciples. In Luke's gospel, the women at the tomb also go back and tell the disciples what they have seen and heard. In John's gospel we have one disciple who seeing the empty tomb, believed. Of course we are not told exactly what he believed; he may have agreed with Mary that someone had removed Jesus' body. We have Peter who looked and went back home with no statement about what he thought. There is no shout of joy from either. No Alleluia. In Luke's gospel, it seems none of the disciples were inclined to take the witness of the women seriously, although in this account too, Peter ran and looked into the tomb, then went home amazed. Each Easter Sunday we walk through this story of resurrection, recounting the witness that we have been given about it. Each Easter we seek to proclaim something about this event. Preaching about this event often involves too much explanation about what happened--notice none are given in the texts. Instead of attempts at justification, what we really need to proclaim is what Mary Magdalene proclaimed when she emerged from the darkness of her grief into the light of the presence of the risen Christ. She doesn't say Christ is risen, he is risen indeed. Instead she simply says: "I have seen the Lord." This is not a doctrine or a creed, but a first person testimony to a truth she has experienced. When we proclaim this as our truth, we point out that resurrection is not only the promise of life after death, but the assurance of the life-giving love of God that will always move away the stones which do not give life. "I have seen the Lord." insists that the ways of love will win over the ways of hate. It confirms that the truth of kindness can be heard over the din of ruthless callous, and vindictive rhetoric. "I have seen the Lord." gives witness to the fact that there is another way of being in the world--a way of being shaped by resurrection, a way that embodies all that is life-giving, a way of being that is counter-cultural. The truth of the resurrection does not depend upon our testimony, but maybe it will be more true for us if we are willing to look for the places where we can say, "I have seen the Lord." In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.