

# How Empty Was the Tomb?

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## Abstract

Although the term ‘empty tomb’ is endemic in contemporary literature, it is never used in the earliest Christian materials. The term makes little sense in the light of first-century Jerusalem tombs, which always housed multiple people. One absent body would not leave the tomb empty. The gospel narratives presuppose a large, elite tomb, with multiple loculi, and a heavy rolling stone to allow repeated access for multiple burials. The gospels therefore give precise directions about where Jesus’ body lay in this large tomb. Apologetic anxiety leads to the characterization of the tomb as ‘new’ (Matthew and John), ‘in which no one had been laid’ (Luke and John), but it is possible that the appearance of Mark’s young man ‘on the right’ is significant. The anachronistic question ‘Was the tomb empty?’ should be replaced by the accurate question, ‘How empty was the tomb?’

## Keywords

Gospels, burial, resurrection, archaeology, Jerusalem, tombs

## Why No ‘Empty Tomb’?

Whenever scholars talk about the gospel resurrection accounts, they invariably use the term ‘empty tomb’, and they generally use it without any kind of self-conscious critical reflection on its usefulness. It is, of course, shorthand for the claim that Jesus’ body was no longer in the tomb. As Mark’s young man says, ‘He is not here! See the place where they laid him’ (Mk 16.6). But Mark himself does not use the term ‘empty tomb’ to narrate this story, nor do any other early

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Christian writers, a point that rarely receives any comment in the scholarship.<sup>1</sup> The first use of the terminology appears to be as late as the fourth century, when John Chrysostom is commenting on Mt. 27.8:

*And they departed from the sepulchre with fear and joy.* Why could this be? They had seen a thing amazing, and beyond expectation, **a tomb empty**, where they had before seen him laid (Τί δήποτε; Ἐκπληκτον πρᾶγμα εἶδον καὶ παράδοξον, **τάφον κενόν**, ἔνθα πρῶτον τεθέεντα εἶδον). Therefore also he had led them to the sight, that they might become witnesses of both things, both of his tomb, and of his resurrection.<sup>2</sup>

Why does it take so long for ‘empty tomb’ terminology to find its way into Christian discourse? Why did they not think of using so obvious a descriptor? How could it be that something that is now so intuitive took so long to occur to them? The absence of the term might actually be telling. Could it be that they do not use the term because it makes little sense to talk about a first-century Jerusalem tomb as being ‘empty’? Could it be that the evangelists know something about the nature of Roman-era Jerusalem tombs that is now getting missed?

The difficulty is that contemporary historical imagination is stunted by the depiction in art, devotion and popular culture of a huge anachronism. It is imagining the wrong kind of tomb. The standard depiction of Jesus’ tomb is a single-person tomb, with a sarcophagus, or one shelf, on which Jesus’ body is laid, and which is clearly visible when the stone is rolled away. Yet there are warnings against such an anachronistic depiction even on a *prima facie* reading of the gospel burial and resurrection stories, in which characters have to be told precisely where Jesus was laid. In Mk 16.6, the young man says, ‘See the place where they laid him’. In Mt. 28.6, the angel says, ‘Come and see the place where he lay’. Characters do not know that the body has gone until they have stooped in to look (Lk. 24.12; Jn 20.5, 11) or until they have entered the tomb – ‘But when they entered, they did not find the body’ (Lk. 24.3).<sup>3</sup>

1. Carrier 2005 is an exception: ‘For Mark does not say the tomb was empty, new, or Joseph’s (15:46), and only the place where the body was put is said to have been empty on Sunday (16:5-6), not the entire tomb’ (p. 385).
2. John Chrysostom, *Homily 89* on Matthew (translation mine). See also earlier in the same homily, ‘For because it was sealed, there was no unfair dealing. But if there was no unfair dealing, and the sepulchre was found empty, it is manifest that He is risen, plainly and incontrovertibly’ (Εἰ δὲ οὐδεμία γέγονε κακουργία, εὐρηγται δὲ ὁ τάφος κενός, δῆλον ὅτι ἀνέστη σαφῶς καὶ ἀναντιρρήτως), *Homily 89*, 781. A contemporary reference to an ‘open and empty tomb’ is found in the Gospel of Nicodemus 17, which speaks of Jesus’ raising of Simeon and his two sons (νῦν δὲ οἱ μὲν τάφοι αὐτῶν ὁρῶνται ἠνεωγμένοι κενοί). Other early references to an ‘empty tomb’ include Leo the Great, *Sermon 71* and Augustine, *Tractate 120*.
3. Jn 20.1-2 might seem to be an exception here in that Mary sees that the stone has been removed from the entrance (Jn 20.1), and then proclaims to Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb’ (Jn 20.2a). But the use of the first person

When the tomb is depicted in films like *The Passion* (BBC/HBO, 2008) or *The Bible* (History Channel, 2013), there is seldom room for more than one person, and Mary Magdalene is the one chosen for the job.<sup>4</sup> Not only can she see clearly into the single-person tomb from outside, but she can see clearly out of the tomb from the place where Jesus' body had lain. The gospel narratives themselves provide no grounds for this scenario.<sup>5</sup> There is clearly plenty of room in Mark's tomb. Three women go in, and they only see the young man when they have entered the tomb, a man who is 'sitting on the right side' (Mk 16.5), as if this is the kind of scene where clear stage directions are required.<sup>6</sup> In Matthew, the angel is outside the tomb, sitting on the stone (Mt. 28.2), but he has to invite the women in before they can see that Jesus' body has gone (δεῦτε ἴδετε τὸν τόπον ὅπου ἔκειτο, 'Come and see the place where he was laid', Mt. 28.6). Luke's women 'found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body' (εὗρον δὲ τὸν λίθον ἀποκεκλισμένον ἀπὸ τοῦ μνημείου, εἰσελθοῦσαι δὲ οὐχ εὗρον τὸ σῶμα, Lk. 24.2-3). When Peter arrives at the tomb, again he is not able to see the place where Jesus' body had been laid until he stoops in to look (καὶ παρακύψας βλέπει τὰ ὀθόνια μόνα, Lk. 24.12), just like the Beloved Disciple (Jn 20.5) and Mary Magdalene (Jn 20.11) in John.

## First-Century Jerusalem Tombs

The difficulty with standard approaches to these narratives is that scholars seldom discipline their imaginations by looking at real first-century tombs in Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup> It is in some ways unsurprising given that the majority of excavations of tombs in Jerusalem have happened since 1945, many over the last 30 to 40 years, and a good number of these are simply accidental discoveries that have

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plural, 'and we don't know where they have laid him' (Jn 20.2b), shows that John is here presupposing Synoptic material that he has not narrated. Similarly, the stone having been placed at the entrance of the tomb is not narrated (Jn 19.38-42; contrast Mt. 27.60, 64, 65-66 and Mk 15.46) but presupposed (Jn 20.1), as in Luke (23.50-56; 24.2). I am grateful to Chris Kugler for the point about the stone.

4. For an exception, see the large tomb in *Killing Jesus* (dir. Christopher Menaul, 2015), which ironically is one of the few Jesus films that does not depict a resurrected Jesus.
5. Amos Kloner (1999) disagrees: 'That the tomb was small is suggested by the fact that the corpse could easily be seen from the entrance: Mary Magdalene and another woman named Mary could apparently see the body from outside', citing Mk 15.47 and Jn 20.1 (p. 29). But Mk 15.47 does not say anything about the corpse being visible from the entrance, and in 16.5-6, they have to enter the tomb in order to see where Jesus had been laid.
6. The point is not often noticed, but see Myllykoski 2002: 64: 'the women as witnesses must go inside the tomb to see clearly this spot ...'
7. Honourable exceptions include McCane 2003, Magness 2011, Evans 2003 and Smith 2014. In spite of the importance of these studies, none specifically explores how loculi tombs can effectively help with the exegesis of the verses studied in this article.

resulted from new building projects, like the discovery of the Talpiot Tombs in 1980 and 1981.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the indispensable study of Jerusalem's necropolis by Amos Kloner and Boaz Zissu appeared as recently as 2007 (Kloner and Zissu 2007), and Rachel Hachlili's definitive work on Jewish funerary customs, practices and rites was published just two years earlier (Hachlili 2005),<sup>9</sup> and New Testament scholars are still catching up.

The key point that emerges from the study of Jerusalem's necropolis is that rock-cut tombs of the kind mentioned in the gospels are always multi-person tombs.<sup>10</sup> The tombs house families. They contain multiple bodies and multiple ossuaries. They never appear to have been built to contain just one body.<sup>11</sup> Although no two tombs are identical, they are generally cut out of the limestone and often feature multiple *kokhim* (loculi), as well as benches formed around a standing pit. Some tombs also feature *arcosolia*, niches cut with a flat bottom and a curved top.<sup>12</sup>

The tomb presupposed in the gospel narratives is a large first-century rock-cut tomb from Jerusalem.<sup>13</sup> Mark speaks of a tomb that 'had been hewn out of the rock' (λελατομημένον ἐκ πέτρας, Mk 15.46; cf. Lk. 23.53), and Matthew makes Joseph the agent of the hewing (ὁ ἐλατόμησεν ἐν τῇ πέτρᾳ, Mt. 27.60), though no doubt in the same way that contemporaries speak of 'building a house' when they mean 'hiring people to build a house'. The large size of the tomb is presupposed not only in Mark's narrating of three women going in, and seeing the

8. On the excavation of these tombs, see Kloner and Gibson 2013; see further the other essays in Charlesworth 2013 and bibliography cited there.

9. Meyers 1971 is also essential reading.

10. So France 2014: 668, commenting on Mk 15.46, 'Anyone who has explored even a few of the many rock-cut tombs still accessible in the area around the Old City of Jerusalem today will be aware that the μνήμειον λελατομημένον ἐκ πέτρας is likely to have been a substantial family tomb ... rather than an individual burial place.'

11. Murphy-O'Connor 2010, summarizes, 'A careful search of all the tomb plans published by Kloner and Zissu did not bring to light any example of a tomb cut in rock for a single individual' (p. 87). Tombs with only one *kokh* are found, but in every case they still appear to be multiple-person tombs. See, for example, the tomb with three limestone ossuaries and one clay ossuary found in 'a two-room rock-cut tomb with a standing pit and a single *kokh*' documented in Aviam and Syon 2002: 171.

12. See the helpful summaries in the literature cited in note 7 above; and for details and illustrations, see Kloner and Zissu 2007, and Hachlili 2005.

13. In what follows, I hope to show how features in both the burial and the resurrection stories make sense on the assumption of a first-century rock-cut tomb in Jerusalem. Myllykoski 2002: 61-62 and 65-66 suggests that the burial story was originally independent in part because it assumes a simple burial in a loculi tomb that contrasts with the spacious, arcosolium tomb of the resurrection story. But the contrast between loculi tombs and arcosolium tombs is false – there are many tombs that have both loculi and arcosolia. See, for example, the Talpiot Tomb, above note 8. Nor are arcosolium tombs intrinsically more spacious and ornate than loculi tombs. See, for example, Hachlili 2005: 70.

young man sitting on the right hand side (see above), but also in the ‘rolling’ of the stone to and from the door of the tomb (Mk 15.46, *καὶ προσεκύλισεν λίθον ἐπὶ τὴν θύραν τοῦ μνημείου*; cf. Mt. 27.60; Mk 16.3, *Τίς ἀποκυλίσει ἡμῖν τὸν λίθον ἐκ τῆς θύρας τοῦ μνημείου*; cf. Mt. 28.2; cf. Lk. 24.2).<sup>14</sup> The verbs used (*ἀποκυλίω* and *προσκυλίω*) suggest the kind of round rolling stone that is found in a number of tombs dating from this period (Hachlili 2005: 62-65), but which is far less common than other kinds of blocking slabs.<sup>15</sup> A key point about the utility of a rolling stone is frequently missed when Jesus’ tomb is imagined as a single-person tomb, with one body in, and one body out. The purpose of a rolling stone was that it facilitated relatively easy repeated access to a tomb, so that new bodies could be buried, and bones put into ossuaries.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the stone is large and heavy (Mk 16.4, *ἦν γὰρ μέγας σφόδρα*), of the kind that would close a huge tomb.<sup>17</sup> Joseph of Arimathea’s tomb, as it is depicted in the gospels, is clearly a large family tomb.

Rock-cut tombs like this are of course elite tombs, and it might be thought unlikely that an itinerant like Jesus, who became an executed criminal, would be interred in a high-status place.<sup>18</sup> The point sounds like a good one, but it loses at least some of its force when we remember that our only archaeological evidence

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14. Only John does not use verbs of ‘rolling’. In Jn 20.1, Mary Magdalene sees that the stone has been removed, *καὶ βλέπει τὸν λίθον ἡρμένον ἐκ τοῦ μνημείου*.
15. Kloner 1999: 23, ‘Of the more than 900 burial caves from the Second Temple period found in and around Jerusalem, only four are known to have used round (disk-shaped) blocking stones.’ He argues that Jesus’ tomb was blocked with a square stone, adding ‘[W]e must remember that “rolled” is a translation of the Greek word *kulio*, which can also mean “dislodge,” “move back,” or simply “move”’ (p. 28). But BDAG only gives ‘roll away’ for *ἀποκυλίω* and ‘roll (up to)’ for *προσκυλίω*, and Kloner does not provide any counter-examples. See also von Wahlde 2015: 16, arguing for the more common kind of holding stone ‘like a mushroom cap or a champagne cork on its side’.
16. Kloner and Zissu 2007: 55, ‘The round stone is shaped like an upper millstone but is smooth on both sides, with no hole going through. This stone ensured excellent closure of the cave and made it possible to reopen the cave easily for further burials’ (though Kloner himself argues implausibly that the gospels are not depicting a rolling stone – see previous note).
17. Note again Kloner and Zissu 2007: 55, ‘They were large and heavy, sometimes weighing hundreds of kilograms ... Round stones were used to close large, complex burial systems.’
18. John Dominic Crossan (1991: 391 and 1995: 188) doubts that Jesus was buried at all. Crossan’s case seems weak in the light of the one genuinely early piece of data we have, *that he was buried* (*ὅτι ἐτάφη*, 1 Cor. 15.4), a note that is among those that Paul has himself received and handed on ‘as of first importance’ (*παρέδωκα γὰρ ὑμῖν ἐν πρώτοις, ὃ καὶ παρέλαβον*, 1 Cor. 15.3) in a text that mentions Peter, James and the Twelve (1 Cor. 15.5, 7). Paul’s vanilla statement does not of course tell us anything about the type of burial imagined, but it is beyond reasonable doubt that burial was a key element in the earliest Christian preaching, so much so that it becomes a part of Paul’s theological reflection (Rom. 6.4, *συνετάφημεν οὖν αὐτῷ διὰ τοῦ βαπτίσματος εἰς τὸν θάνατον...*).

of a crucifixion victim, Yehohanan,<sup>19</sup> was discovered in a similarly elite family tomb hewn from the rock, at Giv‘at ha-Mivtar.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, speculation about the historical Jesus’ burial should not discourage us from exploring the plausibility of the pictures painted by the evangelists, which is the subject of discussion here. Whatever happened to the body of the historical Jesus, the narratives of his burial and resurrection are worth exploring in their own right. And it is clear that whatever happened to Jesus, the evangelists are depicting an elite tomb, and in different ways they take pains to show the plausibility of this scenario by underlining that Joseph was a person of status. In Mark, he is *εὐσχήμων βουλευτής* (‘a respected councillor’, Mk 15.43; cf. Lk. 23.50), who has direct access to the governor Pilate (Mk 15.43-5); in Matthew he is a ‘rich man’ (*ἀνθρῶπος πλούσιος*, Mt. 27.57).<sup>21</sup>

## **A ‘New Tomb’**

If, though, the Synoptics and John appear to be setting their stories in realistic first-century tombs in Jerusalem, family tombs with benches, loculi and room for multiple bodies, bones and ossuaries, this could help to answer the question with which this article began: Why do early Christian writers never use the term contemporary scholars love so much, ‘the empty tomb’? In a tomb full of bodies and bones, it would make little sense to talk about the tomb as ‘empty’. And if Jesus were buried in a typical rock-cut family tomb, there would have been questions about how anyone could be sure that his body was not there. It is possible that Mark’s statements about the precise location of Jesus’ body (15.47, ‘they saw where it was laid’; 16.6, ‘Behold the place where they laid him’) reflect this

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19. See the discussion in Evans 2003: 99-103, and the literature cited there. Evans’s statement that ‘Neither Yehohanan nor Jesus of Nazareth was buried honourably’ (p. 101), however, may be overconfident. There is nothing in either case that necessitates the view that these burials were shameful. We do not know that ‘their bodies would have been barred from interment in their respective family crypts’ (p. 101) or that ‘their bodies would have been placed in a crypt reserved for executed criminals’ (p. 101). Since both were victims of Roman crucifixion, it is not necessary to assume that Jewish leaders were complicit; for all we know, Yehohanan’s death was regarded as unjust, like other Roman crucifixions of Jews. And Joseph of Arimathea is remembered in our earliest source, Mark, as a ‘respected councillor’ (*εὐσχήμων βουλευτής*, Mk 15.43), with no suggestion that he was burying Jesus only out of duty. The fact that the gospels resist the obvious text Isa. 53.9, ‘he made his grave with the wicked’, may itself be evidence against Jesus’ burial in a criminal’s tomb (cf. Allison 2006: 363 n. 643). See also the helpful comments on this point in Magness 2005: 141 and 143-45.
20. On the tombs, which can get forgotten in the light of scholarly interest in the crucified Yehohanan, see Tzaferis 1970.
21. Cf. Magness 2005: 148-49, concluding with the statement, ‘The source(s) of these accounts were familiar with how wealthy Jews living in Jerusalem during the time of Jesus disposed of their dead’.

concern. The evangelist is making clear that Mary, Mary and Salome<sup>22</sup> were not confused – they had seen where the body was laid, and they saw now that it was absent.

It is easy to imagine early Christians being anxious about the possibility of confusion over the location of Jesus' body. Matthew's eagerness to counter rumours about Jesus' body being stolen by the disciples is clear (Mt. 27.62-66; 28.11-14), and the evangelist's redaction of Mark may show similar prescience about potentially troubling issues for later Christian orthodoxy:

Mt. 27.59-60	Mk 15.46
<p>καὶ λαβὼν τὸ σῶμα ὁ Ἰωσήφ ἐνετύλιξεν αὐτὸ σινδόνι καθαρᾷ, <sup>60</sup> καὶ ἔθηκεν αὐτὸ ἐν τῷ <b>καινῷ</b> αὐτοῦ μνημείῳ ὃ ἐλατόμησεν ἐν τῇ πέτρᾳ.</p> <p>And having taken the body, Joseph wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own <b>new</b> tomb, which he had hewn in the rock.</p>	<p>καὶ ἀγοράσας σινδὸνα καθελῶν αὐτὸν ἐνείλησεν τῇ σινδόνι καὶ ἔθηκεν αὐτὸν ἐν μνημείῳ ὃ ἦν λελατομημένον ἐκ πέτρας.</p> <p>And having bought a linen cloth, and having taken him down, he wrapped him in the linen cloth, and laid him in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock.</p>

As often in Matthew, a minor redaction makes a major contribution. If the tomb was new, then there could be no confusion about the absence of Jesus' body. Joseph has placed the body in his own new tomb, so that once Jesus' body is absent, there can be no other bodies or bones present.<sup>23</sup>

The suggestion here is that Matthew's 'new' tomb emerges not from some kind of theological adornment, as if an unsullied tomb is the only appropriate home for Jesus' body in the first Easter weekend, but from the apologetic impetus that is so marked a feature of his narrative. Could Jesus' body have been stolen? No, there were soldiers stationed at the tomb. Could there have been

22. Mk 15.47 mentions Mary Magdalene and Mary the Mother of James, but 16.6 is addressed to Mary Magdalene, Mary the Mother of James and Salome (16.1, cf. 15.40).

23. The idea that the 'new tomb' redaction comes from a marked apologetic concern is occasionally countenanced, but it is never developed. See, for example, Casey 2011: 452, 'Matthew and Luke excluded the possibility that the women misinterpreted an empty space more effectively with their claims that the tomb was new or that no one had been laid in it (Mt. 27.60; Lk. 23.53)'; and Brown 2007, 'Just as in the later Gospels the empty-tomb account shows the influence of apologetics countering adversaries' arguments against the resurrection, so also the burial account. Jesus' body could not have become confused with another body in the tomb and then lost, for this was a new tomb' (p. 1253).

some kind of confusion between Jesus' body and others' bodies in the tomb? No, this was a 'new tomb'.<sup>24</sup>

The very mention of the 'new tomb' presupposes a typical first-century Jerusalem family tomb hewn from the limestone.<sup>25</sup> If every tomb were a single-person tomb, then every tomb would be a new tomb. The note that it was a 'new tomb' suggests something unusual, something worth the special remark.<sup>26</sup> But Matthew's revealing redaction of Mark still raises questions. How new is 'new'? Is this 'new' as in 'New Labour' or 'the new perspective on Paul' or New College, Oxford? How recently should the reader imagine that Joseph had hewn the tomb from the rock? Chiselling a tomb into the rock is not something that one does overnight. Shimon Gibson estimates that it would take at least 50 days.<sup>27</sup> Did Joseph have relatives at death's door? Is that why he cut a new tomb into the rock?<sup>28</sup> Even a 'new' tomb could have bodies in it, and Matthew's redaction of Mark keeps open the possibility that Grandma Joan of Arimathea was lying on one of the benches. However Matthew imagines the scene, even talk about a 'new' tomb may not be enough. Luke now clarifies that in fact it was a virgin tomb, one in which 'no one had ever been laid':<sup>29</sup>

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24. Although theological explanations of the new tomb were widespread in the early centuries, the apologetic explanation is also found, e.g. Origen, *Theophany* 3.61: 'The cave itself was a cave which had recently been hewn out, a cave that had now been cut out in a rock and which had experienced the reception of no other body ... For it is astonishing to see even this rock, standing out erect and alone in a level land, and having only one cavern within it; lest, had there been many, the miracle of him who overcame death should have been obscured'. Although Origen is apparently thinking more in terms of caves and caverns than in terms of multiple loculi within an individual tomb, the apologetic anxiety about the wrong body seems to be present.
25. Contrast Jodie Magness's suggestion that 'The "new" tomb mentioned by Matthew probably refers to a previously unused loculus' (Magness 2011: 170).
26. I am grateful to Viola Goodacre for this point.
27. From an unpublished paper quoted in Magness 2011: 157. On the process of hewing caves, see Kloner and Zissu 2007: 19-20.
28. Cf. Gibson 2009: 130: 'The fact that Joseph's tomb was *newly-cut* ... leads us to infer that his family had not been living in Jerusalem for very long and that his older relatives were buried in the village or town of Arimathea, which explains why his tomb did not house previously deceased members of the family.'
29. I am presupposing here that Luke is familiar with Matthew's redaction of Mark, a position for which I have argued in several publications (e.g., Goodacre 2002). A similar point could be made on the Two-Source Theory, according to which Luke could have had the same apologetic anxiety about Mark's tomb, though independently of Matthew, but given the cluster of other Matthew-Luke agreements against Mark in the Burial and Resurrection stories, this is unlikely. John further complicates any scenario where Luke is independent of Matthew, and John of all three (see n. 32).



Mt. 27.59-60	Mk 15.46	Lk. 23.53
καὶ λαβὼν τὸ σῶμα ὁ Ἰωσήφ ἐνετύλιξεν αὐτὸ σινδόνι καθαρᾷ, <sup>60</sup> καὶ ἔθηκεν αὐτὸ ἐν τῷ <u>καινῷ</u> αὐτοῦ μνημείῳ ὃ ἐλατόμησεν ἐν τῇ πέτρᾳ.  And having taken the body, Joseph wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own <u>new</u> tomb, which he had hewn in the rock.	καὶ ἀγοράσας σινδὸνα καθελὼν αὐτὸν ἐνείλησεν τῇ σινδόνι καὶ ἔθηκεν αὐτὸν ἐν μνημείῳ ὃ ἦν λελατομημένον ἐκ πέτρας. And having bought a linen cloth, and having taken him down, he wrapped him in the linen cloth, and laid him in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock.	καὶ καθελὼν ἐνετύλιξεν αὐτὸ σινδόνι, καὶ ἔθηκεν αὐτὸν ἐν μνήματι λαξευτῷ <u>οὐ οὐκ ἦν οὐδεὶς οὐπω κείμενος.</u>  And having taken it down, he wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb <b>in which no one had ever been laid</b>

Luke's redaction makes clear that the tomb was not just new, but so new that Jesus was its first occupant.

The fresh note about the new tomb is soon embedded in the tradition, and as often with agreements between Matthew and Luke against Mark, this one is taken over by John, with both Matthew's wording that the tomb is 'new',<sup>30</sup> and Luke's that no one had ever been laid in it:<sup>31</sup>

Mt. 27.59-60	Lk. 23.53	Jn 19.41
καὶ λαβὼν τὸ σῶμα ὁ Ἰωσήφ ἐνετύλιξεν αὐτὸ σινδόνι καθαρᾷ, <sup>60</sup> καὶ ἔθηκεν αὐτὸ ἐν	καὶ καθελὼν ἐνετύλιξεν αὐτὸ σινδόνι, καὶ ἔθηκεν αὐτὸν ἐν	ἦν δὲ ἐν τῷ τόπῳ ὅπου ἐσταυρώθη κήπος, καὶ ἐν τῷ κήπῳ

30. There is a fascinating variant in Jn 19.41 that reads *μνημειον κεινον* (D<sup>s</sup> N PC) rather than *μνημειον καινον*. Murphy-O'Connor 2008 says that this has 'a much better chance of being original' (p. 452), but the manuscript attestation is weak.

31. Brown 2007: 1253 maintains the independence of Luke from Matthew and John from both by suggesting that they are 'influenced by a developing Joseph tradition', but this pays no attention to the cluster of agreements between Matthew and Luke in the burial and resurrection stories, as well as the cluster of agreements between John and the Synoptics. It is always possible to avoid the force of extant literary agreements by appealing to unseen oral traditions, but the plausibility of the appeal is diminished by the relatively minor, redactional, literary nature of Matthew's differences from Mark.

τῷ καινῷ αὐτοῦ μνημείῳ	μνήματι λαξευτῷ οὐ οὐκ	μνημεῖον καινόν, ἐν ᾧ
ὁ ἐλατόμησεν ἐν τῇ πέτρᾳ. And having taken the body, Joseph wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own <b>new</b> tomb, which he had hewn in the rock.	ἣν οὐδεὶς οὐπώ κείμενος. And having taken it down, he wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb in <u>which no one had ever been laid.</u>	οὐδέπω οὐδεὶς ἦν τεθειμένος Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a <b>new</b> tomb <u>in which no one had ever been laid.</u>

As often, the agreement between Matthew and Luke appears also in John, and the most straightforward explanation is that John has taken the detail over from the Synoptics.<sup>32</sup> John appears to have combined the details from Matthew and Luke, taking Matthew's 'new' and Luke's 'in which no one had ever been laid', and the pleonasm (Curtis 1972: 443-44),<sup>33</sup> alongside the 'ugly collocation of sounds' (Barrett 1978: 560), makes literary knowledge more plausible than independent access to oral tradition.

### 'Seeking the Living among the Dead'

The presence, though, of the insistent note that this was a new tomb (Matthew and John), in which no one had ever been laid (Luke and John), only serves to draw attention to the lack of this motif in Mark, and this raises an important question. Could it be that the earliest gospel account of the resurrection is not a story about an 'empty tomb' at all? If multi-person tombs are the norm in Jerusalem, and if the gospels are presupposing the norm, then it could be that Mark's story is a story about Jesus' burial in a tomb in which other corpses are found, as well as bones in ossuaries, along with other grave goods, and this might explain why Mark is so particular about the precise location of Jesus' body. Mary Magdalene and Mary do not simply see Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. They see

32. On the agreements between John and the Synoptics in the Passion Narratives, see Borgen 2014: 105-107. The difficulty of Matthew-Luke agreements against Mark appearing in John is, however, seldom discussed. Stein 1992 helpfully gathers together a lot of the evidence, but he assumes Luke's independence from Matthew and uses agreements from John to argue for an origin in oral tradition. The difficulty with this explanation is that it does not address the secondary, minor, literary, redactional nature of many of the agreements. Stein discusses this example on p. 500.

33. Although Curtis sees Matthew and Luke as representing 'independent versions of a current belief regarding the tomb' (1972: 443), he rightly notes that in John 'the pleonasm suggests a combination of sources' (p. 443).

where the body was laid (ἐθεώρουν ποῦ τέθεται, 15.47). The young man does not simply assert that Jesus' body has gone; he draws attention to *the place where they laid him* (ἴδε ὁ τόπος ὅπου ἔθηκαν αὐτόν, 16.6). Is Mark drawing attention to these precise locations in order to make clear there was no confusion about which body was which?

The interesting and rarely mentioned possibility that there were other bodies in the tomb may be echoed in the angels' question in Lk. 24.5, Τί ζητεῖτε τὸν ζῶντα μετὰ τῶν νεκρῶν; It is usually translated with a nice poetic ring, 'Why do you seek the living among the dead',<sup>34</sup> but it would be more precise to translate it, 'Why are you looking for the living one among dead people?' Is the question purely a Lukan rhetorical flourish, or is it a tacit admission that the tomb was not, after all, empty of corpses? One way of focusing the issue that still takes account of the idea in Matthew, Luke and John that the tomb was new is to reflect on the fate of the two bandits who were crucified with Jesus (Mk 15.27, 32; Mt. 27.38, 44; Lk. 23.33, 39-43; Jn 19.18; Gos. Pet. 10.38-39 and 13.55-57). Were these men buried? If so, where, and by whom?<sup>35</sup> Was it in the same tomb with Jesus? Was one of them with Jesus not only 'this day in paradise' but also that evening in the tomb?<sup>36</sup>

The historical possibility of this unnarrated element may point to Matthew's acuity. Matthew may see the possible danger of stories about corpse confusion and mistaken identity, in which case Luke and John were wise to this too. But there is one intriguing detail in Mark that is worth exploring. Why does the narrator take care to tell the reader that Mary, Mary and Salome saw the young man 'sitting on the right side' (εἶδον νεανίσκον καθήμενον ἐν τοῖς δεξιοῖς, Mk 16.5)? For Jerome Murphy O'Connor, the detail is Markan redaction, introducing 'a developed Christological dimension' (Murphy-O'Connor 2010: 63).<sup>37</sup> For Joel Marcus, it represents 'a position traditionally associated with power, victory, and auspiciousness' (Marcus 2009: 565). There is a more practical possibility, however, about the curious stage direction, a possibility that may hint that Mark too, like Matthew, Luke and John, is depicting a new tomb. There is some evidence

34. It is already 'Why seek ye the living among the dead?' in the KJV.

35. Grass (1956: 180) is one of the first to suggest Jesus was buried with the two bandits, but in criminals' trench graves, and not in Joseph's tomb. See also Myllykoski 1991-94: II, 104.

36. One of the few scholars even to raise the question is Allison 2006: 363, n. 643: 'Did Joseph, despite the silence of our sources, also bury the two criminals crucified with Jesus? If so, why did the church not introduce Isa 53:9 ("made his grave with the wicked") into the story? If not, why did Joseph bury only Jesus? Was he sympathetic after all – criminals were probably not buried in caves – or were three different members of the Sanhedrin responsible for three different burials?'

37. Murphy-O'Connor draws attention to Ps. 110.1, Mt. 26.64 and Acts 2.33-34, but this is weak. These texts speak about a figure (the Son of Man for Matthew and Luke) sitting on the right hand of God's throne in heaven, not a young man standing inside a tomb.

that the hewing of loculi in tombs began on the right of the tomb's entrance and proceeded anti-clockwise through the chamber. Rachel Hachlili claims that 'After the chamber and the standing pit were hewn, the loculi were cut in a counterclockwise direction, from right to left' (Hachlili 2005: 56).<sup>38</sup> She suggests also that 'The process of burial and reburial was evidently also followed from right to left' (Hachlili 2005: 56).

It is a tantalizing detail. Is Mark actually implying that this is a new tomb? Did Matthew infer that this was a new tomb because of Mark's minor detail? It is impossible to be certain, and the detail may in the end be no more significant than the greenness of the grass in Mk 6.39 or the nakedness of the young man in 14.52, but the possibility is present that Mark is presupposing not a tomb full of bodies and bones, and instead, at most, only a few fresh corpses, buried where the young man is sitting, 'on the right'.

However this question is resolved, it seems clear that there are several important ways in which the gospel burial and resurrection stories make better sense when they are read in the context of real Second Temple Judaeen tombs. The single-person tomb of popular Christian culture is grounded in devotion and not history. And once one looks instead at history, a plausible picture can be painted of how the gospel tradition evolved. Mark's narrative is attempting to make clear, perhaps in response to sceptics, that however many bodies were in the tomb, the women saw where Jesus was laid, and they saw that his body had gone. Matthew, anxious about the possibility that Jesus' body was confused with other bodies, makes the tomb a 'new tomb'. The reader can now imagine that Jesus' body was the first body in this tomb. Luke clarifies further. After all, even new tombs might contain several bodies. This was a tomb in which 'no one had ever been laid'. John combines the two – this is a new tomb, in which no one had been laid.

The difficulty, of course, with looking at the tomb stories is that the curious scholar cannot help but be interested in what lies behind the gospel narratives, in

38. Hachlili's evidence is from two tombs in Jericho. It is clear in Tomb D3 that *Kokh* 6, at the left of the entrance, was hewn after the other five *kokhim*; see Hachlili and Killebrew 1999: 15-18. The recently excavated (2008) Cave No. 3 in the Sanhedriya neighbourhood in Jerusalem may show the same phenomenon of anti-clockwise hewing of a tomb. In Burial Chamber B, an arcosolium and two *kokhim* are hewn in the eastern wall, to the right of the entrance, and an arcosolium is incised in the northern wall, facing the entrance, but it was never hewn; there is nothing on the western wall, to the left of the entrance. See Baruch and Eirikh-Rose (2014), but note that Fig. 5 incorrectly shows the incised arcosolium on the western wall rather than the northern wall. However, the still more recently excavated (2009) Tomb of Alexa Son of Shalom in Israel Aharoni Street, Jerusalem, may provide evidence of a tomb that was hewn in a clockwise direction. The entrance to the tomb is on its north wall, and the tomb has three *kokhim* to the left of the entrance, on the eastern wall, with two on the southern wall facing the entrance and one on the western wall to the right of the entrance. On the same wall on the west side, an outline of a further *kokh* is incised, but it has not been hewn. See Baruch, Levi and Reich 2011: 97.

what is ultimately unknowable to the historian. Even if the evangelists are accurately reflecting first-century realities, judgments about the historicity of the narratives, especially Mark's, vary wildly. Perhaps these reflections will at least help with some reframing of the question. The early Christians did not talk about 'an empty tomb' because the concept of an 'an empty tomb' did not make a lot of sense given the complexities of real first-century multi-person tombs, with their bodies, bones, ossuaries and grave goods. But how we frame the question will depend on whether or not we are optimists or pessimists about the possibilities of retrieving information about the historical Jesus. From now on, perhaps we will have to ask, was the tomb half empty or half full?<sup>39</sup>

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39. This is a revised version of a paper that was presented at the British New Testament Conference, St Mary's University, Twickenham, on 6 September 2018, under the title 'Of Tombs and Texts: Jerusalem's Necropolis and the Burial of Jesus'. I am grateful also to members of the New Testament Seminar at Duke University for their feedback on a revised version of this paper in June 2020.

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