# The Case of the Empty Tomb

Mark 16:1-8 1 Corinthians 15:13-19

By Dr. James M. Baird

I am going to ask you to open your Bibles to the last chapter of the book of Mark, the Gospel of Mark, the 16th chapter of the Gospel of Mark. The sermon topic is "The Case of the Empty Tomb," and if you will, I am going to ask you to participate in this message using your imagination. If you will, let me suggest that you would be the jury–you would be the jury in this case and, if you will, think with me. Now these are the facts of the case. There was a man, Jesus of Nazareth, who claimed to be God and the Messiah. Second fact, He died on a cross. These first two facts are basically uncontested. He claimed to be God and the Messiah; He died on a cross. The third fact is on the third day the tomb was empty. Now that is the question that is contested, and that is what this case is all about. The claim is that He rose from the dead, bodily, that He came back to life.

Now, in certain cases, the importance of the case is well known publicly, and I suggest to you that this is a very important case to you and to all mankind. First of all, for this purpose: Is this a moral world or is this an unjust world? When He came to this world, and regardless of what you think about His life, He was a good man. Even unbelievers will say He was the best of men as evidenced by His life. Yet He died like a common criminal. A book I read this week said, "He died like a dog." Is that what life is all about? If it is so, and there is no such thing as justice or morality and there is no source of morality on this earth, if the best men are to be put to instruments of torture.

There is a second great importance and that is this. It is commonly said in this world that "power comes only out of the barrel of a gun," which many believe, or "through money" or "through political power" or certain social institutions. Other than that, there is no power. And so we are in a power hungry world, unless...if there was a true empty tomb, then power has come from outside this world. Not only has a revelation of morality come from Him but power to do something in this world, even the raising of the dead! That's the question. Is there no power except the power that men generate? Or can God transcend time and space?

There is a third great importance and it goes like this, if He did not rise from the dead, we are still in our sins; there never was a Messiah on the cross; there is no sure hope that you'll ever go beyond the grave; and there certainly is no hope for anybody who has lived before us. The whole story of life after death has been

questioned. That's the importance of the case. Now where do we get the facts of this case? The facts of this case are found as we read the Scripture. May I read to you the Scripture as it is recorded in the word of God, first of all in the Gospel of Mark chapter 16, beginning verse 1?

#### Mark 16:1-8:

1 And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had bought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint Him. 2 And very early in the morning the first day of the week, they came unto the sepulcher at the rising of the sun. 3 And they said among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulcher? 4 And when they looked, they saw that the stone was rolled away: for it was very great. 5 And entering into the sepulcher, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a long white garment; and they were affrighted. 6 And he saith unto them,

By the way, the other accounts tell us that he was an angel.

"Be not affrighted: Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: He is risen; He is not here: behold the place where they laid Him. 7 But go your way, tell His disciples and Peter that He goeth before you into Galilee: there shall ye see Him, as He said unto you." 8 And they went out quickly, and fled from the sepulcher; for they trembled and were amazed: neither said they any thing to any man; for they were afraid.

They kept their silence for a while. Now turn, if you will, in your Bibles to the text that I had appointed in the bulletin and that is to the epistle 1 Corinthians, 1 Corinthians chapter 15. 1 Corinthians is written after the life, death, and resurrection of Christ and it is written within a period of 15 to 20 years after His death and resurrection. Chapter 15, 1 Corinthians and beginning to read in verse 13:

### 1 Corinthians 15:13-19:

13 But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen: 14 And if Christ be not risen, then *is* our preaching vain, and your faith *is* also vain. 15 Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ: whom He raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not. 16 For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised: 17 And if Christ be not raised, your faith *is* vain; ye are yet in your sins. 18 Then they also which are fallen asleep (Dr. Baird, or they which are dead) in Christ are perished. 19 If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. *God give us some understanding of His word.* 

#### I. The facts of the case

Now the facts of the case again are that there was Christ; He was crucified; He was raised from the dead. Some will say, "Well you have already lost me, preacher, because you see, I don't believe in your Bible. I don't believe in any of the Bible and particularly the New Testament. So you've lost your case already."

There is a rule that historians always deal with and it goes like this: If you disagree with the excepted facts of history, the burden of proof is on you, the disagreer, to prove your case. It is a generally accepted fact of history, that Christ was crucified and raised from the dead.

Consider three men who are not Christians but who acknowledge the facts of history and who affirm the Bible. The first one is a Jewish Historian, Josephus, who lived in the day of Christ and is generally regarded as the greatest historian of his day. Josephus said, "There was Jesus of Nazareth. He was crucified on the cross. He did claim to be the Messiah. His people believed that He arose from the dead on the third day, and they go the world round preaching it." He said, "I cannot explain it. I simply affirm those facts." The second historian was the greatest Roman historian of that day, who lived right immediately after Josephus; his name was Tacitus. Tacitus said the exact same things that Josephus did, "I do not believe but these are the facts." He claimed, "His people believe that He arose from the dead. They go around the world. They will give their life rather than deny the fact that He did not rise from the dead." And those two historians lived within the lifetime of those who claimed that they saw the risen Savior. There is a third witness that I bring in terms of affirming the facts. Now this is one who lives in our day, his name is Nelson Glueck. Nelson Glueck is the minister of archaeology in the modern state of Israel. He is an archaeologist. He makes this claim, he says, 'Whenever there is in an archaeological dig a disagreement with somebody's opinion, some scholar's opinion, as to where we are to dig to establish some ancient fact and they disagree with the Bible, either the Old or the New Testament; in every case we have discovered that the Bible is right and the scholars are wrong"...in every case, historically. Glueck will say that the greatest historian in the day of Jesus Christ was the man who wrote the third gospel. His name is Luke and he was a doctor. The burden of proof, historically, is on any man who says, "The generally accepted facts of history, I disagree with." Now how, therefore, would anybody believe that Christ did not rise from the dead?

At a previous pastorate, I lived, literally, within a stones throw of a great university in the South. I got into some contact, some pleasant and some not-so-pleasant at times, with a certain group of people within the university. One of them was in the school of philosophy, a very brilliant man. Yesterday in the mail I received something from one of my former assistant, who had written something in the newspaper about prayer in the public school. And now this is his reply. He's a philosopher at the university. I am going to read to you just a few

paragraphs but here's a paragraph that he writes, "Why does religion cause all this misery?" He goes on to mention Northern Ireland, the middle East with the Arabs and the Jews. His suggestion is that all misery in the world results from religion. "Why does religion cause all this misery? Because religion is inherently evil. Religion is inherently evil because religion is fundamentally anti-rational. Indeed, religion is nothing more than superstition." And then in the end, he writes, "Moral values do not come from God. This is not merely my personal opinion; it is an established philosophical fact, and virtually any professional philosopher in the world will confirm that this has been established beyond any doubt." There are many people who will say that we as Christians somehow have a blind, superstitious faith and because of that we are inherently evil. The implication is that Christians do not think, that they refuse to face up to facts, and they also will indicate it appears as though Christians have never had what is called "a doubt" about this fantastic, unbelievable story that they learned in Sunday school.

# II. Arguments against the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ

## Theory #1: Self-delusion

A man like that philosopher will say there are answers to your case of Christ rising from the dead, and they give four different answers in an attempt to prove that the generally excepted facts of Christianity are wrong about the resurrection. And the first answer goes like this: it is the question of delusion. You see, the mind of man is very strange. If a man so in anticipation wants a certain event to occur, if he feels strongly enough about that event, if in fact that event does not occur in history, but if he wants it to occur in history so much, then his mind can literally be deluded or unbalanced to the fact where he really believes that it occurred. This happens, by the way, not altogether infrequently. And so the suggestion is that the disciples literally deluded themselves. They wanted it to happen so bad that they went around and therefore claimed that. By the way, this is very similar to the use of drugs. Drugs is called "a mind bender." A chemical can be taken so that the facts out there never change but my mind changes from within. That's what chemicals will do for you, that same affect. That's called "hallucination." Delusion is no drug. And so the explanation is given that the disciples simply deluded themselves.

Now, here is the problem with that theory. As we read the Scripture we understand that the disciples had exactly the opposite attitude. For instance, there is one who is called "Doubting Thomas." A week after the resurrection he was still saying, "I don't believe it. You'll have to prove it to me." On Resurrection Sunday, no disciple was at the tomb; in fact, some of them were already on their way leaving Jerusalem. The only people who approached the tomb were some women, and they came only to anoint again the body in its mummification stage. They had all kinds of problems with, "How are we going to get in?" because of the stone. "When they saw the empty tomb," the Bible says, "they were

astonished." When they finally went back and told some of the apostles, the apostles said, 'That sounds like old wives' tales.' They finally induced two of them to come look. John and Peter...they saw the empty tomb and went away perplexed, couldn't understand. The facts of the case are these: The apostles, instead of anticipation, were totally taken by surprise on Easter Sunday. They didn't believe it, and had a very difficult time accepting the proof. There was even one, Thomas, who said, 'I have to put my finger into the holes of His hands before I'll believe.' Let me ask you, jury, How would you vote if that was the argument, self-delusion? Just as a rational man, would you accept that as an explanation of the empty tomb?

## **Theory #2: Spiritualism**

Well, there's another argument. The second argument is the argument that goes under the heading of spiritualism. Spiritualism is this: it is possible for Christians to have some kind of a relationship with Christ after His death, and it is based upon the fact that there is a contact made by a medium, and the medium actually allows you to make a contact with the dead. Not very many years ago, one of the most famous bishops in the Protestant church in the United States had a son who died at the age of 21. This bishop then believed that he began to make contact with his son, and he fully entered into the whole question of spiritualism. And he himself, the bishop, in a few years would die in a most mysterious way, right outside of Jerusalem, but he was absolutely convinced that this was the explanation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, that you have life after death and you can have a relationship through a medium with the dead.

Now here are the problems with that explanation: Number one, the Bible teaches in the Old Testament that that is an evil practice and don't ever get involved in it. It is not that it is untrue, because there are spirits in this world other than the Holy Spirit. And it is an evil, ungodly practice.

There are other problems as well. After the resurrection of Christ, for a little over a month, Christ appeared to His disciples, eleven different occasions. The first occasion, when they are all together, is on the first Easter in the Upper Room, that night when they are gathered in a room together and He comes to them. That meets all the qualification for a sŭance but the other ten do not. For instance, He walks with two of them a distance of 8 to 11 miles to a village called Emmaus on Easter Day. I have ridden over that distance and it's up and down hill. It's in a mountainous area all in the open. Is that a sŭance? Also He met them at the Sea of Galilee and He cooked breakfast and He ate fish with them. Is that spiritualism? Finally, he met with 500 of them in a public situation, out in the open, 500. Now there are far more than 500 people who are gathered here this morning. I want to tell you, in a group of 500 people, there will be some who are so pre-disposed that they will believe. I don't know why it is, but they never question. They seem to have a disposition to believe. There are some who are cynical and who will never believe. Count me as one of them. That's my nature.

You couldn't get 500 people together out in a public place and believe that in a spirit medium situation, that all 500 of them, as the book of Corinthians says, "saw Him and believed that He was risen from the dead." In the light of the answer of spiritualism, that He died and the only way He's ever contacted the living is through a spirit medium, does that line up with the facts? Especially with One who eats fish? How vote you, jury? Would you accept that in lieu of the generally recorded facts of history?

## Theory #3: the Swoon Theory There's a third explanation.

The third explanation is called "the Swoon Theory." The Swoon Theory is, that it appeared as though He died on the cross but He really didn't die on that cross. And when they put Him into the tomb, during the Saturday, He revived Himself and He moved the stone away that night, and He secreted Himself away. And then on Sunday He presents Himself as One who had risen from the dead, when in fact He had not risen from the dead, He had only "swooned" on the cross. And it is literally called "the Swoon Theory." Now, lest you think that I am making this up as kind of a wild thing, *Time Magazine* had an article within the last ten years. A professor in Britain presented this as an explanation for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That book was on the best 10 sellers of *Time Magazine's* list of non-fiction. It is a generally accepted concept. The idea would go like this: There are many people in our day who are declared clinically dead and come alive; that is the explanation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Now here are the problems with that theory, or explanation to the empty tomb. Number 1, on the day that Jesus Christ was to be crucified, He was scourged by the Romans. Now scourging is done with a whip with many thongs, and at the end of a thong would be a lead pellet the size of a marble. When one, and Jesus Christ, by the way, received every kind of an abuse, far beyond a normal criminal. When they were through with Him, His back was cut to ribbons, right to the bone. Law required that when there was a scourging that there would be a day in which one would be able to recover, but not so with Jesus Christ because of the press of the time of the coming Sabbath on Saturday; so much so that the scourging occurred leaving him half-dead; then the cross was placed on his back. And that's why, while there were three being brought through the streets carrying their crosses to Calvary, He was the only one who collapsed. He was half-dead already. That's when they got Simon of Cyrene to come and carry that cross. Then on that cross, He is nailed to the cross through palms and through feet.

I know this sounds strange, but in a certain country, within the last decade, a man trying to visualize and express to a group of people the death of Jesus Christ on the cross allowed himself to be crucified. You see you can put nails right through the palms of your hands and through your ankles. He literally was nailed to a cross and then the cross was put up into place. He stayed on the cross 3 minutes then demanded to be brought down, and in mercy they brought

him down. Crucifixion on a cross is the most cruel form of death. Our Catechism puts it like this, "It was a painful and shameful death." It has to do with the fluids in the lungs and drawing yourself up for a breath of air. You both suffocate and literally die on the cross through a combination of things. That's why, when He was dead and they thrust the spear into His side, it was the blood and the fluids that flowed out, blood and the water. He stayed on that cross for six hours after the scourging, on the cross for six hours, then He was put into a tomb and He was wrapped up literally like a mummy. Then purportedly He came out of that. How could He breathe? But He rose, moved the stone, and then presents Himself alive. And on that day, Resurrection Day, He walks those ten miles to Emmaus, up and down mountain roads and the disciples see Him as a healthy, realized resurrected person and never dreamed that He just "swooned." By the way, in the swooning that is purported in our day, one never truly dies. It is not the kind of death, the resurrection that Jesus Christ went through. A true death, in which there is no evidence of any life, and especially with no means of breathing for a period of several hours, and a day at least. Now if you were one of the disciples and you met Jesus Christ on Resurrection Day who had only swooned, and you found Him in that kind of medical state, and He purports Himself as perfectly whole and healthy after you look upon Him, would you believe that He's swooned? Would you accept Him in that kind of state, medically? So I ask you, jury, would you accept that theory that He simply swooned? How vote you?

# Theory #4: the Fraud Theory

There's one last theory and the theory goes like this. It's called fraud. It is the oldest of all theories of explanation, proving once again that Christians are simply a people who believe in superstition, the non-facts of history. And it goes like this: 1) when the women came back, they went to the wrong tomb, or 2) on that night, the disciples came, rolled away the stone, took the body of Jesus Christ, secreted away and buried it in another place. There is an empty tomb. This is the explanation that was given because, you see, the only people who sensed that something might occur were the Romans and they literally had a Roman guard posted. When the authorities came to the empty tomb the next day, and when they proposed an explanation, and this is given in the gospel of Matthew. Here is the proposition: The soldiers said. "While we were asleep, the disciples came and they secreted away the body of Jesus." Well, Let me ask you these things and here are the problems: 1) If it were just the group of women who came to the wrong tomb there would be plenty of people who say, 'Come over here. I want to show you the right tomb.' 2) Men, have you ever been on guard duty? I remember the first time I went on guard duty in the infantry. They put the fear of God in me. The last thing I wanted to do was go to sleep because of the consequences. And then as a jury, would you accept as a jury, if I were one of those soldiers and I tell you, 'While I was asleep, I saw and they came and they took away the body and they.' Would you accept that? How vote you?

In the late 1800s, the governor of Arizona was a military man. He had had an extended and a fine military career. His name was Lew Wallace. Lew Wallace had as a friend a man by the name of Robert Ingersoll. There are some of you here who are a little bit older who may even remember the ministry of Robert Ingersoll. Robert Ingersoll was an atheist. Robert Ingersoll challenged all of Christianity on the same basis: it is all superstition, and it is inherently evil, and it is the greatest moral difficulty in the world. His friend, Lew Wallace, as governor of Arizona, when he completed his term of office, Ingersoll challenged Lew Wallace to disprove the one thing that would cause Christianity to collapse. Here's what Ingersoll said, "Everything is based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. You go and disprove the resurrection of Jesus Christ and we will have won the case." Wallace took up that challenge, and he went back, as any good historian would, to try to make his way back to the original cases, the original records. He went back to the Middle East. He went back to Europe. He began his studies in the libraries of Europe to disprove the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And in a musty library in the middle of Europe, with practically no one present, he slipped off of his chair and got down on his knees and confessed Christ as his Savior, because he became absolutely convinced that there was no other explanation. And if Jesus Christ rose from the dead, then everything is true. He took, by the way, all the material that he had gathered, and he wrote a novel, one of the greatest Christian novels every written; it's called Ben Hur. What were the rules of evidence that Lew Wallace was following? The same rules of evidence that any good lawyer would follow: there are three to prove a case.

## III. The defense of the empty tomb

### Direct evidence

And you see, what I am doing to you now is to present to you the argument of the defense. I am going to defend the empty tomb. The first rule of evidence is called direct evidence, the second one is circumstantial evidence, and the third one is real evidence.

The first one is the evidence that is called direct evidence. Direct evidence is this: "I saw you cross the street and I saw you get into that car." I am an eyewitness. That is what is called *direct evidence*, as opposed to "My mother told me that she saw you cross that street and get into the car." That is not admissible evidence; that is hearsay. All of the disciples, as they present the resurrection of Jesus Christ present it as direct evidence, as 'I saw it.' Go through and read the gospel accounts. Read what I just read to you again in the book of Corinthians. And they all say like this, 'I saw Him.' Do you ever watch the movies or the TV? I once thought I was going to be a trial lawyer. When I was in college I used to go down and watch them at the courtroom. It went like this: Whenever there is a man who is on the stand who says, "I am an eyewitness," do you know how you get around him? You discredit his character. And so the lawyer gets up and says, "By the

way, where were you on so and so?" And so on. And you try to prove one thing, that he is a pathological liar. How about the apostles? What was their character like? Were they men? Were they in Never-Never-Land like preachers and seminary professors? Ah. These were businessmen, fishermen. Men who had never been to school. That was the charge against them. But their lives and their characters could not be smirched and their whole argument was this, 'I saw Him.' And every one of them gave their life rather than deny it.

### Circumstantial evidence

There is a second evidence and that is circumstantial evidence. And circumstantial evidence goes like this. There is an act; that act is repeated; and it is repeated until a certain pattern is formed and that pattern leads you to one conclusion. It is a system of circumstances; the circumstances go like this: How was Jesus of Nazareth born? Miracle. How did He live? Nobody could prove one sin in His life. In fact, His trial was biased and He was judged guilty on one basis: He claimed to be God, and they said "Blasphemy!" What did He do in this life? He performed miracles over and over again. At His death, are you surprised at the resurrection? By the way, not very often and not with a whole lot of fanfare, but He prophesied and told His disciples, 'On the third day, I'll come back and explain everything.' He based His whole life on the resurrection. Circumstantial evidence wins cases because of patterns established. The pattern of the Bible is if He had not been raised from the dead, it would prove that He was not God. The fact that He was the living God, if you will, requires, as did the rest of the pattern of His life.

#### Real evidence

There's one last means that is used to defend a case and prove a case. That's the kind of evidence that is called *real evidence*. There's a gun, a bullet, and somebody is shot. There are ballistics for the bullet. There are fingerprints. That's what's called *real evidence*. And the real evidence goes like this: Jesus Christ says to Thomas, 'Go ahead, stick your finger into the palms of My hands.' And Thomas falls down on his feet, from his feet to his knees, and says, "My Lord and My God." One day you and I will see it, but His disciples all saw the real evidence on His person. V. The moment of truth: Jury, how say ye?

Now, beloved, before the jury leaves...and that's always an exciting moment in a trial, the jury filing out. The only other more excited movement is when they file back in. Before they file out, the judge usually charges them again...and may I remind you of the importance of this vote? Is this a moral and just world, or did the best die like a dog and that's the way life is? Is there any power from God? Can God transcend time and space and enter into your life today, do something with you today? Is there any hope except the power that comes out of the power of a gun or money? Is that the only available power? And for you who are here, do you believe your sins are forgiven? Do you believe that when you take your

last breath, which might come, that you will pass into eternity alive? Do you have any hope to see your mother as a Christian in heaven? That's how important your vote is.

Now in just a minute we are going to bow our head and you're going to go into the jury room and before God you declare your vote. By the way, there are three votes. The first vote is, "No, I do not believe He was raised from the dead. After examining the evidence and because of certain things in my life and whatever—it goes from way back in childhood or whatever it is—I just don't believe it." And I remind you again what a "no" vote means to all mankind.

There is a second vote and the second vote goes like this: "I am neutral. I am neutral." Somebody could say, "You know what, preacher? I just came to church. What's all this vote about? I just came to church. I am not about to vote." We'll give you that right, of course. No man, humanly speaking, forces another to vote in this way. When we close our eyes in just a minute, you say, "No vote." I just remind you of this, that the Lord Jesus Christ says, "He that is not for Me is against Me." A neutral vote is a "no" vote. My only prayer would be, How often will you vote neutral? And a reminder that every time I say "neutral" my spiritual neck gets stiffer and stiffer, becomes harder and harder to ever say "yes." And if you say "yes," it will be in a congregation like this or it will be in a traumatic experience in your life, and if you don't vote "yes" today, you just remember this sermon and the possibility of saying "yes" and the unfortunate thing of never living out that "yes." But you may vote "neutral." And if one continues to vote "neutral," which is a *no* vote, my sins are not forgiven and I defy the Father who gave His Son.

There is one last vote and that is "Yes, I believe. I believe that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead and that the tomb was truly empty." May I warn you, many people in a church like this, born and brought up in a church like this and in the Bible-belt in the South will say, "Yes, yes, yes, I've believed that all my life," get in the car, drive off, and forget about it. That's not a "yes" vote.

I'll tell you how you vote "yes"—with your life, never to forget it and the implications of the resurrection and Lord Jesus Christ. When I get into that car and when I go to work tomorrow and when I hit the real world at 8:00 tomorrow morning, He's alive. That's how you vote "yes." You just don't say, "Oh yea, always believed that." You vote with your life. That's the difference.

Now, this vote is different from any other jury because everybody else's jury votes on somebody else. You vote with your life. By the way, the "yes" vote is a vote of exhilaration. My sins are forgiven! God is alive! The suffering in my body is going to result in salvation for many! The world is real! God is real! Men, I understand about evil. I understand about forgiveness and I understand about hope. I understand when my last breath comes...I understand about the Creator of this world, and living once again in this world in a real body, a resurrected

body–I could jump out of this place! It is so wonderful. Everything else pales into insignificance if Jesus rose from the dead and lives in my heart. As we pray together...and this is the time when in His presence, we simply take time to say, not audibly, but silently, "Here's my vote. Yes, I believe." "No, I do not believe." The agnostics vote neutral, hung jury, no vote. In the presence of God, jury, how say ye? With your life, you vote.

Our dear heavenly Father, we ask Thee to not only hear us but receive us. We thank Thee Lord Jesus, Thou art not dead, as evidence by the fact that there would be hundreds and hundreds who would stand even in this place and across this city and in every tongue and every tribe and in every nation around the world and would say, "I die before I deny that Jesus rose from the dead."

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