

ChatGPT — PRO

User

Was Jesus buried in a tomb that was later found empty?

AI Response

Most historians agree that Jesus was crucified and buried, but whether his burial tomb was later found empty is more debated.

The earliest Christian sources, especially Paul's letters and the four Gospels, affirm that Jesus was buried and subsequently raised. The Gospel of Mark, generally considered the earliest Gospel, explicitly tells of women finding Jesus' tomb empty. Matthew, Luke, and John also report an empty tomb.

Historically, scholars tend to divide roughly like this:

- **Jesus' burial:** widely accepted as historically probable, though there is debate about exactly how and where he was buried.
- **The empty tomb:** accepted as historically plausible or probable by many scholars, including some who are not committed Christians, but it is **not a universal scholarly consensus**.
- **What explains the empty tomb:** this moves beyond what historical method alone can establish. Christians understand it as evidence of Jesus' bodily resurrection; alternative explanations include relocation of the body, legendary development, or other possibilities.

One reason the empty-tomb tradition is often taken seriously is that the Gospels identify **women as the first witnesses**, which some historians consider an unlikely detail to invent in that cultural setting. On the other hand, Paul's earliest resurrection discussion in **1 Corinthians 15** does not explicitly mention an empty tomb, which makes some scholars more cautious.

So the careful historical answer is: **Jesus was very likely buried; there is substantial early evidence that his followers believed his tomb was found empty, but historians disagree over whether the empty tomb itself can be established as a historical fact.**

User

Your main case for empty tomb tradition being plausible is because the gospels identify women as the first witnesses. That's probably pretty strong, because women's attestation in that era was weak, and if you were going to invent a lie you probably wouldn't start with women telling the story hey?

AI Response

Yes—that is a genuinely significant argument, and you've captured its basic logic well. I'd just soften it from "they wouldn't invent this" to **"this is not the obvious detail you would invent if your main aim were to maximize credibility."**

In the first-century Jewish and wider Greco-Roman world, women generally had lower social standing than men as public witnesses. Josephus, for example, reflects a particularly dismissive attitude toward women's testimony. So if an early Christian were freely constructing an apologetic story to convince skeptical outsiders, having respected male disciples—Peter, James, John, or others—discover the tomb would seemingly have been more advantageous. Yet all four canonical Gospels preserve women, particularly Mary Magdalene, as the first people at the tomb.

That gives the tradition a certain **“against-interest” quality**: an awkward feature may have survived because the storytellers inherited it rather than chose it. This is closely related to what historians have traditionally called the criterion of embarrassment. It doesn't prove the story occurred, but it can increase its historical plausibility.

There is an important counterargument, though. Scholars such as Bart Ehrman point out that saying “nobody would invent women witnesses” goes too far. Women were prominent in early Christianity, and the women are portrayed as Jesus' faithful followers through his death and burial while the male disciples flee. So a storyteller could have had **literary or theological reasons** for placing women at the tomb. Moreover, rules restricting women's testimony in formal legal proceedings don't necessarily mean that nobody would believe anything a woman reported in ordinary life.

What makes the point more interesting, in my view, is **not merely that women appear in one Gospel**. It's that the tradition persists across all four, despite substantial differences in their resurrection narratives. Matthew has Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary”; Mark has Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome; Luke names several women; John focuses principally on Mary Magdalene. Yet **women arriving first is remarkably stable across them**.

So I'd rank the argument this way:

Women as first witnesses ≠ proof of the empty tomb.

But:

Women as first witnesses + the tradition appearing across multiple Gospel accounts + its somewhat counterproductive apologetic character = a legitimate piece of evidence that there may be an early historical memory behind the story.

And there are actually **stronger arguments for the empty tomb when you combine this with several other facts**—especially the burial tradition, the antiquity of the resurrection proclamation, and what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15. That's where the historical case becomes considerably more interesting.

User

what did the women report and what is largely agreed about the women?

AI Response

The safest way to put it is to separate **what the Gospel accounts say the women reported** from **what historians think can reasonably be established about the women themselves**.

In the Gospel tradition, the core report is essentially: **Jesus' burial place was empty, and they were told that he had been raised**. In Mark, the earliest Gospel, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome go to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body. They find the stone rolled away and the burial place empty. A young man in white tells them that Jesus “has been raised” and instructs them to tell the disciples and Peter. Mark's earliest recoverable ending is striking: the women initially flee in fear and “said nothing to anyone” because they were afraid.

The later Gospel accounts develop this differently. Matthew says the women encounter the risen Jesus himself and then tell the disciples. Luke says the women report what they encountered at the tomb to the apostles, who initially regard their story as unbelievable. John concentrates particularly on **Mary Magdalene**, who first reports that the body is missing and subsequently says that she has seen the risen Jesus.

What is especially notable historically is the **stable core concerning the women despite variations in details**. Matthew names Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary”; Mark names Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome; Luke names Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and others; John focuses on Mary Magdalene. Yet across all four accounts, **women are the first people associated with discovering the empty tomb**, and Mary Magdalene appears in every strand. That agreement is explicitly noted in scholarship comparing the narratives.

So, regarding what is “largely agreed,” I'd distinguish levels of confidence:

- **Very strong:** Mary Magdalene was a real follower of Jesus and belonged to the group of women associated with Jesus' final days. Her connection with the Easter tradition is extremely early and widespread.
- **Strong:** There was an early tradition that **Mary Magdalene and other women went to Jesus' burial place shortly after his crucifixion** and became the first people connected with the claim that the tomb was empty.
- **More disputed:** Whether historians can establish that they literally found a previously occupied tomb empty. Many scholars think this is probable; others regard the evidence as insufficient.
- **Historical method cannot independently establish:** that an angel actually spoke to them or that Jesus was supernaturally raised. Those are additional claims requiring philosophical/theological judgments as well as historical evidence.

And there's an interesting detail relevant to your previous point: **the women aren't merely peripheral characters accidentally appearing in one version**. Their priority survives even though another very early tradition, Paul's list in 1 Corinthians 15, gives **Peter** the first named resurrection appearance. Scholars have noticed that tension for a long time.

So I think the strongest formulation is: **we have good historical reason to think that women—especially Mary Magdalene—stood at the beginning of the Christian claim concerning Jesus' empty tomb**. The harder question is whether that early testimony is sufficient to conclude that the tomb really was empty.

User

ok. but there were also arguments later about Jesus body being stolen. That would infer that he had to be stolen from somewhere. It's also suggested that in that time, Jewish law mandated burial before sundown, and that while roman law didnt allow for burial of crucified persons, they would make exceptions for Jews, and given the political tension around Jesus himself (and Pilate trying to push the decision to Herod and away from rome) would also infer that the risk / reward ratio to allow a burial was low (for Pilate)

AI Response

Yes. I think the overall argument you're constructing is historically stronger than simply saying, “the Gospels say there was a tomb.” But some parts deserve different weights.

The Jewish burial-custom point is particularly strong. Deuteronomy 21:22-23 requires that an executed person who has been hung not remain exposed overnight but be buried the same day. And this wasn't merely an ancient rule sitting unused in scripture: Josephus, writing in the first century, emphasizes Jewish concern for prompt burial, even contrasting Jewish practice with that of other peoples.

That matters because one sometimes hears the objection that “Romans never allowed crucified criminals to be buried.” That’s too categorical. Crucifixion certainly could involve leaving the corpse exposed as part of the punishment, but Roman practice wasn’t uniform. John Granger Cook’s survey of the Greco-Roman evidence concludes that provincial authorities had discretion: some crucified people were left exposed, while in other cases their bodies were released or buried.

So the Gospel account in which **Joseph of Arimathea petitions Pilate for Jesus’ body and Pilate allows burial** is not historically anomalous. In a Jewish province, immediately before the Sabbath and during Passover, permitting burial is quite plausible.

Your political calculation also makes sense as a possibility, though I’d be more cautious about treating it as independent historical evidence. Pilate had reason to care about public order in Jerusalem during a major pilgrimage festival. Josephus shows that Roman governors had to negotiate Jewish sensitivities and that Pilate himself sometimes backed down when confrontation threatened to become politically troublesome.

So one can reasonably imagine Pilate thinking:

Jesus is already dead. Someone respectable is asking for the corpse. Jewish law strongly favors burial. Tomorrow is the Sabbath. There is little Roman advantage in creating another religious dispute over a dead body.

That’s historically plausible.

Where I’d modify your argument is the **Pilate → Herod point**. The episode in which Pilate sends Jesus to Herod Antipas occurs specifically in Luke. We don’t have enough independent evidence to confidently reconstruct Pilate’s motives as “trying to shift responsibility away from Rome.” It may preserve historical memory, but using it as a major plank in the burial argument would make the case weaker than it needs to be.

The **stolen-body accusation** is also interesting, but needs careful handling. Matthew reports that opponents of Christianity were saying that Jesus’ disciples stole his body. If that really reflects an early Jewish-Christian controversy, then you’re right about the implication: **“the disciples stole the body” presupposes that there was a body in an identifiable burial location and that afterward it wasn’t there.**

That would be significant because the argument isn’t:

“There was no tomb.”

It’s:

“There was a tomb, but the disciples removed the corpse.”

And that’s exactly the sort of hostile testimony historians like to notice: your opponents concede part of your case while proposing an alternative explanation.

The limitation is that our explicit literary evidence for this accusation comes from **Matthew himself**. We don’t possess an independent first-century Jewish document saying, “Yes, the tomb was empty because the disciples stole Jesus.” So it cannot simply be treated as independent confirmation of the empty tomb.

Still, if Matthew’s statement that this explanation was circulating among Jews reflects a genuine controversy—and many scholars think it plausibly could—then it becomes another piece of cumulative evidence.

Put the pieces together and you get a fairly substantial historical argument:

1. Jesus’ crucifixion under Pilate is exceptionally secure historically.

2. Jewish law and custom strongly favored burial before nightfall, especially with the Sabbath approaching.
3. Roman law/practice did not categorically prohibit the burial of crucified people; officials could release bodies.
4. The earliest Gospel tradition says a named individual, **Joseph of Arimathea**, obtained Jesus' corpse from Pilate and placed it in a tomb.
5. The Gospel traditions also have women watching or knowing where Jesus was buried, which connects the burial location to the subsequent discovery.
6. All four Gospels preserve women—especially Mary Magdalene—as the first people associated with finding the burial place empty.
7. An early counter-explanation preserved by Matthew says not “Jesus was never buried,” but rather **“his disciples stole the body.”**

None of that, individually, proves resurrection.

But cumulatively it makes the proposition

“Jesus was buried in an identifiable place which was subsequently found empty”

considerably more historically defensible than the proposition

“Nobody knew what happened to Jesus' corpse and the empty-tomb story arose much later.”

And there's one further piece that strengthens this argument considerably: **Paul's formula in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7**, which is generally dated extraordinarily early. Although Paul never says the words “empty tomb,” the sequence **died → buried → raised → appeared** becomes quite important when placed alongside the Gospel burial tradition. That's probably the next piece I'd examine, because it gets us much closer to the first few years after Jesus' death rather than decades later.

User

of course, resurrection is divine (a non human event). But the rest of the burial argument seems plausible

AI Response

Yes. That's a sensible distinction.

Historically, you can make a fairly strong case for a sequence like **crucifixion → death → burial → a subsequently empty burial place → followers reporting experiences they interpreted as appearances of Jesus**. Each step is an ordinary historical claim, so historians can weigh sources, customs, hostile explanations, and plausibility.

The jump from **“the tomb was empty”** to **“God raised Jesus from the dead”** is different in kind. Historical method can assess the evidence surrounding the claim, but it cannot directly verify divine causation in the same way it can assess whether someone was buried or whether a tomb was found empty.

So I'd put it this way: **the burial-and-empty-tomb case is historically plausible and arguably quite strong; the resurrection is the theological explanation Christians give for that evidence, rather than something historical method alone can compel.**