

“What an Empty Tomb Can Do”

How odd that his enemies understood him better than his friends! His enemies placed a guard and sealed the tomb. His friends ran away. One denied him three times. At first reports, they regarded it as nonsense and did not believe (Luke 24:11). They didn't understand the scripture (John 20:9). They were afraid of the Jews (20:19). Their hearts were hard (Mark 16:14). In a sonnet, D.A. Carson captures the mood:

No heroes, these: defeated followers all,
Their nurtured faith extinguished, snuffed the flame
Of courage. Quite abandoned now the game
Oneupmanship (“Not I, Lord; I’ll not fall!”),
Displaced by furtive fear’s disabling pall.
More crippling than the sickening fear, the shame;
And cowed by common cowardice, they came
Upstairs together, spiritually mauled.
Reports come in of shattered, vanquished Death,
Of Life’s appearance in triumphant mood.
Begins the birth of hope, the death of death,
Of failing, faithless men with faith ended.
Arranged of old, unqualifiedly new:
Such change is what an empty tomb can do.¹

Their unbelief, cowardice, and misunderstanding are hardly résumé enhancements for religious leaders. Their unflattering testimony about themselves is unlikely to have been made up. So, how do we account for the dramatic change in their lives from cowards hiding from the Jews to courageous proclaimers of the resurrection of Jesus. C.F.D. Moule stated it this way:

If the coming into existence of the Nazarenes, a phenomenon undeniably attested by the New Testament, rips a great hole in history, a hole of the size and shape of Resurrection, what does the secular historian propose to stop it up with?

The explanation for the change from “old” to “unqualifiedly new” is best explained by “what an empty tomb can do”. Jesus was raised from the dead.

But the “unqualifiedly new” of the Apostles and early Christians was no minor affair. The dramatic event of the resurrection brought a dynamically different life in the disciples. The New Testament can talk about crucifying the old self, putting on the new self, and newness of life. That’s spiritual major surgery, not a Band-Aid. Jesus was not to them a religious good luck charm to be dragged out of the drawer a couple of times year. Jesus became their life and their Lord. What about in your life? “Such change is what an empty tomb can do.”

—Russ Holden

¹D.A. Carson, *Holy Sonnets of the Twentieth Century* (Baker Books, 1994), p. 67.