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S6E10 - The Empty Tomb

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Risen Jesus - Mike Licona

In this season finale to season 6 of the Risen Jesus Podcast, Mike Licona and Kurt Jaros discuss the evidence of the empty tomb, alternative theories to resurrection, and the timeline of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection.

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Transcript

[music] Hello, and welcome to the Risen Jesus podcast with Dr. Michael Lacona. Dr. Lacona is Associate Professor in Theology at Houston Baptist University, and he is the President of Risen Jesus of 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. My name is Kurt Jares, your host.

On today's episode we discuss the empty tomb. The empty tomb and what it means for the historical bedrock, for the facts pertaining to the historical Jesus, his life, death, and the aftermath. And so we'll be discussing that aftermath when we discuss here with our resident expert, Dr. Michael Lacona.

Mike, great to see you today. Hey, thanks. Appreciate it.

This has been a fun season. Yes, it has. We've been covering a lot of subjects, really a lot of meat here, looking at the bedrock, what you call the historical bedrock, or the facts pertaining here to the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and all the players, the events and players that form that discussion.

And so on today's episode, we're going to look at the empty tomb and what that means. I've got some questions myself for you, and then towards the end we'll take some questions from some listeners. So tell me about why is the empty tomb important when looking at the case for the resurrection of Jesus? Well, if Jesus was raised physically, bodily, materially from the dead, as I believe that Paul seems to think and the Jerusalem apostles, well then if there's a narrative, the story that narrates his resurrection, we would expect an empty grave of some sort.

And we have that with all four gospels. All four gospels report that Jesus was raised physically, bodily, materially from the dead, and exited the tomb, leaving it empty. Okay, so this is just that.

This is entirely consistent with what Paul taught. All right, so all four gospels, there's an empty tomb. Seems like an open and shut case.

Are there any New Testament scholars that object to the notion of an empty tomb? Oh, sure. There's quite a few of them. Now, Gary Habermas has actually been a being counter with this, and he's been keeping track of where scholars are on over 100 topics related to the resurrection of Jesus since 1975.

The empty tomb being one of them. He says that I don't know what the actual number is right now, but the last he said it was right around 75%. I think just below 75%.

But that was his figure, I think 15, 17 years, 18 years ago. Well, no, that's probably 2005, 2006. So it's still, you know, maybe 15 years ago.

It might have changed since then. I know before that time, he had, when we wrote our book in 2004, it came out. So we wrote it in 2003, it was finished.

He was around 75%. Then it dipped down to about two thirds, and he continued to add more sources to it as he's putting together his bibliography. I think he started off when we wrote our book was 2200, 2400 sources massive, you know.

And now I think it's over 5300, maybe closer to 5400 sources. So more than twice what he had when it was 75% and it dipped down to two thirds. Now, like 15 years ago, it was just shy of 75%.

I don't know what it is now. So this is one of the more, if not the most hotly disputed of the 12 facts that Habermas proposes here. And so what sort of an alternative view to the empty tomb? Would it be something like the wrong tomb, a mass or a mass grave approach? Yeah, you know, they just, the main one, I mean the old, old long ago it was, you know, the disciples stole the body, right? We find that in the Gospel of Matthew and Matthew, whenever you think it was written, whether early or late, Matthew is telling his readers who would have known whether he's telling the truth, he's telling them that the Jewish leadership continues to spread this rumor to this very day.

So we know that sometime in the first century that the Jewish leadership was saying that disciples stole the body, which I think is interesting because why would you say the disciples stole the body if it was still there, right? Yeah, you wouldn't. Now, of course, they could have spread this later on after the Gospels were written. And if, you know, we know up till the time of the year 70, you had those burial boxes called ashwaries that many Jews were using that they put the bones in after the corpse decomposed for a year, then they they reburied the bones.

So, you know, maybe the fact that it, they're saying the disciples stole the body, they couldn't prove it otherwise, one way or the other, if they had buried Jesus' bones in an ashwary somewhere. You've got Tertullian who mentions toward the end of the second

century that the gardener had a lettuce patch by the tomb, and it was going, the rumor was that the gardener reburied the body because he was afraid that visitors coming out to pay homage to Jesus at his tomb would trample over his lettuce. But that being spread around still gives an alternate explanation to why the tomb was empty.

It's not disputing the empty tomb. You have Kelsus in the middle of the second century who is saying that Jesus used magic to fake his death on the cross. He went unconscious and then he was revived in the tomb and came out.

But again, that is not to dispute an empty tomb, it's just to give an alternate explanation for it. Justin Martyr in the middle of the second century said that the Jewish leadership was still claiming in that day. He says this in his dialogue with Trifo that they were still saying, spreading the rumor that the disciples had stolen the body.

Still, the only kind of alternative explanations to the empty tomb is to explain how the tomb came to become empty. They're not disputing whether the tomb was empty. I think that is pretty telling.

So there's that implication that it still is in fact empty. So is there for you, when you're looking at your method here, do you find that the empty tomb qualifies as part of the historical bedrock? I do think there's good reasons for it. I typically provide a few like Christianity, the resurrection of Jesus is first proclaimed in Jerusalem, which would be difficult to do if the body was still in the tomb.

You could expose any kind of body, if it had any kind of stature that even looked, resembled Jesus, you couldn't have dispelled the rumor, the resurrection. So the fact that it started in Jerusalem, I think that gives evidence for it. I mentioned how it is enemy attested.

They're only providing alternative explanations to the empty tomb. I think the strongest evidence may be the testimony of women. In the first century, a woman's testimony was certainly not regarded anywhere near as credible as the testimony of a male.

So if you're going to invent a story about a resurrection and include an empty tomb, a story that's already going to be very, very difficult for most people to swallow, why are you going to make it doubly difficult by making your primary witnesses women who are going to be questionable? It'd be like today if you're going to make a story, you're going to invent a story that is very difficult to believe for others to believe and you want people to believe it. And they say, "Well, how do you know this?" He said, "Well, my witness is so and so. Well, who's so and so?" Well, he's a thug.

He was in prison recently for forgery and for deceiving. And he's my primary witness. You know, that's what you're looking at here.

I mean, Josephus says that a woman's testimony was less valuable or is about the same

level as a thief or a robber. That's how good, how much it was valued back then by Jews. So again, if you're going to fabricate account about a resurrection and empty tomb, you're just not going to make the women your primary witnesses.

So you got some good evidence, I think, for the empty tomb. The reason I don't include it is, by the way, you do have a heterogeneous majority who granted. So you even have some non-believers who granted.

Like Pincus LePied, he was a Jewish scholar and a New Testament scholar, he believed, he actually believed Jesus rose from the dead. He just says he doesn't think that Jesus is the Messiah, he's a savior for the Gentiles. But he believed the tomb was empty, he believed Jesus rose from the dead.

You do have some other, a couple other non-believers scholars who think the tomb was empty. So you could say it's a heterogeneous majority, but by far the majority of scholars who grant the empty tomb are Christian scholars. And it doesn't come up to the level, even though it's a majority, if it's around 75%, that's a pretty strong majority.

But I like it to be 90% or more for what I'm doing here, for my criteria for accepting something as historical bedrock. So it didn't quite make a strong enough majority, and it certainly not a robust heterogenetic, genuity of scholarship that is granting it. So although I believe the tomb was empty and I think the evidence is sufficient for that, it's not a, it doesn't raise to the level of being a minimal fact, of being historical bedrock.

Let me ask you a question about the empty tomb, it's related here. From Matthew we have this passage about guards being placed at the tomb. Well okay, so let's suppose that, let's suppose that the disciples stole the body.

And then afterward the Jewish leaders are saying hey they stole the body. If you were Matthew or the Christian community maybe you would come up with, you would invent a story to try to dispel the accusations, even though they were true, this is all hypothetical. Well the Jewish leaders placed guards at the tomb.

Wouldn't that sort of be a sneaky way of getting away with having stole the body if the story were invented? Yeah, yeah it would be. I mean we can't rule that out of course. Anything that comes with history, we can't get into a time machine return to the past and verify our conclusions.

So what you've proposed is certainly possible, but of course historians are looking for the most probable explanation. I will say that the majority of critical New Testament scholars do not accept the historicity of the report about the guard at the tomb. Now that doesn't mean they weren't there, it just means that's where the majority is today when it comes to this.

But you know I would look and I'd say well does Matthew, does he give us good reason to

think that he fabricates things elsewhere? And what I would do then is I would say well how do we test that? Well I would test Matthew on how he uses Mark. We know that we're pretty confident that Matthew used Mark quite extensively, same thing with Luke. Luke and Matthew used Mark extensively.

They certainly edit Mark, sometimes they unpack him and provide additional details. Matthew tends to abbreviate the stuff in Mark, but you know we can see how Matthew used Mark and he treats Mark with a lot of integrity. He doesn't change anything about the essence of the story, the core is still there.

And then there's the hypothetical Q source, now something that Luke used Matthew, that's entirely possible. Entirely possible. I tend to think that Matthew and Luke used a common source that we refer to as Q. Q being short for Quella, the German word for source.

So I view Q as a written document containing the teachings of Jesus and that it was without narrative. So I think it was probably notes taken by one of Jesus' disciples they took along and then later on it was expanded. Now it could be wrong on that.

All of it is speculation with that and some of it is more informed than others, but that's how I view Q. So we look at how Matthew used Q, we look at how Luke used Q and yep they edit Q but they stay pretty close to it. So if where I can test Matthew I don't see him fabricating then that gives me some pretty good confidence that he's not fabricating where I can't test him. Now does that mean he doesn't fabricate or invent a story? No.

But I can only go with what I see or what I perceive that I'm seeing and I just don't think he's doing it elsewhere. I can't prove that he's not doing it. There are occasions where scholars are going to think he is like with the passion narratives.

But that's what I'd say. Yeah, well and certainly the stolen body hypothesis is rife with other errors. But furthermore we could think that Matthew is generally reliable, generally historically reliable.

And so until we have reason otherwise to think that the disciples or the Christian community invented this story, we might think yeah this is a historical. But for our project here yeah we're not talking about historical bedrock material about the guards being placed at the tomb. So yeah good.

All right well you know I've got another question for you Mike here and I've got here this chart that hangs up in our office here at Defenders Media. The chart of five different views on the timeline of the crucifixion and I think I've got it all in frame here. It's all a big picture here.

Five different views, three of them holding to a Friday crucifixion. One of them the Thursday crucifixion and one a Wednesday crucifixion timeline. And you've got your own

view on the date, the day of the week in which Jesus died and that relates to the three-day motions.

The three-day motif that we have in the the gospels. So tell me what's your view on the day of the crucifixion of Jesus and your thoughts on the three-day motif? Well almost all scholars are going to place or they're going to locate Jesus' death by crucifixion on Friday, the Passover. And so the question then would remain is how do you reconcile it with some other things.

Especially say the sign of Jonah where in Matthew specific there he says Jesus says as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish. So would the son of man be in the earth and then rise. So if you back out from Sunday morning three days and three nights it doesn't take you to Friday where Jesus dies and is buried Friday afternoon.

So you've got to reconcile those things and then you know the Passover meal. You do have the attention in John where John in my opinion and in the opinion of a number of other scholars it seems like that last meal with Jesus is not framed as a Passover meal. In fact to the contrary it is not it seems at least my reading of the text starting at John 13 verses 1 and 2 and then what follows it doesn't seem like it's a Passover meal.

And then I think it's 1829 they deliver Jesus over to Pilate but they don't follow him into the Proterium so that they wouldn't be defiled and could eat the Passover that evening. So I think there's a couple of indicators in John's Gospel that would suggest that Jesus was crucified before the Passover meal was to be eaten. So that could still place it on Friday right but we find the Passover meal and the Synoptics being eaten Thursday evening.

So what do we do here you know how do we do this well you know I discussed this at length in my book *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels*. I do think for theological reasons John is relocated it's just a day earlier in order to accommodate or to make some theological points that Jesus is the burnt offering for us in the Passover our Passover lamp. I think John also alters the time a little bit and this is not unusual for John it's not unusual for ancient authors to do it either other biographers and historians.

In terms of the three days and three nights I think that this is a temporal figure of speech. The Acadian language had a three day motif of say three days and three nights for a figure speech to say you're healing if you do this take this medicine you'll feel better soon. They just say three days and three nights you'll feel better soon.

We have stuff like this like when my kids were young I'd say hey would go out and go out and do pull up some weeds in the garden. Oh that'll take me forever. Well no it won't take you forever it may take you an hour you know or you go in and I'll be with you in just a minute.

Well we know that he's not a person is not saying 60 seconds it's a short period of time or just give me a second on that you know well you've taken five now come on Mac. That's not what's going on these are temporal figures of speech what leads me to believe this is a few things here Kurt. So number one you have Jesus resurrection mentioned in a few ways after three days and three nights after three days and on the third day.

In fact Matthew includes all three Luke has on the third day and after three days well on the third day is different than after three days. So I think we have a three day motif here meaning just a short period of time and it's just stated in different ways. Another we find the same kind of thing in the book of Esther where I think it's her uncle Mordecai comes to her and says hey you know Haman's doing this thing and we're all going to die.

As Jews and she says tell you what go back and tell the people the Jews to fast for three days and three nights and after that I will go in to see the king. And it says and so Mordecai did and the people fasted for three days and three nights and on the third day Esther went in to see the king. Again it just seems like a temporal figure of speech here and then you've got finally you've got in Matthew's gospel the Jewish leaders come to Pilate on Saturday and say we remembered when that deceiver said that he would be raised from the dead after three days.

So grant us a guard so that we may guard the tomb until the third day so that his disciples don't come and steal the body and then the new deceit is worse than the first. Well if you're going to take this three day motif in a very literal sense Jesus is going to be raised from the dead sometime after three days right but they're only asking for a guard until the third day they're going to remove that guard at the very time they need the guard most. So I think there's good reason here to think that when any of these three days and three nights after three days on the third day these are just different ways of saying in a short period of time.

And so we don't have to say well every even an hour or two hours of a day counts as a whole day. I mean you could do that I don't think that's that be stretching it too far. And that might be it might be correct.

I just think if we're trying to really take this in an uber literal sense it's just going to lead us down the wrong path. I think it's just best to look at this as a temporal figure of speech meaning a short period of time and then it just happened within 36 hours later however you want to look at it. Yeah.

All right we've run out of time so let's quickly take two questions here I think the first question here will be short and it comes from Dean. What are your thoughts on Dr. Andrew Lok's work regarding the resurrection what if any original contribution had he made to the topic? Well unfortunately I haven't read Professor Lok's book I've heard very good things about it from those in the apologetics community who are reading it. People

have said some really good stuff about it but I haven't read it myself so and it's not because I don't want to it's just right now and for the last eight years or so my focus has moved away from resurrection and gone to gospel differences and the historical reliability of the gospel so I'm only reading things at this point that relate directly to my present research.

Sure sure okay and then this question last question comes from Twitter. What do you think about historical critical method looks like it's used only in research of the Bible's historicity not any secular history why is that allowed? Well I don't know that that is true that it's only used in biblical stuff maybe that's what biblical scholars refer to it as the historical critical method and maybe it's not used by classicists or general historians in that sense. But historical critical method simply is you are looking at history through critical eyes you're looking at historical reports through critical eyes doesn't necessarily mean skeptical it's just saying well what's the evidence for this.

Historical critical method looks at reports to say did this person say something like this did an event did this event actually occur that's what the historical method is it's for historians. Now in the evangelical community usually those on the far right they have they make use of what's called the historical grammatical method and nothing wrong with the grammatical historical historical grammatical method it's just a different method for a different purpose. The historical grammatical method looks at a text and using the grammar the language that it's used and what we know about the historical background of the text and which the text is written understanding the culture and everything.

It's all used in order to interpret that text so the historical grammatical method is used for interpreting a text whereas the historical critical method is used by a historian to say well did this actually occur did this person actually say this or something like it. So they serve different purposes the reason those theologian historical grammatical method is going to be used by a theologian not a historian and the reason they're not even interested in the historical critical method and I'm referring to theologians on the far right who insist on the historical grammatical method over the historical critical method is because they are just a priori accepting everything in scripture as true for theological reasons. And I'm not going to say that that is wrong but that's doing the work of a theologian not a historian my work as a historian cannot make such assumptions.

And so if I'm going to do exegesis to see what I come to the text I'm going to look at it in the New Testament in Greek I'm going to study the cultural background and everything that's doing historical grammatical method. But if I'm approaching the text like we're doing with the resurrection to wonders to see did he really rise from the dead what led to the disciples and Paul's belief that the risen Jesus had actually appeared to them. Well I've got to use the historical critical method.

I don't have the luxury of making theological assumptions. I'll give that answer to that

question from one of your listeners. And you know this has been a real fun season we've covered a lot of ground here looking at the historical bedrock.

You know we first started asking that question what is historical bedrock. Then we went and began looking at the life of Jesus how he was seen as a miracle worker and exorcist and as a catalogical agent we looked at predictions he made about his death and his vindication or resurrection. And we looked at the evidence for his death we looked at evidence for the appearances we spent three episodes on Paul and Paul's conversion experience.

Then we talked about James and now the empty tomb we've covered a lot of ground here looking at this case and in next season we're going to be considering the different hypotheses to that evaluate this historical data. So that should be really fun considering the hypotheses and I'd like to think that the historical resurrection will be the one that proves triumphant over all the other hypotheses Mike. Alright well if this podcast has been a blessing to you would you consider supporting our work you can go to risenjesus.com/donate. If you are interested in learning more about the work in ministry of Dr. Lacona you can go to risenjesus.com and it's there that you can find authentic answers to genuine questions about the resurrection of Jesus and the historical reliability of the Gospels.

This has been the risen Jesus podcast a ministry of Dr. Mike Lacona.

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