

His Tomb is Still Empty

In 1985 I had my first opportunity to visit Israel and personally view the land where Jesus lived. Among the many wonders to be seen, I anticipated that my visit to the site of Jesus' crucifixion and burial would be the highlight of my trip.

The day we journeyed toward the location, I was somber and thoughtful. In my mind, I recalled the visual images of Hollywood films I had seen which depicted Christ's death -- three crosses high atop a hill against the background of angry clouds and thunder.

Deep in thought and meditating on the words of the old hymn, "The Old Rugged Cross," the tour bus arrived at the destination just north of the Damascus Gate, outside the walled city of Jerusalem. Through the PA speaker, the tour guide announced proudly, "Here we are! To your right is the site where it is believed that Jesus was crucified."

As I looked out the window, surely there had to be a mistake. I could hardly believe it. It was a bus station with acres of paved asphalt! It seemed impossible that the site of the most sacred event in history could be obscured and defiled by such a thing.

Once I gained my composure, I looked

beyond and saw the vague image a skull, a natural formation in the nearby rocky cliffs. It was obvious, this indeed had to be Golgotha -- the place of the skull.

Although the jagged skull in the rugged hillside should have been a strong clue for researchers, the site only gained its credibility as the genuine, historic Golgotha, a few decades ago. Before that, another site was considered the traditional location, although it lacked many authenticating characteristics.

The site of Jesus' tomb was well known to the post apostolic church, and was described in writings as late as the fourth century. In 333, a pilgrim from Bordeaux, France wrote, "As you pass through the gate of Neapolis [the present Damascus gate]... on your left is the hillock Golgotha where the Lord was crucified, and about a stone's throw from it to the vault where they laid his body and he rose again on the third day."⁽¹⁾

The location of the skull hill corresponded precisely with the description of the ancient writer. In addition, some years ago archeologists discovered that the bus station at the foot of the hill was built on top of what had been an ancient stone quarry. Diggings showed that this had probably been the Jew's traditional place of execution, which

was carried out by stoning. The Romans crucified Jesus (a Roman method of execution) at the place where Jews usually carried out their own method of capital punishment.

The great evidence that brought convincing authenticity to the mentioned site was the discovery of the nearby garden tomb not more than 100 yards away, excavated from a hillside in 1867. The famous British General, Charles Gordon, was the first to suspect the tomb as Christ's, during his inspection of the site in 1882. Other researchers and scholars later concurred with his speculations.⁽²⁾

The Gospel of John described that Jesus' tomb was in a garden near the crucifixion site (John 19:42) and belonged to a wealthy disciple, Joseph of Arimathaea. He and Nicodemus took Jesus' body, prepared and placed Him in the tomb.

According to scripture, the tomb of Jesus was the site of His resurrection - - the greatest event in history and the single most important doctrine of the Christian church. Upon it hinges the entirety of the claims that Jesus made, including the eternal salvation of His followers (1 Cor. 15:13-14).

As I first approached the tomb, it first appeared only as a jagged crevice in the side of a hill. But closer examina-

tion showed that it was a man-hewn cavern -- a classic example of a first century tomb prepared for a prominent person. Before entering inside, I noticed the obvious indentation of a rut hewn in the rock beneath the opening. Archaeologists explain that this was a type of "track" used to guide the huge, wheel-shaped stone that sealed the entrance.

Entering the tomb was an extraordinary experience. There inside the dual chambers, which probably measured about 8' x 15', I viewed a stone-carved pedestal on which a body would be laid. Then as I looked about the cavern in the dim light, I noticed that in one upper corner there was a carved symbol -- it was the first letter of the Greek alphabet, Alpha, and in the opposite corner was Omega, the last alphabetic letter. The meaning could not be clearer. The "Alpha and the Omega" was a reference that Jesus made to Himself (Rev. 22:13), and it was apparent that the tomb had been marked in ancient times to show that it was where Jesus once laid.

For a considerable time I stood alone in the tomb, trembling and praying. It was an awe inspiring experience. I became profoundly aware that I was standing at the site of the greatest miracle ever known to mankind -- the intersection of God's love to the human race. This was where Jesus' broken

body laid and where His resurrection life burst forth! I felt humbled and unworthy to stand on the same stone floor where Jesus' holy feet stood and walked.

Finally, it was time to go. But as I stepped to the opening to exit, I paused and looked back momentarily, reflecting on the impact of this incredible pilgrimage. I grinned and thought to myself, "Nobody was home here!" Buddha, Mohammed, Confucius may be found in their tombs, but my Lord's grave is still empty. Jesus, our risen Savior, is alive and well!

(1) "Egeria's Travels"

(2) "The Search For The Tomb Of Jesus," William Stewart McBirnie

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*Unless otherwise stated, all scripture references were taken from
The New King James Bible, © Thomas Nelson Inc., 1982.*

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