

The Tomb

Part 1 of 3: Leader Preparation Guide

■ Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that the burial and the empty tomb rest on embarrassing, early, checkable testimony, that the earliest recorded counter-explanation itself concedes the tomb was empty, and tests the wrong-tomb and theft theories at full strength.

Catholic Touchstone. CCC 640: the empty tomb is an essential sign, the first step in the disciples' recognition of the resurrection, though not by itself a direct proof; its meaning had to dawn on them, and at first it did not.

■ What You Need to Know

Two figures anchor tonight, and both are historically awkward for inventors. First, Joseph of Arimathea: all four Gospels agree the burial was performed by a named, prominent member of the very council that had condemned Jesus, and the creed of 1 Corinthians 15 includes "that he was buried" in its earliest layer. If the burial story were fiction, this is the last burier a Christian would invent: the disciples themselves fled, and the honor goes to a Sanhedrist. He is also checkable; a "respected member of the council" (Mark 15:43) is a public figure whose family and tomb could be located by anyone in Jerusalem who cared to ask.

Second, the women. In all four Gospels the first witnesses of the empty tomb are women, led by St. Mary Magdalene, at a time when a woman's testimony carried little or no legal weight; Josephus records the prevailing attitude bluntly (source card tonight). Luke adds the humiliating detail that the male apostles dismissed the women's report as "an idle tale" (Luke 24:11). Historians call this the criterion of embarrassment: details that embarrass the movement reporting them are unlikely to have been invented by it. An invented empty-tomb story has Peter and John discover it heroically at dawn. The story we actually have was, in its own culture, an evidential liability, told anyway. The natural explanation of a liability told anyway is that it happened that way.

Third, the earliest counter-story. Matthew reports that the guard and the chief priests circulated the explanation that "his disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep" (Matt 28:13), and that "this story has been spread among the Jews to this day" (28:15). Independently, a century later, St. Justin Martyr reports the same theft explanation still circulating. Notice what the reported enemies of the movement did not say. They did not say: the body is right here. They did not say: wrong tomb, come and see. Be precise with the group about the kind of evidence this is: Matthew is a Christian source reporting what opponents were saying, not an opponent's own surviving document, so it does not carry the independent weight of a Tacitus. Its force lies elsewhere. Matthew appeals to a rival story his readers could hear in circulation for themselves ("to this day"), where inventing an opponents' explanation no opponent actually gave would be self-defeating; and the exchange, from whichever side one reads it, presupposes a missing body. Justin's report a century later shows the accusation persisted; treat it as evidence of the polemic's long currency, not as independent first-century confirmation. Debates about the guard's historicity (it appears only in Matthew; say so honestly) do not touch the core point, because the polemic presupposes emptiness on both sides of it.

Tonight's two steelmen: the wrong-tomb theory (grieving women in the dark confused the site, argued in scholarly form by Kirsopp Lake in 1907) and the theft theory in its best form. Present both fully; the discussion guide arms you. Note honestly, and say aloud if useful, that the empty tomb is the one item

tonight where scholarly consensus, while favorable, is not overwhelming; a minority of scholars dispute it. Our ledger line is worded to carry exactly what the evidence carries.

▪ Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Isaiah 53:9 says of the Servant: “And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death.” Executed criminals expected a criminal’s pit; this one gets a rich man’s tomb. Tonight the group hunts the fulfillment and finds Matthew 27:57, the only Gospel to mention it: “there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph.” Keep also in your back pocket, without spending it tonight, John’s quiet note that the tomb lay in a garden (John 19:41); the garden will matter in Session 8.

▪ Voices of the Church

St. Cyril of Jerusalem • *Catechetical Lectures 14, delivered in Jerusalem, c. AD 350*

Cyril catechized converts within sight of the sepulchre itself and appealed to it as a standing witness: in substance, the very place testifies; the stone, the garden, the rock-cut tomb remain before your eyes. For Cyril the resurrection was preached not in a faraway land but at the scene, to audiences who could walk there. A summary in our words. (A note for your own preparation: the precise occasion and audience of some of Cyril’s lectures is a live scholarly question; his location is not.)

St. John Chrysostom • *Homilies on Matthew 90*

On the guards’ story Chrysostom presses the obvious question with lawyerly relish: in substance, if the soldiers were asleep, how could they know the disciples stole the body? Sleeping men make poor eyewitnesses; and if they were awake, why did they permit the theft? The explanation refutes itself in the telling, he argues, and its circulation shows only that the body could not be produced. A summary of his homily in our words.

St. Gregory the Great • *Homilies on the Gospels 25*

Preaching on St. Mary Magdalene at the tomb, Gregory dwells on her perseverance: in substance, the others departed, but she remained, seeking him whom she had not found, and because she remained and sought, she found; love that would not leave the tomb was the first to see it opened. The Church came to call her the apostle to the apostles (apostolorum apostola), the messenger sent to the messengers. A summary in our words.

▪ Catechism Connection

- **CCC 640:** the empty tomb and the linen cloths signify that Christ’s body escaped the bonds of death and corruption; yet the empty tomb by itself is not a direct proof, and its meaning dawned gradually, beginning with the disciple who “saw and believed” (John 20:8).
- **CCC 641:** St. Mary Magdalene and the holy women were the first to encounter the risen Christ and became the first messengers of his resurrection to the apostles themselves.
- **CCC 515:** the mysteries of Jesus’s life were signs to be read; the investigation of visible facts is a path the Gospels themselves invite.

▪ Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • leader only

Ledger. Three candidate lines tonight, worded carefully; the empty-tomb line carries an honest concession clause. If your friend held on “Jesus died on the cross” last week, tonight’s polemic evidence

(the theft story concedes death too: nobody steals a survivor) may reopen it. Reopen gently or not at all.

Thread 3. The Isaiah 53:9 hunt feeds “in accordance with the scriptures.”

Garden seed. John 19:41 is deliberately not discussed tonight. If someone notices the tomb was in a garden, smile and say: hold that thought until Session 8.

▪ **Leading This Study Well**

LEADING THIS STUDY WELL • leader only

Let him build the theft case. Invite your friend to make the strongest theft case he can before the steelman box is read, and add the box’s points to his rather than replacing them. He should experience the counter-theories as his tools, freely offered, fairly tested.

The embarrassment criterion needs plain speech. Put it in modern terms: nobody invents the detail that humiliates their own side. If he pushes back that embarrassment can be faked as reverse psychology, concede the logical possibility and ask which explanation is simpler across four independent tellings and an embarrassed leadership.

Honesty is your best apologetic tonight. Volunteer the guard’s single attestation and the minority scholarly dissent on the empty tomb before he finds them. A case that concedes its soft spots earns the right to press its strong ones.

▪ **Session Goals**

1. The group meets Joseph of Arimathea and weighs why his role is an unlikely invention.
2. The group discovers Isaiah 53:9 fulfilled in Matthew 27:57.
3. The group weighs the women’s witness against the era’s legal attitudes (Josephus card).
4. The group reads the earliest counter-explanation and identifies what it concedes.
5. Wrong-tomb and theft theories steelmanned and tested; ledger lines proposed.

▪ **Time Note**

75 to 90 minutes. If you must cut: the Dig Deeper box and Win question 2. Never cut the Justin card or the two steelmans.

The Tomb

Part 2 of 3: Discussion Guide

▪ Opening Prayer

Leader: Lord, tonight we stand at a grave. Give us the patience to look carefully and the honesty to say what we see. Amen.

▪ Win

1. What is something true and embarrassing about your own past that you would never have invented about yourself? Why do embarrassing admissions tend to be believable?
2. If you were inventing a religion in the first century and wanted it believed, what would your founder's story look like? Who would discover the great miracle?

▪ Build

Read aloud: Mark 15:42-47.

1. What do we learn about the man who buried Jesus? Why is he a strange character for Christians to invent?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Joseph of Arimathea is “a respected member of the council” (Mark 15:43), the council that had condemned Jesus that morning; he must “take courage” to approach Pilate. All four Gospels name him; the creed already includes “that he was buried.” An inventor gives the burial to a loyal disciple, not to the enemy bench, and does not name a checkable public figure while the man's family, colleagues, and tomb were all still there to ask. Note also the double confirmation in the passage: Pilate's inquiry to the centurion sits inside the burial account itself.

2. Discovery hunt: read Isaiah 53:9, written centuries earlier. Now hunt through the burial accounts; does any Gospel record the detail? (Try Matthew 27:57.)

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Isaiah: “they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death.” Matthew 27:57: “there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph.” A condemned criminal, destined for a criminal's grave with the wicked, ends instead in a rich man's new tomb. Only Matthew mentions Joseph's wealth, and he does not even flag the Isaiah connection for his readers; the fulfillment sits quietly in the record. Add it to Thread 3.

Read aloud: Mark 16:1-8.

SOURCE CARD • read aloud at the table

Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 4.219

First-century Jewish historian, summarizing the legal custom of his people. Translation: William Whiston (1737), public domain.

“But let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex...”

We print this statement as historical evidence of first-century attitudes, not as a view anyone at this table holds. The Church honors St. Mary Magdalene precisely as the first witness.

3. All four Gospels agree: women found the tomb first, and Luke 24:11 adds that the apostles dismissed their report as “an idle tale.” Given the attitude on the card, what would you conclude about a movement that reported its central miracle this way?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

That it was reporting what happened rather than what would persuade. In that legal culture, women as sole first witnesses is an evidential handicap, and the apostles’ recorded contempt for their report doubles the embarrassment. Fabricators optimize; all four accounts carry the same liability instead. The simplest explanation of a handicap preserved across every telling is memory.

Read aloud: Matthew 27:62-66 and 28:11-15.

SOURCE CARD • read aloud at the table

St. Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho 108

Philosopher convert, writing c. AD 155, reporting the explanation still circulating among opponents a century after the crucifixion. Ante-Nicene Fathers translation, summarized with a brief quotation.

Justin tells Trypho that emissaries had gone out proclaiming that a godless sect had arisen from a deceiver whom “we crucified,” and that “his disciples stole him by night from the tomb” and were deceiving men by proclaiming him risen. The theft explanation, first recorded in Matthew 28, was still the standing counter-story a hundred years on.

4. Here is the earliest counter-explanation on record, from the movement’s opponents, still circulating a century later. What does it concede? What does it *not* say?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

It concedes everything except the miracle: that he was crucified, that he was dead (nobody builds a story around stealing a survivor), that the tomb was known, and that it was empty. What it never says is “here is the body” or “you have the wrong tomb.” Weigh it precisely: this is Matthew’s report of the counter-story, not an opponent’s own document, so its force is not independent hostile attestation like Tacitus. It is self-exposure: Matthew points at an explanation “spread among the Jews to this day,” circulating where his readers lived, and a story no opponent told would have been a self-defeating invention. And the one refutation that would have ended the movement in an afternoon, producing the corpse in the city where the preaching began, is a refutation no surviving source, on any side, ever claims was made. Absence of that claim, from parties with every reason to make it, is quiet but real evidence.

STEELMAN • The Wrong Tomb, at full strength

LEADER • do not read aloud. The co-investigator presents this; strengthen it freely.

READ ALOUD. The women had watched from a distance, in grief, at dusk before a Sabbath; Jerusalem’s garden tombs were numerous and similar; they returned in half-light. An honest mistake at the wrong, unused tomb, plus a young man’s ambiguous words, could ignite the whole story. Kirsopp Lake argued a scholarly form of this in 1907. No fraud required, no miracle, only grief and dawn shadows.

PRESS TOGETHER • read or say in your own words. Mark 15:47 exists precisely to close this door: the women “saw where he was laid,” and the tomb was not anonymous; it belonged to a named public figure who could point to it. A mistake by the women is corrected in ten minutes by Joseph, by Peter and John (who also ran and looked, John 20:3-8), or, most decisively, by the authorities, who needed only to walk

to the right tomb and end the movement. The theory also explains none of what follows: mistaken women do not produce appearances to groups, a transformed Peter, or a converted persecutor.

STEELMAN • The Theft, at full strength

LEADER • do not read aloud. Invite your friend to build the theft case himself first. When he has finished, add whatever is missing from the case below.

READ ALOUD. The disciples had motive (shame, sunk cost), tomb robbery was common enough that an imperial edict later threatened death for it, the guard appears only in Matthew and may be apologetic legend, and a small group with one night could move a body. Alternatively, unknown third parties (gardener, grave robbers, authorities relocating the body) could have taken it, seeding an honest mistake.

PRESS TOGETHER • read or say in your own words. Read John 20:6-7 together. Thieves work fast and take the valuables; the valuables were the spiced linens, left behind, with the face cloth “rolled up in a place by itself.” A staged theft by disciples founders on psychology (they fled, denied, hid, and did not expect a resurrection, Luke 24:21: “we had hoped”) and, decisively, on what comes later: men do not endure torture and death for a body they buried themselves; Session 6 weighs this fully. Third-party theft explains the missing body but leaves untouched the appearances, the transformed lives, and the authorities’ silence: whoever held the body could have produced it, and no one ever did.

DIG DEEPER

The Nazareth Inscription: a marble slab bearing an imperial edict threatening death for disturbing tombs, acquired in Nazareth in 1878. Its date, origin, and connection to Christianity are all debated (a 2020 isotope study traced the marble to the Greek island of Kos), so we hang no argument on it; it stands only as evidence that grave robbery was real and taken seriously. And a word on the Shroud of Turin: fascinating, contested, and deliberately not part of this study’s case. The Church takes no doctrinal position on its authenticity, and nothing tonight rests on it.

The Fact Ledger: Proposed Lines

- *Proposed:* Jesus was buried in a known, identifiable tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the council.
- *Proposed:* Within days, his followers were reporting that tomb empty, with women as first witnesses in every account, and the earliest counter-explanation on record (reported in Matthew 28, still current in Justin’s day) presupposes an empty tomb. (*A minority of modern scholars dispute the empty tomb itself; this line asserts what the earliest reports and counter-reports show.*)
- *Proposed:* No source, friendly or hostile, ever claims the body was produced.

▪ Send

1. Between wrong tomb, theft, and something else, which explanation seems strongest to you tonight, and what evidence would test it?
2. Is there a line you are not ready to sign? What exactly is missing?

▪ Live It This Week

- Read John 20:1-10 on your own. Picture the scene as a detective would: what is out of place, and what does each detail suggest?
- Think of one occasion when someone’s honest admission of a weakness in their own case made you trust them more. What does that tell you about testimony?

- **Closing Prayer**

Leader: Lord, the women stayed at the tomb when staying seemed pointless. Give us their stubbornness in seeking the truth. Amen.

- **Scripture Memory Verse**

Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him.

Mark 16:6 (RSV2CE)

The Tomb

Part 3 of 3: Leader Reference Card

▪ Every Passage Used Tonight

- Mark 15:42-47 • read aloud (the burial; the women see the place)
- Isaiah 53:9 • discovery hunt (grave with a rich man)
- Matthew 27:57 • discovery hunt (the rich man from Arimathea)
- Mark 16:1-8 • read aloud (the empty tomb)
- Luke 24:11 • cited (an idle tale)
- Matthew 27:62-66; 28:11-15 • read aloud (the guard; the theft story)
- John 20:1-10 • leader background and Live It (the cloths; vv. 6-7 read in steelman press)
- Luke 24:21 • cited (we had hoped)
- John 19:41 • leader background only; do not discuss (garden seed for Session 8)
- Mark 16:6 • memory verse
- CCC 640, 641, 515 • doctrine anchors

Source cards tonight: Josephus, Antiquities 4.219; St. Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho 108.