

## Three Witnesses to the Empty Tomb

Luke 23:50–24:12

As we begin this five-week mini-series, The Road to Resurrection Life, we start right where the cross left off: with the burial of Jesus and the shocking discovery of the empty tomb. This passage isn't just the next chapter in Luke's Gospel; it's the turning point of history. Death has been defeated. The tomb is empty. And the evidence is overwhelming.

Imagine a wounded soldier—shot seven times, stabbed with a bayonet, and clubbed—crawling back into a killing zone under heavy fire, not for glory, but to drag his dead and dying comrades to safety so they wouldn't be left behind. That's Master Sergeant Roy Benavidez in Vietnam, who risked everything in 1968 to recover the bodies of his fallen team and ensure they received honor and dignity. He was later awarded the Medal of Honor in 1981.

That's the kind of courage we see in today's passage. Three people—Joseph, the women, and Peter—honored Jesus' body in ways that became some of the strongest proofs of the resurrection. Their actions change everything.

There's something powerful we are going to see demonstrated again in our text which Andrew pointed out in his message a few weeks ago. Luke often uses patterns of threes—triads—to emphasize completeness, fulfillment, and divine order. Just as Andrew noted Pilate's three affirmations of Jesus' innocence and Peter's three denials, here we have three witnesses to the empty tomb, building progressively: from quiet preparation with Joseph, to the women's discovery and announcement, and finally to personal investigation with Peter. This isn't coincidence; it's the beauty and wisdom of Scripture, showing how God's plan unfolds in perfect completeness.

And it calls us to embody their complete witness today: **Joseph's courageous devotion** in risking everything to honor Jesus, **the women's faithful proclamation** in boldly sharing the truth, and **Peter's personal encounter** in running to see and marvel for himself—so that our actions, our words, and our hearts together declare the resurrection power alive in us.

**Main Theme:** The empty tomb is confirmed by three unlikely witnesses whose courageous devotion, faithful testimony, and personal wonder prove Jesus truly rose—and call us to rise up as living proof that He is alive and reigning today.

To unfold this theme, we are going to look at three witnesses to the empty tomb—three people whose actions became evidence that changes everything.

### **1. A rich man risked everything to bury Jesus—modeling how to honor Christ’s living body today.**

First: A rich man risked everything to bury Jesus—and showed us how to honor Christ’s living body today. Again, we read in verses 50-53:

*“Now there was a man named Joseph from the Jewish town of Arimathea. He was a member of the council, a good and righteous man, who had not consented to their decision and action; and he was looking for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid it in a tomb cut in stone, where no one had ever yet been laid.” Luke 23:50-53*

Joseph of Arimathea stands out like a bright light in the dark aftermath of the crucifixion. He was rich. He was a member of the Sanhedrin—the very council that had just condemned Jesus to death. He was a secret disciple for fear of the Jews (John 19:38). Yet when Jesus died, Joseph did something extraordinary.

He took courage (Mark 15:43). He marched straight to Pontius Pilate—the man who had sentenced Jesus—and boldly asked for the body. That took guts. Pilate could have refused or punished him severely. Joseph risked exposure, ridicule, and ruin.

Then he did the work himself: he personally took Jesus’ bloodied, broken, pierced body down from the cross with his own hands. I can only imagine the weight, the sticky blood still warm on His skin, the lifelessness of the One who had healed so many, clinging to him. As a former Chicago Police Officer, I once had to place a woman stabbed 27 times into a body bag and transport her to the morgue. That image

has never left me—the finality, the senseless violence, the duty to honor what remained. Joseph did something similar, but infinitely greater: he handled the body of the sinless Son of God, mangled by our sin, yet he did so with reverence and love.

He wrapped it in linen. He laid it in his own new tomb, cut out of rock, where no one had ever lain. He fulfilled prophecy without knowing it as Isaiah reveals: “They made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death” (Isaiah 53:9).

Although he was not aware, Joseph’s honorable burial in a specific, known tomb strengthens the historical credibility of the resurrection. The claim of an empty tomb went public in Jerusalem itself—if the body remained, the authorities could have produced it to silence the movement. They never did.

Moreover, Joseph honored the body of Jesus at great personal cost. He didn’t delegate. He didn’t hide. He cared for the One he believed was the Messiah.

This kind of costly devotion reflects an Old Testament example. When Saul and his sons were killed and their bodies desecrated by the Philistines, the men of Jabesh-Gilead rose in the night, risked their lives to recover the bodies, and bury them under a tamarisk tree in Jabesh. Then they fasted seven days in mourning (1 Samuel 31:11–13). King David later blessed them for their loyalty (2 Samuel 2:4–7).

These men risked their lives to recover and honor the body of their fallen king. Joseph did the same for the King of kings.

Now, Luke highlights one detail that explains His motivation: Joseph ‘was looking for the kingdom of God’ (v. 51). Though he didn’t fully grasp Jesus’ death, he believed Jesus was the King who would bring God’s kingdom—and that longing gave him courage to act when others hid.

As believers, we live in the same tension: the kingdom has come in Jesus, yet its fullness is still future. The Holy Spirit who dwells in us is the guarantee of what’s ahead (Ephesians 1:13–14), and He calls the

church—the living body of Christ—to be a visible sign of that kingdom now through love (John 13:35; Romans 14:17).

Joseph risked everything to honor Jesus' **dead body** because he longed for the kingdom. How much more, then, should we honor the **living body** of Christ today—the church?

Knowing the kingdom has come in Jesus and the Spirit guarantees its fullness, we become living evidence of the resurrection when we love one another sacrificially—with patience, kindness, and courage. As Jesus Himself declared: 'By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another' (John 13:35).

## **2. God chose faithful women as the first witnesses—proving the resurrection and showing Jesus' high value for women.**

Secondly: God chose faithful women as the first witnesses—proving the resurrection and showing Jesus' high value for women. Luke records beginning in chapter 24 concerning the women who had earlier prepared spices and ointments for the body:

*"But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, 'Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.'" Luke 24:1-7*

The women—Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and others—came at dawn with spices. They had watched the burial. They had prepared spices. They rested on the Sabbath as the law commanded. Then, at first light, they came to honor Jesus one last time.

But they found the stone rolled away. The tomb was empty. The body was gone. Two men in dazzling apparel—angels—appeared. The women were terrified. The angels asked the question that still echoes:

*“Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.”*

Then they reminded the women of Jesus’ own words: He had told them in Galilee that He would be delivered, crucified, and rise on the third day. The women remembered. They believed. And they ran to tell the others.

This is stunning historical evidence. In first-century Jewish culture, a woman’s testimony was not considered reliable in court. If the resurrection story was invented, no one would make women the first witnesses. The fact that Luke records them as the first to see the empty tomb and hear the angelic announcement strengthens the historicity. God deliberately chose the humble and faithful to be the first proclaimers.

But it’s more than evidence—it’s a testimony to Jesus’ counter-cultural value for women. In a time when women were often marginalized, treated as second-class citizens, and their voices dismissed, Jesus elevated them. He allowed women to travel with Him and support His ministry (Luke 8:1-3). He revealed Himself as Messiah first to the Samaritan woman at the well, making her an evangelist to her town (John 4). He defended Mary of Bethany’s choice to sit at His feet and learn like a disciple (Luke 10:38-42). And at the resurrection, He chose women as the first witnesses—entrusting them with the greatest news in history.

Contrary to cultural critics who claim Scripture demeans or belittles women, Jesus and God’s word repeatedly gives great honor, worth, and value to them. These ordinary women weren’t sidelined bystanders; they were frontline witnesses, countering any notion that the Bible undervalues women.

Beloved, God still uses the overlooked to carry the gospel. Are we faithful in small acts of devotion? Are we listening when the Word reminds us of Jesus’ promises? The women were faithful in their grief. And their testimony changed everything.

### 3. Peter ran to see for himself—and turned from doubt to wonder at the empty tomb.

Lastly: Peter ran to see for himself—and turned from doubt to wonder at the empty tomb. Verses 9-12:

*“And returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home marveling at what had happened.”*

Notice the women return and tell the Eleven and others. But the apostles dismiss it as “an idle tale”—nonsense, fantasy. Even faithful followers can doubt when the news seems too good to be true.

But Peter does something different. He rises. He runs. He stoops and looks in. He sees the linen cloths lying by themselves—no corpse, no angels, just empty grave clothes. And he goes home marveling.

Peter didn't yet fully understand. But he wondered. He marveled. The empty tomb demanded a personal response. He couldn't stay in skepticism or rely on second-hand reports. He had to see for himself.

This is the power of personal knowledge and pursuit of God. The empty tomb doesn't just invite belief—it demands investigation. And right here in the text, the evidence piles up in ways that are hard to dismiss.

Let's start with the undeniable reality: **the tomb was empty**. The massive stone had been rolled away, and the body was gone. Again, if the disciples had stolen it—as some early critics claimed—the authorities could have made them produced the body and ended the movement before it began. They never did. The tomb stayed empty, and the claim spread right there in Jerusalem, where everyone could check.

Then look closer at what Peter actually saw: **the linen cloths lying by themselves**, with the face cloth neatly folded or rolled up in a place by itself (John 20:6–7). Thieves wouldn't bother unwrapping the body, much less carefully folding the head wrapping. And a resuscitated Jesus—still weak from crucifixion—wouldn't have the strength or motive to tidy up. No, these cloths collapsed in place as a glorified body passed through them, leaving everything orderly and untouched. It's a quiet but powerful sign: death didn't have the final word; it was defeated in an instant.

Even more striking: **God chose women as the first witnesses**. Again, in first-century Jewish culture, a woman's testimony wasn't considered reliable in court—Josephus and rabbinic sources make that clear. If anyone were inventing this story to convince skeptics, they would never have made women the primary discoverers and proclaimers. They would have put Peter or John front and center as heroic first responders. The fact that Luke records it this way—embarrassing as it was—actually strengthens the historicity of the event. Truth often looks awkward when it's real.

And notice Peter's reaction itself: he didn't concoct a triumphant tale. The apostles first dismissed the women's report as 'an idle tale'—nonsense. Then Peter ran, looked for himself, marveled, and went home wondering. That's honest reporting. Fabricators would have made themselves instant believers, bold heroes from the start. Instead, we see raw doubt turning to awe.

But the evidence doesn't stop at Luke's account. The apostle Paul quotes an early creed in 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 which is a summary of the gospel he received and passed on. Most scholars date this tradition to within just a few years of the crucifixion, perhaps as early as 2–5 years after Jesus died. It lists the risen Christ appearing to Peter, then the Twelve, then more than five hundred brothers and sisters at once (many still alive when Paul wrote), then to James, and finally to Paul himself.

Hundreds of eyewitnesses. This isn't a story that grew slowly over time—it's early, rooted in real events and real people who risked everything because they saw the risen Jesus.

The resurrection isn't legend—it's history. And this history still calls us today: not just to admire the evidence from afar, but to rise and run like Peter, look for ourselves, and let wonder become worship.

Let me emphasize, Peter didn't let doubt paralyze him. The report seemed like nonsense, yet he rose and ran to the tomb anyway. In that small act of faith, he encountered the empty tomb—and soon the same Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, would boldly proclaim the risen Christ and command a lame man, 'In the name of Jesus Christ, rise up and walk!' (Acts 3:6). When the man responded in faith, resurrection power flowed, and he leaped up praising God.

Friends, the pattern still holds true for us. The tomb is empty, so our lives don't have to stay stuck in doubt or fear. When we rise up and run toward Jesus—even with trembling legs—we discover His resurrection power waiting to fill us. It's not our strength; it's His. Will you rise today and run for Him?"

Beloved, there's something more powerful than any external evidence: personal knowledge and experience. As the old hymn declares: "You ask me how I know He lives—He lives within my heart." Evidence convinces the mind; encounter transforms the soul.

As John Piper describes in a recent message on moving beyond dry Bible reading, there's a huge gap between knowing the tomb is empty as a fact and tasting the risen Christ in its reality—where wonder turns to worship, and worship fuels our whole lives.

Today, the empty tomb still demands a personal response. We cannot settle for distant faith or second-hand reports. Like Peter, we must "rise" and "run" to see for ourselves—through Scripture, prayer, community and obedience and let wonder lead to worship.

We'll unpack this more in the coming weeks, but don't just read Scripture to check a box. Read it meditatively—think deeply about what the words reveal. Read it prayerfully—ask God to enlighten the eyes of your heart. Read it responsively—pray it back to Him, obey what you see, and proclaim it to others. That's the path from knowing about the risen Christ to tasting His reality in your life.

**Remember: the stone was rolled away not to let Jesus out, but so we could look in and live.** Look to the risen Christ and let your worry turn to wonder, your wonder to worship, and your worship to witness, rising up to run the race He has set before us. Living on mission, we experience the resurrection power of Jesus today.

## **Conclusion**

Beloved, these three witnesses—Joseph’s courageous devotion, the women’s faithful testimony, Peter’s personal wonder—confirm the empty tomb is real. Jesus truly died. He truly rose. And because He lives, everything is different now.

So what do we do with this truth? Let these witnesses inspire our response today:

- Like Joseph, step out in courageous devotion—sacrificially serving and loving the church as Christ’s living body.
- Like the women, faithfully proclaim the good news—sharing the resurrection truth with boldness and humility.
- Like Peter, pursue personal encounter—running to the risen Christ in Scripture, prayer, and worship, for it is from this intimate marveling that courageous devotion and faithful proclamation flow.

Because the empty tomb changes everything. Doubt turns to marveling. Death gives way to life. Fear gives way to bold love. So today—will you rise and run to the risen Christ? Will you live as one who knows the tomb is truly empty?”

**Rise up**—by the power of the Spirit—and care for Christ’s living body like Joseph.

**Rise up**—and proclaim the good news like the women.

**Rise up**—and pursue Him daily in the Word, prayer, and obedience like Peter.

Rise up—because He already did. The grave is empty; let your life declare it.