

Easter Meditation

The tomb of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem is a decaying, nineteenth century construction of marble, squatting darkly under the dome of Constantine's basilica. Its architectural merit is dubious, and many of the tourists and pilgrims who come to see the birthplace of Christ pass through with very ambivalent feelings. This is not the simple, rock-cut tomb set in a quiet garden of which we read in the gospels. It is over-ornate, its decoration in questionable taste, and its exterior crowded with a bewildering array of priests and visitors. It is, nevertheless, undoubtedly empty.



Those who know its history are even more bemused. The church is part-owned by Christians of different rites, whose disputes have ensured that the tomb had never been properly maintained, and the keys to the building have had to be held by a Muslim family for centuries. Those centuries have also witnessed sectarian violence and political intrigue on a shameful scale. The church has often resembled a cattle-market more than a holy shrine. Even now, on the holiest Easter day, sacrilege is institutionalised annually as a sacred flame “miraculously” appears in the inner cell of the tomb. This pantomime fools none but the gullible, but is a stumbling block to many wiser men.

Jerusalem is a war zone, a centre of conflict between faiths, continents, and ideologies. It is truly, as it has been described, a city of the dead. It is a difficult place to believe in resurrection – but the body of Jesus is not there.

A team of scientists has spent years surveying the edicule of the sepulchre. Within the modern structure they have found evidence for centuries of demolition and rebuilding, corresponding to the political and religious changes that have surrounded it. But within the oldest of these structures, behind the facades of marble, gilding and dirt they have found something else. There are clear traces of a simple, rock-cut tomb. A tomb of the first century. An empty tomb.

For those with eyes to see, and with ears to hear, there is something very wonderful hidden beneath the accretion of two millennia. There is something which, for all its concealment, is actually a message of freedom made manifest today, in every continent, in millions of transformed lives. It is the message of *αναστασις*, anastasis – resurrection. The first birth of eternal life occurred on this spot, but it lives on wherever frail and mortal men put their trust in the One resurrected – the One who carried his victory over sin and death to the right hand of the Living God, drawing up with him every one of those who know they cannot attain heaven without him.

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