

Further insights into the resurrection of Jesus

Tony Benson

FOLLOWING the publication of the article "[The significance of the resurrection](#)" (Dec. 2007, p. 425), a reader has sent me a booklet entitled *A Thing Incredible?* written by Bill White, general secretary of the Garden Tomb (Jerusalem) Association and previously an Anglican rector in Sussex. As many readers will be aware, the Garden Tomb is an ancient tomb to the north of the wall of the Old City of Jerusalem, an area thought by some to be the location of the crucifixion and burial of Jesus. Even if this is the correct location, there is, of course, nothing to say that this particular tomb is the one in which Jesus was buried. In any case, though Bill White says it is a tomb of the right period, modern Israeli archaeologists date it to Old Testament times; and if this is so then it cannot have been the tomb of Jesus, for that was Joseph of Arimathea's "own new tomb" (Mt. 27:60). Regardless of this, however, White makes two interesting points based on careful attention to the Greek words used in the Gospel records.

The first point concerns the linen in which the body of Jesus was wrapped. Matthew 27:59,60 states that, when Joseph of Arimathea had been given the body of Jesus, "he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his own new tomb". The word translated "linen cloth" here is *sindōn*, which refers to a single sheet of linen. It is also used in the same context in Mark 15:46 and Luke 23:53. The same word is used in Mark 14:51,52 of the piece of linen that the young man who followed Jesus and the apostles from the upper room had wrapped round him. In John 19:39,40 we read that Joseph and Nicodemus "took . . . the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury". The word here is *othonia*, the plural of *othonion*, meaning a strip of linen, and this word is translated "linen clothes" in Luke 24:12 and John 20:5-7 concerning what was seen by Peter and John in the otherwise empty tomb.

The suggestion is that a large piece of linen was used initially by Joseph to wrap the body of Jesus, as described by Matthew, Mark and Luke. Later Joseph was joined by Nicodemus, who came

with the necessary spices, and together they prepared the linen covered body in the accepted way by wrapping it in strips of linen, like bandages, incorporating the spices.

As the late Brother Storer pointed out in his article, the linen bandages and the spices were left undisturbed, and may well have set in the shape of the body of Jesus. Bill White says that the body of Jesus would have been laid on a ledge in the tomb and would have been visible through the open door. He puts forward the following idea about what exactly happened when Peter and John visited the tomb, as recorded in John 20:1-10. Mary Magdalene, having seen that the stone had been moved from the entrance to the tomb, ran immediately and told Peter and John that the body of Jesus had been taken away. They ran to see for themselves. John, getting there first, bent down and looked in, and seeing in the half-light the outline of a body, concluded that Mary had been too hasty, the body was still there.

Peter then came up, went in and saw that the linen bandages and the napkin were separate but does not seem to have understood the implication. John then entered the tomb to see for himself, perhaps responding to a cry of Peter's, and, as Brother Storer pointed out, understood the implication of what he saw, and so believed. White points out that, although we refer to 'the empty tomb', the most powerful fact indicating that Jesus had risen was that the tomb was *not* empty; the spice impregnated bandages were still there in the shape of a body, but with no body inside them.

The second interesting point made by Bill White concerns the stone. This would have been in the shape of a wheel, and it was the practice to cut a groove in the rock in front of a tomb in order to make it possible to roll the stone into its place. The groove would be at its deepest by the centre of the entrance to make it easier to roll it into the right place and more difficult to roll it away. Matthew says that Joseph "rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre" (27:60). Presumably it had already been prepared ready for when the tomb was used, and it would have had to be lifted and



The Garden Tomb.

rolled into place, which would have involved a number of men, probably servants of Joseph. Thus it would also have required a number of people to roll the stone back up the groove to open up the tomb, hence the concern of the women as to how they would gain access to it. The size of the stone is emphasised by Mark, who says, “when they looked, they saw that the stone was rolled away: for it was very great” (16:4).

Matthew then goes on to say that on the resurrection day “there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it” (28:2). If a circular stone wheel had simply been rolled a little way to open up the entrance to the tomb, it would not have provided a suitable seat for the angel. Therefore it must have been rolled away and laid flat. John uses a different word to state what happened: “Mary Magdalene . . . seeth the stone *taken away* from the sepulchre” (20:1). This implies it was not just rolled a short way but removed some distance away; the Greek *airō* can mean ‘lift up’ or ‘carry away’. This is consistent with the idea that the stone was taken well away from the tomb, then laid down to form a flat seat for the angel to sit on.

This has interesting implications. As Brother Storer pointed out, the resurrection of Jesus in-

volved his body passing through the bandages and spices that were tightly wound round him. Given that this was the case, he did not need the stone to be rolled away to get out of the tomb; he could have passed through the stone as well. The purpose of removing the stone was not to let Jesus out but to let people in to see that he was no longer there.

Moreover, the complete removal of the stone from its groove took away a possible way for the guards to explain the absence of the body of Jesus. If it had simply shifted sufficiently for someone to squeeze in they could have said that it had shifted as a result of the earthquake of Matthew 28:2, allowing the disciples to creep in and remove the body; but an earthquake would not have removed the stone completely and deposited it flat on the ground some way off. The best the Jewish authorities could come up with to explain the empty tomb was, in their words to the guard, “Say ye, His disciples came by night, and stole him away while we slept” (v. 13), and the weakness of this explanation is indicated by the absence of any later reference to it, even when the apostles repeatedly proclaimed the resurrection to the people of Jerusalem, and even to the authorities themselves, as recorded in the early chapters of Acts.