

## **Matthew 27:57-28:15**

### **“The Battle for the Bones of Jesus”**

#### **Sermon**

**Tim Black**

1.

### **Introduction - “The Lost Tomb of Jesus”**

1.

### **The Documentary**

1.

Title: “The Lost Tomb of Jesus”

2.

Produced by James Cameron, the director of a documentary on the “Titanic.”  
Directed by Simcha Jacobovici, a Jew.

3.

Aired March 4, 2007 on the Discovery Channel.

4.

### **Its Facts**

1.

Tomb was discovered in 1980 in the Jerusalem suburb of Talpiot.

2.

It contained 10 ossuaries, which are “bone boxes,” which contained the bones of people who had been buried in the tomb. Six of the ossuaries were inscribed with the name of the person whose bones were contained in each box. The names are written in Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic, and most are written legibly enough that I can read them. Those names read:

1.

Matia / Matthew

2.

Jose / Joseph

3.

Maria / Mary

4.

Yeshua Bar Yoseph / Jesus, son of Joseph (poorly written)

5.

Mariamene e Mara / Mary (could read Mary and Martha)

6.

Yehuda bar Yeshua / Judah, son of Jesus

7.

Mark 6:3 says that Jesus had several brothers, and lists them as “James, Joses, Judas, and Simon.” Jesus also had sisters, Salome and perhaps Miriam.

8.

After the bone boxes were taken out of the tomb and examined, the bones were reburied to respect the wishes of the Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem.

9.

## **Its Claims**

1.

The documentary takes these facts and claims they indicate this was the tomb of Jesus, and that it contained the bones of Jesus. The documentary proposes the following conclusions:

1.

Jesus did not physically rise from the dead, though He may have risen from the dead in a “spiritual” way. [1](#)

2.

Mary Magdalene was buried in the tomb (assuming she was Mariamene).

3.

Mary Magdalene was Jesus’ wife.

4.

A stone box labeled “Judah, son of Jesus” belonged to their son.

5.

Mary the mother of Jesus was buried near him, as was a relative named Matthew.

6.

Claims to give tangible historical evidence for the mere fact of Jesus' existence.

7.

The key argument in support of these claims is that it is statistically improbable that so many names which scripture indicates are the names of Jesus' family members would appear in a tomb together, unless it was in fact the tomb of Jesus' family. The statistical argument runs like this: Scripture does not say Jesus had relatives named Judah or Matthew who might be buried in the same tomb with him, so they are left out of the equation. The remaining four names were had by 1/190, 1/160, 1/20, and 1/4 people in Jesus' day, so by multiplying those fractions together, and correcting for possible error, conservatively, we would expect these names to occur together only in 1/600 tombs.

8.

## Its Evaluation

1.

This statistical argument is flawed.

1.

First, because these names are **common names**. The director claims the name used on the ossuary for Mary Magdalene, Mariamene, was rare, had only by 1/160 people, but in fact it is just a different form of the far more common name Mary, had by 1/4 people. This in itself drastically decreases the odds that this was the tomb of Jesus.

2.

Second, because Jose could be Jesus' **father Joseph** rather than His brother Jose. In that case, the probability of finding a bone box named "Jesus, son of Joseph" next to a bone box named "Joseph" is very high. It is no surprise to find these two bone boxes next to each other; they are not statistically independent of one another. This second flaw in the statistics reduces the odds that this was the tomb of the Biblical Jesus in a similarly drastic manner.

[2](#)

3.

Third, the presence of names in the tomb which scripture does **not** indicate are **relatives** of Jesus serves to further

reduce the odds that this was the tomb of Jesus.

4.

The documentary is unwilling to take these further statistical considerations into account.

5.

There are many other arguments both for and against the claims of the documentary. Notable arguments against the documentary:

1.

**Illegible writing.** The inscription that is claimed to read “Jesus” is the hardest to read, and may not actually spell “Jesus” but rather some other name.

2.

**Incorrect theology.** Why would Jesus’ followers write on His bone box that He was the “Son of Joseph” when they knew Joseph was not His biological father?

3.

**No support by archaeologists.** Top archaeologists consider the movie's claims preposterous. The original discoverer of the tomb denies that it could be the tomb of Jesus. [3](#)

4.

**Other burial places more well attested.** There are other more historically trustworthy locations for the burial place of Jesus—at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, and of His mother Mary—either beneath the Dormition Abbey in Jerusalem, or in Ephesus.

5.

Dr. James H. Charlesworth, Professor of New Testament Language and Literature at Princeton Theological Seminary says:

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“1) The scribbling is not an inscription, it is a sloppy graffiti.

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2) The name “Jesus” before “son of Joseph” is the most difficult name to read among all the names in the tomb.

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3) All archaeologists and historians know that the names “Jesus” and “Joseph” are two of the most common names in first-century Jerusalem.

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4) The ossuary is remarkably ordinary without any ornamentation; this may indicate that the remains placed inside belonged to someone rather common.

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5) After Jesus’ crucifixion as a common criminal, some priests wanted to stop (even kill) those who were claiming that Jesus was the Son of God because God had raised him from the dead. They could have produced the bones of Jesus rather easily and thus thwarted those who claimed that God had raised Jesus



from the dead.

-

6) The so-called “Jesus tomb” is not far from the place where Caiaphas’s ossuary was recovered. The “Jesus tomb” is decorated and elegant and would have been clearly visible before 70 CE when Roman soldiers destroyed the area. The priests who sought to stop the Palestinian Jesus Movement would have known about this tomb, regardless of who was placed inside.

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7) The authors of the Gospels report that Jesus was placed in a tomb prepared for the family of Joseph of Arimathea; there is no New Testament evidence that

Jesus' family had a tomb." [4](#)

1.

## **The broader problem**

1.

In recent years marketers have started a new tradition of coming out with these sorts of critiques of traditional Christianity right before Easter.

1.

Last year it was Dan Brown's Da Vinci Code novel and movie.

2.

In previous years it has been a resurgence of interest in the Gnostic gospels and TV programs claiming that Jesus was merely human.

3.

Other fantastic claims that have been made:

-

Jesus was a woman.

-

Jesus was a space alien and is buried in Japan.

-

Jesus survived the crucifixion and is buried in the Kashmir region of India.

-

Jesus was insane.

-

Jesus was a Buddhist.

-

Jesus was a Muslim.

-

Jesus was a Mormon.

-

Jesus was a magician.

-

Jesus was a Gnostic.

-

Jesus was the son of Mary and a Roman soldier.

-

Jesus never existed.

-

Jesus was never executed.

-

Jesus was married and had children.

-

Jesus was a social revolutionary when he was not a mere Mediterranean peasant.

-

Jesus was an itinerant visionary whose real teachings exist only in distorted, fragmented form.

-

Why do people do this? It is because there is a **battle for the bones of Jesus**

▪

1.

That battle is a physical battle, an intellectual battle, and a

## spiritual

battle. Our passage today has 4 sections:

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Jesus is buried 27:57-61

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The guard at the tomb 27:62-66

-

The resurrection 28:1-10

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The report of the guard 28:11-15

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In the first and third sections the text focuses on the actions of believers. In the second and fourth sections the text focuses on the actions of unbelievers. The believers bury Christ's body and witness His resurrection. The unbelievers seek to prevent Christ's body from being stolen and to explain away the resurrection. This juxtaposition of the contrasting and conflicting actions of believers and unbelievers indicates there is a battle. And it is a battle for the bones of Jesus.

1 "If Jesus' mortal remains have been found, this would contradict the idea of a physical ascension but not the idea of a spiritual ascension." Quoted from <http://dsc.discovery.com/convergence/tomb/theology/theology.html>

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2 By my very unscientific reworking of the statistics, the odds are not 600 to 1 for, but 13.2 to 10 against, this being the tomb of Jesus.

3 “The official report written by the archeologist Amos Kloner found nothing remarkable in the discovery. The cave, it said, was probably in use by three or four generations of Jews from the beginning of the Common Era. It was disturbed in antiquity, and vandalized. The names on the boxes were common in the first century (25 percent of women in Jerusalem, for example, were called Miriam or a derivative).” Quoted from <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/17328478/site/newsweek/page/2/>

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4 Quoted from <http://www.ptsem.edu/NEWS/images/Charlesworth%20comment.pdf>

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1.

## **Body**

1.

### **The Physical Battle 27:57-66**

1.

First, it is a physical battle. A battle for the physical bones of Jesus.

1.

Joseph of Arimathea

-

“Disciple of Jesus”

-

“

asked for the body”

-

**In order to keep Jewish law.** A dead body could not legally remain on the cross for more than 24 hours, and it could not be taken down and buried on the following day because it was the Sabbath, so it had to be buried today. Joseph of Arimathea saw this need and so made a way for the law to be kept.

-

Joseph’s purpose is not primarily to gain **possession** of the body of Christ, though this is the result of his action.

-

“Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.”

-

Notice that the **location of this tomb was known** to Joseph, to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, AND to the chief priests, the Pharisees, Pilate, and the guard of soldiers. When the soldiers and the Jews later told the false explanation of the empty tomb, they no doubt made the location of this tomb known to the general public. This lends more support to the traditionally held location of

Jesus' tomb than to any new discovery of a tomb at a different location.

-

The guard

-

“after the day of Preparation”

-

**Manner:           Impiety - Business on the Sabbath.** The chief priests and Pharisees considered it a work of necessity to petition Pilate       on the Sabbath. I'm surprised they were willing to do this.       This gives a slight shade of impiety to their intent from the       outset.

-

“imposter...fraud”

-

**Mindset: Defame Christ and His disciples.** These are based on the same root word in the Greek. Notice that here you can see the Jews preparing for the intellectual battle already. Their “Plan A” is the physical battle, but if that fails, they have an explanation ready: His disciples stole Him away and will tell the people a lie that “He has risen from the dead.”

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**“tomb to be made secure”**

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**Means: Keep Christ's bones in the tomb.**

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**Your response.**



-

I have little doubt that if you were present for these events, you would want to take part in this physical battle. You who are believers would want to help Christ receive a God-honoring burial like Joseph did, and would want to visit Christ's grave like the Marys did. And the unbelievers of today would want to lock Jesus' bones in the tomb so we could not pull the greatest hoax in human history

on the world. And in fact today, unbelievers hope they can find Christ's bones in order to prove that Christ's resurrection was a hoax after all.

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## **The Intellectual Battle**

## 28:11-15

1.

Second, the battle for the bones of Jesus is an intellectual battle. It

is not that believers and unbelievers can gain possession of Jesus' bones by means of a successful argument, but rather they battle intellectually over where in fact the bones of Christ are *located* /

. Where are they? In Jerusalem?  
India? Japan? Or in heaven,  
seated at the right hand of God  
the Father?

2.

The Jews began this  
intellectual battle even before  
Christ rose from the dead. This  
is not unlike the current practice  
of airing anti-Christian  
documentaries immediately prior  
to the celebration of Easter.  
But the intellectual battle began

in earnest immediately after the resurrection.

3.

The report of the guard 11-15

1.

“all that had taken place”

-

**The truth.** It appears the guard gave an accurate and complete account of the fact that Christ rose from the dead.

-

“taken counsel...we will satisfy him”

-

**The conspiracy.** This is quite literally a conspiracy.

-

“a sufficient sum of money”

-

**The bribe.** The Jews

give the guard a selfish  
motive to disseminate a  
false report.

-

“stole Him away”

-



**The lie.** Those who claimed Christ was an “**imposter**” promoting “**fraud**” are now engaging in fraud themselves. The guard had told them the truth, but the Jews deliberately suppress the truth in their unrighteousness. This protects the Jews’

intellectual,  
ecclesiastical, and political  
position, but it involves  
serious intellectual  
problems.

-

The lie the Jews  
concocted is the same  
story told by the  
documentary. It is still

circulated to this day.

The tomb of which the documentary speaks is very likely not the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

So, for Jesus' bones to arrive in the documentary's tomb, they had to be removed from Joseph's tomb and transported to the tomb in Talpiot. The

documentary and the  
scholarly buzz  
surrounding it focuses  
carefully on this very  
passage, noting that  
immediately after the  
resurrection, some  
people believed Christ's  
body had been stolen by  
His disciples.

-

But would the disciples really have been able to sneak past the guards while the guards were asleep? The Jews had paid the guards to stay awake! And now they pay the guards to falsely admit that they had fallen asleep, the

very thing they had been  
paid not to do. The  
story doesn't ring true.

-

And further, if  
someone had stolen the  
body, it would have been  
either the Romans, the  
Jews, or the disciples. If

it was either the Romans or the Jews who moved the body, they could have produced the body to disprove the disciples' claim that Jesus rose from the dead. Why didn't they do so? If it was the disciples who moved the body, why were they willing to die for their claim that Jesus

rose from the dead, when  
they knew        He did not?  
Again, the Jews' story  
doesn't ring true.

-

Yet        unbelievers  
continually develop new  
ways of explaining away  
the        resurrection. And



those explanations  
always fail to fully  
prove that Christ did not  
rise from the dead.

-

“this story has been

spread ”

-

**The effect:  
deception**

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# **The spiritual battle**

## **28:1-10**

1.

Lastly, there is a

spiritual battle for the bones of Jesus. And this battle makes all the difference. In this battle, the onslaught of unbelief is completely vanquished. Because of the overwhelming spiritual power of Jesus Christ, unbelievers will never win the physical or intellectual battle for

the bones of Jesus. The issue is not merely that Jesus' physical bones can't be found, it is not merely that their earthly location can't be finally ascertained through intellectual inquiry, but the issue is that Jesus Christ is the true and living God, and no mere mortal can defeat Him.

Consider the glorious and awesome power of the living God! A minuscule portion of His mighty power is on display in the angel He sent to the tomb.

1.

The angel 1-4

—

“a great earthquake”

—

“angel of the Lord”

—

Angels are incomparably more powerful and holy than men! And yet before God Himself the angels cover their faces and cry “Holy, Holy, Holy!” Their holiness is absolutely nothing compared to the infinite holiness



# of God!

—

“rolled back the  
stone”

—

“His appearance  
was like lightning, and  
his clothing white as  
snow.”

—

“for fear of him  
the guards trembled  
and became like  
dead men.”

—

If you are not  
trembling in your

heart because of  
the incredibly  
terrible power of this  
angel, you don't yet  
understand that  
all the Roman  
guards in the world  
cannot cage the  
bones of Jesus!

If you are more  
impressed by the  
arguments of a  
television  
documentary than  
by the earth-shaking  
power of this  
angelic spirit of utter  
astounding

brightness and  
power, you do  
not yet know the  
power of the  
Almighty God!

-

And this angel

came from that  
God!

—

# The message 5-7

-

“Do not be  
afraid...He is not  
here, for He has  
risen.”



-

Amazingly, the  
angel tells the  
women not to fear.  
The reason is that  
the angel  
knows they are

seeking Jesus.  
The angel is not  
here to destroy  
those who seek  
Jesus, but to  
announce the  
message that  
Jesus is risen from  
the dead.

-

Neither  
believers or  
unbelievers will win  
the physical battle  
for the bones of  
Jesus. No, instead,

Jesus Himself won  
that battle. He  
raised His bones  
from the dead, and  
He takes His flesh  
and bones  
where He wants  
them to be.  
Unbelievers want to

secure      Christs'  
grave in order to  
possess His  
physical bones, but  
Christ alone  
holds the keys of  
Death and Hades!  
He has taken  
captivity captive,

and now gives the  
gift of resurrection  
to men. He is  
the Resurrection  
and the Life. Do  
you believe  
this?

-

Your response  
8-10

—

If you do, then in your heart the spiritual battle for the bones of Jesus has already been won. Christ has won it by



raising your  
heart to life, and on  
the final day He will  
raise your body as  
well to life in  
glory. His bones  
are not bound by  
sin and death  
and hell, and

neither are yours.  
The spiritual battle  
for the bones of  
Jesus is over.

-

And so is the

intellectual battle.  
The women's  
message now is no  
longer that  
Jesus is buried in  
the tomb, but rather  
that He is risen  
from the dead. It is  
this message—that

Jesus is risen  
from the  
dead—that now is  
the truth of  
convicting,  
convincing,  
converting power  
that they carry to  
the apostles, and to

the world. It is the message of the gospel, and this alone, that will triumph over the intellectual arguments of unbelief. The gospel must be

presented in all the  
fullness of its  
evidential  
support and sound  
intellectual rigor, all  
of its logical  
consistency, but it  
is the gospel's call  
to repent and

believe on  
Jesus Christ that  
will resurrect the  
dry bones of the  
lost, deceived,  
and dying world.

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And so the  
physical battle is  
over as well.

James Cameron  
and Simcha

Jacobovici will  
never find the dead

bones of Jesus.  
Because He is  
alive, and exalted  
to the right hand of  
God, and He will  
come again to  
judge the world.  
Unbelievers will  
claim to have

found his tomb time  
and again, and time  
and again you  
should always  
challenge them and  
say, “Show me the  
bones!” They  
cannot. And they  
will not.

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1.

# Conclusion

1.

Where are the  
bones of Jesus?

Why can't you  
show them to me?  
Why can't you  
prove beyond a  
shadow of a doubt  
where His grave  
lies? Why can't  
you prove He didn't  
rise from the dead?

“O Grave, where  
is your victory? O  
Death, where is  
your sting?”

Because of Christ's  
resurrection, they  
are gone.

2.

“Thanks be to  
God, who gives us  
the victory through  
our Lord Jesus  
Christ!” 1

**Corinthians 15:57**



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