Here I’ll continue my thread on topics that I changed my mind about or came to see in doing my research for *How Jesus Became God*. One of the most important things I changed my mind about was the idea that Jesus’ tomb was discovered empty three days after his death.

When I was a Christian, of course I thought that was the case. But even when I had become an agnostic I thought it was probably a historical tradition: it’s found in all four Gospels, for example, and the fact that the stories indicate precisely it was *women* who found the tomb did not seem like something Christians would want to make up. (And so, as an agnostic, I had to come up with alternative explanations for why the tomb was empty. But…)

I changed my mind. Most of my change came from my investigation of Roman practices of crucifixion. As it turns out, standard policy appears to have been to have left the bodies of corpses on the crosses to decompose, as part of their punishment. Decent burials were not allowed. I go into this matter at length in the book – at greater length than I want to excerpt here. But I can excerpt my new reflections on whether it is conceivable that any Christian story-tellers would invent the tradition that women found the tomb empty. Here is what I say about that:

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Would Anyone Invent the Women at the Tomb?

It is often argued by Christian apologists that no one would make up the story of the discovery of the empty tomb precisely because according to these stories, it was women who found the tomb. According to this line of reasoning, women were widely thought of as untrustworthy and, in fact, their testimony could not be allowed in courts of law. According to this view, if someone wanted to invent the notion of a discovered tomb, they would be sure that it was discovered by credible witnesses, namely by the male disciples.

I used to hold this view as well, and so I see its force. But now that I’ve gone more deeply into the matter, I see its real flaw. It suffers, in short, from a poverty of imagination. It does not take much mental effort at all to imagine who would come up with a story in which the female followers of Jesus, rather than the male followers, discovered the tomb.

The first thing to point out is that we are not talking about a Jewish court of law in which witnesses are being called to testify. We’re talking about oral traditions about the man Jesus. But who would invent women as witnesses to the empty tomb? Well, for openers, maybe women would. We have good reasons for thinking that women were particularly well represented in the early Christian communities. We know from the letters of Paul – from passages such as Romans 16 – that women played crucial leadership roles in the churches: ministering as deacons, leading the services in their homes, engaging in missionary activities. Paul speaks of one woman in the Roman church as “foremost among the apostles” (Junia in Rom. 16:8). Women are also reputed to have figured prominently in Jesus’ own ministry, throughout the Gospels. That may well have been the case, historically. But in any event, there is nothing at all implausible in thinking that women who found their newfound Christian communities personally liberating told stories about Jesus in light of their own situations, so that women were portrayed as playing an even greater part in the life and death of Jesus than they actually did, historically. It does not take a great deal of imagination to think that female storytellers indicated that women were the first to believe, after finding that his tomb was empty.
Moreover, this claim that it was specifically women who found the empty tomb makes the best sense of the realities of history. Preparing bodies for burial was commonly the work of women, not men. And so why wouldn’t the stories tell of women who went to prepare the body? Moreover, if, in the stories, they’re the ones who went to the tomb to anoint the body, naturally they would be the ones who found the tomb empty.

In addition, our earliest sources are quite clear that the male disciples fled the scene and were not present for Jesus’ crucifixion. As I stated earlier, this may well be historical, that the disciples in fear of their own lives not only went into hiding, but fled town in order to avoid arrest. Where would they go? Presumably back home, to Galilee. That was over a hundred miles and would have taken at least a week on foot. If the men had scattered, or returned home, who was left in the tradition to go to the tomb? If it wasn’t the fleeing disciples, it must have been the other followers of Jesus, the women who had come with the apostolic band to Jerusalem but who presumably did not need to fear arrest.

Moreover, one can imagine strictly literary reasons for “inventing” the women at the empty tomb. Let’s suppose it was Mark himself who invented the story. I personally don’t think he did; there is no way to know, of course, but my suspicion is that it was a story Mark inherited from his tradition. But suppose Mark did invent it. There would be plenty of reasons, just from his own literary perspective, to do so. The more you know about Mark’s Gospel, the easier it is to think of reasons. Let me give just one. Mark makes a special point throughout his narrative that the male disciples never do understand who Jesus is. Despite all his miracles, despite all his teachings, despite everything they see him do and say, they never do get it. And so at the end of the Gospel, who is it who learns that Jesus has not stayed dead but has been raised? It is the women. Not the male disciples. The women never tell. As a result, the male disciples never do come to understand. That is all consistent with Mark’s view.

Again, I’m not saying that I think Mark invented the story. But if we can imagine very easily a reason for Mark to have invented it, it is no leap at all to think that one or more of his predecessors may also have had reasons for doing so. In the end, we simply cannot say that there would be “no reason” for someone to invent the story of women discovering the empty tomb.