

How long was Jesus in the tomb?

Many books and articles have been written about this question. The principal difficulty derives from Jesus' own use of several different expressions to describe that time. Referring to the time period between His death and resurrection He Himself said—"the third day", "after three days" and "three days and three nights". A careful look at all the relevant passages makes clear that the three phrases are not equal candidates. Consider:

There is only one instance of 'three days and three nights', to be found in Matthew 12:40. Jesus cites the experience of Jonah (Jonah 1:17) and says that He will have a similar experience. That we are in the presence of a Hebrew idiom will become apparent from what follows.

There are just two instances of 'after three days', to be found in Mark 8:31 and Matthew 27:63. In Mark Jesus is cited in an indirect quote, as Jesus tells the disciples what is going to happen to Him. In Matthew Jesus is quoted by the Jewish leaders as they ask Pilate to guard the tomb; but notice that in verse 64 they go on to say, "until the third day", so the two phrases would appear to be synonymous.

As for 'the third day', there are eleven direct instances, plus three related ones. Proper hermeneutic procedure requires that we interpret the few in terms of the many, and not the reverse. In Matthew 16:21, 17:23, 20:19; Mark 9:31, 10:34;¹ Luke 9:22, 18:33, Jesus is telling the disciples what is going to happen to Him. In Luke 24:7 the angel quotes Jesus to the women at the empty tomb. In Luke 24:46 the resurrected Jesus is speaking with the disciples. In Acts 10:40 Peter is preaching to Cornelius. In 1 Corinthians 15:4 Paul makes a statement. Those are the eleven direct instances. In Luke 24:21 Cleopas says to Jesus, "today is the third day since these things happened"—the 'these things' refers to the crucifixion, and the 'today' includes the resurrection, since he cites the women. In John 2:19 Jesus says, "destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it". In Luke 13:32 Jesus sends a message to Herod, "the third day I will be perfected". Those are the three related instances, for a total of fourteen. Well, the last one is marginal, so make it thirteen.

I suppose that all human cultures have the tendency to think that their way of seeing things is right, and all others wrong. But what to do when conflicts arise? When attempting to understand a given event, it is the culture within which it happened that must be respected. Jews and Brazilians handle time differently than do 'Westerners' in general. Here in Brazil, after church, we often say, "I'll see you in eight days", which means the next Sunday. The day in which you are is included in the number. We have biblical basis; consider John 20:26. "Well, after eight days His disciples were inside again, and Thomas with them." 'Eight days' from when? "Then at evening on that first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the middle" (John 20:19). The 'first day of the week' is Sunday; the use of "that" indicates that it was Resurrection Sunday. With few exceptions, the Church Universal has always understood that Jesus arose on a Sunday, as the Text plainly indicates. In John

¹ In Mark 10:34 the eclectic text currently in vogue reads 'after three days', following a mere 0.7% of the extant Greek manuscripts, which manuscripts are of objectively inferior quality, demonstrably so.

20:26 “after eight days” means the next Sunday. To the ‘western’ mind, the use of ‘after’ is misleading; ‘after eight days’ would place one in the ninth day. But we are in the presence of a Hebrew idiom, wherein ‘after eight days’ = ‘the eighth day’. This is plainly indicated in Matthew 27:63-64, where ‘after three days’ = ‘until the third day’. But as already noted, the beginning day is included in the number; so ‘after eight days’ = ‘the eighth day’ = seven consecutive solar days of elapsed time (although the first and last solar day may not be a full 24 hours).

Now consider Luke 23:53-24:1. “Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock, where no one had ever been laid. **54** It was a Preparation day; the Sabbath was drawing near. **55** The women who had come with Him from Galilee followed along, and they saw the tomb and how His body was placed there. **56** Then they returned and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment. **1** Then on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb carrying the spices that they had prepared, along with some others.” After the women observed the burial, they rested for one day—Sabbath is singular. They took their spices to the tomb on Sunday. It follows that Jesus was buried on Friday. Jesus was in the tomb for part of Friday, all of Saturday, and part of Sunday—He rose ‘the third day’.

Mark 14:1 may also be of interest. “It was two days before the Passover and the Unleavened Bread.” According to a careful analysis of the sequence of events that made up the last week, at this point it was late Tuesday afternoon, probably after 6:00 p.m.—adding two days takes us to 6:00 p.m. on Thursday, but the proceedings in the upper room began after 6:00 p.m. on that Thursday, which to the Jews was already Friday. Therefore Jesus died on a Friday. We take it that “3 days and 3 nights” was an idiomatic expression that could refer to three solar days represented by some part of each, but in sequence—in this case: Friday, Saturday and Sunday.