

THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

Christianity is a historical religion: unlike all other religions, Christianity isn't based on philosophical propositions, but on objective, historic truth. The resurrection of Jesus is the foundational truth of Christianity; take this away and all of Christendom falls. Knowing this, many critics have attempted to prove that the resurrection was not a historical event, although none have succeeded; rather, many skeptics, after studying the facts, have been converted. The resurrection of Jesus, incredible as it may seem, is a fact of history.

The man involved, Jesus of Nazareth, really was a historical figure of first century Palestine. The event itself occurred at a definite time and place in history. We may have accepted the resurrection by faith, yet as we examine the historical proof, our faith will be verified. After hearing the evidence, we may wonder how anyone can doubt the resurrection of Christ.

Notice the circumstantial evidence.

Jesus was definitely dead. Skeptics have theorized that Jesus didn't really die, but only appeared dead, later to revive and escape the tomb. However, since the Bible is an accepted generally truthful historical book even by skeptics, let's consider the evidence of John 19. Listen at the judgment of the soldiers: "Because it was the Preparation Day, that the bodies should not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), the Jews asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they [Jesus and the other two crucified with Him] might be taken away. Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who was crucified with Him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs" (verses 31-33). Here were men trained to kill, and who, because of their occupation, had seen death often; in other words, they were men who knew the signs of death. As they set out to do their jobs, their trained eyes noticed a difference between Jesus and the other two; so evident was His death that they didn't break His legs.

Notice John's next statement: "But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out" (verse 34). Michael Green, who wrote of Christ's death, wrote, "Had Jesus been alive when the spear pierced His side, strong spurts of blood would have emerged with every heartbeat. Instead, the observer noticed semi-solid red clots seeping out, distinct and separate from the accompanying watery serum. This is evidence of massive clotting of the blood in the main arteries, and is exceptionally strong medical proof of death. It is all the more impressive because the evangelist could not possibly have realized its significance to a pathologist. The 'blood and water' from the spear-thrust is proof positive that Jesus was already dead" (*Man Alive*, InterVarsity Press, p. 33).

John's testimony of this event validates the truth of Christ's death: verse 35 reads, "He who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you may believe." If the argument that Jesus wasn't really dead is valid, I wonder why the Jews didn't think of using that argument instead of bribing the guards to lie about Christ's resurrection (Matthew 28:11-15). Aren't sleeping witnesses sort of ridiculous?! If Jesus wasn't really dead, how could He have lived through three days in a cold tomb, with no food or water, and bleeding profusely from many wounds? Besides this, He walked seven miles on pierced feet from Jerusalem to Emmaus (Luke 24:13).

The Roman guard secured the tomb. Matthew 27:62-66 reads, "On the next day, which followed the Day of Preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees gathered together to Pilate saying, 'Sir, we remember while [Jesus] was still alive, how that deceiver said, "After three days I will rise." Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night and steal Him away, and say to the people, "He has risen from the dead." So the last deception will be worse than the first.' Pilate said to them, 'You have a guard; go your way, make it as secure as you know how.' So they went and made the tomb secure, sealing the stone and setting the guard." Skeptics, who cannot deny that Christ was dead, have theorized that His body was stolen from the tomb; however, the guards were unconcerned with the worries of the Jewish leaders or the disciples, their total allegiance was to the empire of Rome. The Roman seal affixed to the tomb was far more sacred to them than all the philosophy of Israel. Their lives depended on their diligence, knowing the punishment for sleeping on duty could be death. Keeping the body secure within the tomb was their only concern—they would've died before they allowed anyone to steal the body of Jesus. The only reasonable

explanation to the empty tomb, then, is that a force more powerful than the Roman guards overcame them; obviously the chief priests knew this too, for, as noted a moment ago, instead of denying the word of the guards, they bribed them to lie and say that Jesus' disciples came at night and stole His body while they slept (Matthew 28:11-15).

The empty tomb itself is evidence. Matthew 28:5-6 reads, "The angel...said to the women [the two Marys who came to see the tomb, verse 1], 'Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and indeed He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him. Behold, I have told you.'" The vacant tomb is the undeniable fact that no one can disprove: Jesus' enemies couldn't deny it; anyone could come and see for himself, the tomb was empty, and His body has yet to be found. The condition of the grave clothes are a testimony in the evidence of the empty tomb: John 20:3-8 reads, "Peter...went out, and the other disciple (John), and were going to the tomb. So they both ran together, and the other disciple outran Peter and came to the tomb first. And he, stooping down and looking in, saw the linen cloths lying there; yet he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb; and he saw the linen cloths lying there, and the handkerchief that had been around His head, not lying with the linen cloths, but folded together in a place by itself. Then the other disciple (John), who came to the tomb first, went in also; and he saw and believed." The body of Christ was gone, but the grave clothes were still in their place. Even if grave robbers could have overcome the Roman guards, would they then take the time to carefully unwrap the body of Jesus before removing Him. That's very unlikely! What did John see that caused him to believe? Not just the absence of the body, but the undisturbed condition of the grave clothes. The body of Jesus had been tightly wrapped in linen cloth and one hundred pounds of spices: before Jesus was buried, John 19:39-40 tells us that "Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. Then they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in strips of linen with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury." Had we been present when the resurrection took place, what would we have seen? We would've suddenly noticed the body had disappeared. The wrappings, without support of the body, would've collapsed under the weight of the spices. The gap probably would have appeared between the body clothes and the head napkin where His head and face had been as a cocoon without the butterfly (John 20:6-7). Such was the scene which convinced John that Jesus had indeed resurrected.

Witnesses to whom Jesus appeared after His resurrection are evidence. Still seeking to discount the resurrection, skeptics claim the appearances were hallucinations of hopeful disciples, but this can't be true because His appearances were too numerous and too varied to be simply hallucinations: the Scriptures record ten appearances after His resurrection and four appearances after His ascension. To Mary Magdalene (John 20:14 & Mark 16:9); to the women returning from the tomb (Matthew 28:9-10); to Peter later in the day (Luke 24:34 & First Corinthians 15:5); to the Emmaus disciples (Luke 24:13-33); to the apostles when Thomas was absent (John 20:19-24); to the apostles when Thomas was present (John 20:26-29); to the seven by Lake Tiberias (John 21:1-23); to a multitude of five hundred at once (First Corinthians 15:6); to James (First Corinthians 15:7); to the eleven at the ascension (Matthew 28:16-20 & Acts 1:4-8); to Stephen (Acts 7:55); to Paul (Acts 9:3-6); to Paul in the temple (Acts 22:17-21 & 23:11); and finally to John on the Isle of Patmos (Revelation 1:10-19).

Hallucinations as an explanation just won't work for although there were hundreds of individual witnesses, they obviously agreed on who and what they saw, otherwise history, as well as the people who lived then, surely would have made a fool out of Paul for his statement about the hundreds who witnessed Jesus alive after His death. Hallucinations generally repeat themselves, but in this case they abruptly ended with everyone by the end of the first century. Hallucinations are caused when people hope to see something, strongly anticipating its appearance; however, none of the disciples expected to see Jesus again, but were rather caused to believe against their will like Thomas in John 20. Thomas was absent when Jesus appeared to the disciples, and in spite of their efforts, he refused to believe their witness: John 20:25 reads, "The other disciples said to [Thomas], 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand in His side, I will not believe.'" Later Jesus appeared to deal specifically with the one we have heard called "Doubting Thomas," causing him to believe against his will: verses 26-28 read, "After eight days, His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors

being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, 'Peace to you!' Then He said to Thomas, 'Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing.' And Thomas answered and said to Him, 'My Lord and My God.'" Since it never says that Thomas actually put his finger into the nail prints or his hand into Jesus' side, it seems that just by the mere fact that he saw Jesus and that Jesus told him to do the very things that he had said he wanted to do for proof when Jesus wasn't around to hear him, that was enough to convince him.

Luke, a convert through Paul's witness of the resurrection and a student of Christ's life, said that Jesus "presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs" (Acts 1:3). Christ's appearances were so well documented that Luke labeled the proofs "infallible." His research and conversion were based on eyewitness accounts: Luke began his writings about Jesus by saying, "Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which are most surely believed among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed" (Luke 1:1-4). No doubt Luke had such trust in his sources that he felt his account was the exact truth. If these witnesses all lied, then why did so many become martyrs for a lie?

Summary: So the circumstantial evidence surrounding Christ's death and tomb (namely that Jesus was definitely dead, that the Roman guards secured the tomb, that the tomb was empty, and that there were hundreds of eyewitnesses to a living Jesus after His burial) suggest only one conclusion—Jesus is alive! Yet, this is only circumstantial evidence!

Notice the phenomenon of the Lord's church as evidence.

If Jesus did indeed come back from the dead, one would naturally expect that He would build His church just as He had promised (Matthew 16:18). If He didn't return from the dead, who can explain the existence and the endurance of the church of Christ? The empty tomb became the cradle of the church.

Christ's resurrection was the message on which the church originated. Before His ascension, Jesus promised the apostles that they'd be His witnesses in Jerusalem and throughout the world (Acts 1:8). What were they to be witnesses of except the resurrection of Christ? Notice what was said by Peter in the first Gospel sermon the day the church was inaugurated: "Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption. This Jesus God has raised up, of which we all are witnesses" (Acts 2:29-32). So it was this message which resulted in the birth of the church.

Christ's resurrection was the central theme of the apostles' preaching. In choosing a man to take Judas' place, the most important qualification was that he was an eyewitness of Christ's resurrection: Acts 1:21-22 read, "Of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection." The significance of being an apostle was that their preaching was based on experience—he had actually seen the risen Christ which is why Paul, when defending his apostleship asked, "Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord" (First Corinthians 9:1)? Every apostolic sermon recorded in the book of Acts has the resurrection as its central message! Why? Because the resurrection was (and still is) a major part of the Gospel: In First Corinthians 15:1-4 Paul wrote, "I declare to you the Gospel which I preached to you.... For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures."

Especially with reference to the religious skeptics, they need to remember that many church doctrines are based on the fact of Christ's resurrection, so before they can deny the resurrection, he must find an

explanation for the existence of these doctrines that's equal in significance to the resurrection; otherwise, they can't dismiss the evidence that church doctrines lend to the probability of the resurrection.

The Lord's day is one such doctrine. One of the most revered commands of the Jews was to keep the Sabbath day holy; likewise, first century Christians met for worship on the first day of every week in acknowledgment of the resurrection of Christ, calling it "The Lord's Day" (Revelation 1:10). These Christians actually succeeded in changing worship to Sunday, yet remember that they were Jews! Considering their background, this was probably one of the biggest decisions any religious body of men have ever made. How can we explain the change from Saturday to Sunday worship without the resurrection?

Baptism is another doctrine directly linked to the resurrection of Christ. Here again, Jewish Christians went against their previous Mosaic beliefs: to the Jews circumcision made one a child of God; rejecting this, the apostles taught that one must repent and be baptized to become His child: In Colossians 2:11-14 Paul wrote, "In [Christ] you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all your trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross." What is the significance of baptism? In this act, one partakes in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. In Romans 6:3-5 Paul wrote, "Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection." Peter likewise said, "There is also an antitype which now saves us, namely baptism...through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (First Peter 3:21). In baptism one's old man of sin dies and he's raised up to new life in Christ. How can one account for the meaning of baptism if the resurrection never took place?

The church has survived while nation after nation has arisen only to fall: it has weathered bitter attacks waged against it. What can be the explanation for such endurance? Nothing, unless the fact that as long as Christ is alive His church will endure.

Summary: So the evidence of the church in support of Christ's resurrection can't be negated, and yet, the strongest evidence is yet to be heard.

Notice the transformed lives of the disciples as evidence.

The men pictured for us in the Gospel accounts are new and different men in the book of Acts. What mighty force could have transformed such mice into men?

Consider Simon Peter. The Gospel accounts characterize him as a man ruled by fear. In fear of his life, he denied the Lord three times and swore that he never knew Him (Matthew 26:69-75). "For fear of the Jews" he joined the others in the upper room to hide away (John 20:19). However, the book of Acts reveals him as a man of unwavering boldness; in this book no threat seems to intimidate him! In Acts 2 he preached so boldly and powerfully to vast crowd that 3,000 of them were converted. In Acts 5 we see him defy the Sanhedrin who had condemned Christ to death, rejoicing that he was worthy to suffer shame for the name of Christ. In Acts 12 we find him sleeping calmly in his cell the night before his expected execution. In the book of Acts, Peter is indeed a rock. What made the difference?

Consider James, the Lord's brother. He, throughout the Gospel accounts, is represented as an unbeliever: John 7:5 says that "even His brothers did not believe in Him." However, in the book of Acts, James is mentioned as assembled with the 120 disciples: "These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brother" (1:14); evidently, James was now a believer and is thought to be the James who wrote the book by that name since James the apostle and elder was beheaded. What made the difference in this brother of Jesus?

Consider Saul of Tarsus, the archenemy of the church. Acts 8:3 pictures Saul in all his fanatic zeal making “havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison”; he seemed to be the most staunch unbeliever of those times. However, Acts 9:19-22 read, “Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus. Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God. Then all who heard were amazed, and said, ‘Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?’ But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ.” This transformation seemed impossible in Saul’s case, yet it happened.

What made the difference in Paul, as well as in James, and Peter? Perhaps First Corinthians 15 will give us a clue. Jesus appeared to Peter (verse 5), James (verse 7), and Paul (verse 8). It was the resurrection which transformed Peter’s fear into boldness, and James’ doubt into faith, and only something as significant as the resurrection could have transformed the fanatical persecutor into a preacher of the very faith he previously destroyed.

Conclusion

These are the evidences for the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth: the empty tomb, the enduring church, and radically transformed lives. There’s no adequate explanation of these phenomena other than the obvious—namely, as Luke 24:34 says, “the Lord is risen indeed!”

What has our study taught us? The resurrection really occurred because those to whom the resurrection was a living reality were transformed, and we’ll be transformed as well if only we believe as they believed. The resurrection was the central message of the early church; by insisting that the world believe in the resurrection they, according to Acts 17:6, “turned the world upside down.” By teaching the same message in the same insistent way, we may also be able to do the same today.

[Leland Byars, 1990.]

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