

The Reality of the Resurrection

Introduction

As a senior in high school, we received an extended Christmas vacation because repairs were needed on the foundation of the school building. In fact, because of a poor foundation the school gym was condemned. Though most of us students were excited about the extra week of vacation, school officials were in a dilemma because of the damage caused by the weak, crumbling foundation. Whether you are talking about a building or our faith, a firm foundation is essential.

As Christians, our faith stands or falls on one historical event. There is one event in history that serves as the foundation of our religious commitment and determines whether or not such a commitment is valuable or is in vain. That foundation is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It has been suggested by some that there is value in Christianity apart from the resurrection. The Apostle Paul disagrees. He tells the church at Corinth in 1 Corinthians 15, that if there is no resurrection our faith is futile, our faith is useless. Paul says that if Christ has not risen we are of all men most to be pitied.

Many look at the Christian claim of the resurrection and call it foolishness. Many Christians feel overwhelmed with doubt as they consider the resurrection. Maybe you are here to day and you cannot help but, at times, have doubts of your own. After all, "Man dead three days, Lives again!" sounds more like a tabloid headline than a historical truth. We have personally never seen a resurrection. Most of us are like Thomas, "show me and I will believe." We are a people who like to be able to examine every truth claim in a science lab. And let's face it, we cannot prove the resurrection by studying test tubes.

Still, it is important to understand that no event in antiquity is studied that way. History is established by evidence that is left behind. And surely an event so extraordinary as the resurrection would need to leave behind pieces of evidence, wouldn't it? And yes, in fact, it does.

Today you will play the role of a jury. You will make the verdict. And remember, as Christians we seek truth. And if our claims are true, we need not fear what our studies will show. If you come hear it total disbelief of the resurrection, I simply want you to examine the evidence. I believe if that you will weigh the evidence with an open mind, that it overwhelmingly proves the historicity of the resurrection of

Jesus Christ. And Christian, I hope that our discussion today will help you realize that our faith is not empty but real and that our foundation is not weak but firm.

The Empty Tomb

The first piece of evidence that I would like for us to examine is the empty tomb. There can be little doubt that come Sunday morning after the crucifixion of Jesus, the tomb was empty. All four gospels record that come Sunday morning, the large stone was rolled away and that the tomb was empty. Luke writes, “But on the first day of the week at early dawn, they [the women] came to the tomb, bringing the spices which they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.” Also realize that as Christianity began there were many Romans and Jews who longed to quench this movement. They tried to stop it. They persecuted believers. Still it continued, they could not stop it as much as they wanted to. If the tomb of Jesus was not empty, they could have stopped this new faith in its tracks. All they would of have to have done is go to his tomb, and say, “Look, here lies Jesus!” The Christian movement would end. But, it did not end because the tomb was empty.

Now we must ask, why was the tomb empty. Several reasons have been given. Some would say that the reason is that Jesus did not actually die on the cross. They would say that he simply went into a coma. This so called “Swoon Theory” has little credence however. First of all, there was no way possible that Jesus could have lived through what happened to him. Jesus could not have survived crucifixion. Consider what he went through. The night before he was crucified, he was so stressed that he sweat drops of blood. A medical doctor named Dr. Methrell says this condition is called hematidrosis and would have made Jesus’s body, especially his skin, very, very weak. After, he was arrested, Jesus was beaten and flogged. This probably means that Jesus was slashed 39 times by a whip with pieces of sharp bone. A third century-historian named Eusebius writes of floggings, “The sufferer’s veins were laid bare, and the very muscles, sinews, and bowels of the victim were open to exposure.” The loss of blood would send Jesus into hypovolemic shock. In this condition, Jesus’s blood pressure would drop, he could faint or pass out, and he would become extremely thirsty. We see this as Jesus falls to the ground when carrying the cross. He had to

be helped by Simon. Also, on the cross we hear Jesus cry out, "I thirst!" The point is that before he was crucified, Jesus was already in serious condition. Once nailed to the cross, Jesus was sure to die. After he was already dead, a spear was pierced through his side. John saw blood and water come from Jesus' pierced heart. This shows that Jesus's lungs had collapsed and he died of asphyxiation. Dr. Samuel Houghton, a noted physiologist from the University of Dublin, concurs in the diagnosis of death by stating that a "copious flow of blood, succeeded by a copious flow of water" flowing out of a wound could only occur in a person who had died from a ruptured heart.

Secondly, many observed the body of Jesus and checked to make sure he was dead. The Roman soldiers checked and they would not make a mistake. Roman law laid the death penalty on any soldier who let a capital prisoner escape. In any court of law, a Roman soldier would be considered an "expert" witness on the finality of death, and his testimony that a person was dead would be given considerable weight. Furthermore, if these soldiers had any doubts as to Christ being dead, they would have taken the simple precaution of breaking his legs, but they did not deem it necessary, because "they saw that he was already dead." The soldiers did not break Jesus's legs, as they did the other two crucified criminals. They were sure He was dead. Also, Pilate specifically asked if Jesus was dead. The centurion in charge of the execution said that he was in fact dead. The Roman military code of discipline provided that if a guard allowed a prisoner to escape or failed to carry out the prescribed execution, the guard himself must take the prisoner's place and fulfill the sentence. Therefore, it was no idle answer that the centurion gave Pilate, for if Christ was in fact not dead when he was taken down from the cross, then the Roman centurion would have been forced to take his place. Pilate then granted the body to Joseph to be buried when he learned that he was dead. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus while handling the body would have given medical attention if there was any life left in the body of Jesus. Instead, the body was totally encased in winding sheets and entombed. Therefore, from a legal standpoint the fact that Jesus Christ died at 3:00pm on Friday afternoon at a place called Golgotha is absolutely irrefutable.

Against the array of testimony which we have presented that Jesus Christ died, there is not one witness; there is not one shred of evidence to contradict it. But, even, if Jesus did in fact live, though we

know he could not have, how could one in such a horrible state, arise in tomb, take off his own grave clothes, then move a huge rock and over take those guarding the tomb. A swooning corpse could not overpower Roman guards at the tomb. That in it self is impossible. But, then to believe that such man in such a state could over a forty day period show to others that he was victorious over death and motivate them to change the world is absolutely ridiculous! The post-resurrection appearances convinced the disciples, even “doubting Thomas”, that Jesus was gloriously alive. It is psychologically impossible for the disciples to have been so transformed and confident if Jesus had merely struggled out of a swoon, badly in need of a doctor. A half-dead, staggering sick man who has just had a narrow escape is not worshiped fearlessly as Divine Lord and conqueror of death.

A second option that opponents of the resurrection put forward is that enemies of Jesus had stolen the body of Jesus. This is what Mary Magdalene thought when she first approached Jesus’s empty tomb. John writes that on seeing the empty tomb, Mary Magdalene goes to Simon Peter and says, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” Still, it is hard to find a motive here. Why would opponents of Jesus give Jesus’s followers fuel to continue the movement of Christianity. Also, opponents of Jesus would have simply reproduced his body to put an end to Christianity. Furthermore, this option in no way answers why or how so many claimed to have seen Jesus after he raised from the dead.

A third option to why the tomb was empty is that the disciples of Jesus stole the body. Again, this makes little since. Why would they steal it? In order to start the idea that Jesus rose from the dead? This in no way explains the transformation we see in their lives. They were some of the most disappointed people ever. The one they trusted in as the Son of God had died. Most ran as Jesus was arrested. And yet something happened to make them some of the most courageous people of all time. Could this transformation be explained by their stealing of the body? NO!

No reason has ever sufficiently answered why Jesus’s tomb was empty except that He rose from the grave. Still, an empty tomb does not in and of itself prove that a resurrection has occurred. More evidence is needed.

Many Claimed to See Jesus Alive

The next item of evidence to demonstrate the reality of the resurrection is eye witness testimony. In any court case, eye witness testimony is the strongest evidence possible. And though no one actually saw the resurrection event itself, many claim to have seen the risen Lord. If in fact their testimony is true, Jesus did rise from the grave. Therefore, it essential that we examine the eyewitness accounts.

The bible states that many people saw Jesus in between the resurrection and the ascension. By examining all four gospels we can conclude that this is the probably order in which people saw Jesus: Mary Magdalene, Other women, Two disciples on the road to Eramaus, Peter, 10 disciples, then all 11 disciples. We also know of these other appearance though we are unsure of the time or order: Disciples at the Sea of Galilee, 500 on mountain in Galilee, James (Jesus's brother), those present at the Ascension. The bible also indicates that Jesus revealed himself to others after the ascension. Luke in Acts indicates that at his stoning, Stephen saw Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father. Paul saw the Lord on several occasions, the first time being on the road to Damascus. John also indicates that he saw the Lord Jesus in his writing of Revelation on the island of Pampus.

This is obviously strong eye witness account. It has been said that this would total 129 hours of testimony by eyewitnesses in court. Enough to lead beyond reasonable doubt that Jesus did rise from the dead. Still, we should examines these claims. What could make so many people have claimed to see the risen Lord?

Some would say that these so called eye-witness appearances are legendary. But for legends to build, several generations must past after the event actually occurred. The resurrection cannot be called a myth or a legend because, there is lacking the several generations necessary to build up a commonly believed myth. There is not even one generation. Most scholars suggest that 1 Corinthians 15 was written in the mid 50's AD. In this passage, Paul shares a creed that speaks of Christ death, burial, and resurrection. It also identifies several of the people who were eyewitness to the resurrection. Most of these people were still alive. That means that not even one generation had passed after Christ death when the word of his

resurrection was spreading. Since many of the people that Paul names were still alive, their testimony could be checked out. It has been said that “perhaps the greatest difficulty for those who say that the resurrection accounts are legendary is that the time period between the events and the writing of the gospels was too short to allow legend to substantially accrue.” Also, a simple reading of the gospels shows that they do not read like myths. Finally, Peter states in his second epistle, “We did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty.”

Instead of arguing that the eye witness accounts are legendary. Others will suggest that these witnesses simply lied. Again, this argument is very weak. First of all, it would have been merely impossible to make such a lie believable. One apologist writes, “The gospels were written in such temporal and geographical proximity to the events they record that it would have been almost impossible to fabricate events. Anyone who cared to could have checked out the accuracy of what they reported. The fact that the disciples were able to proclaim the resurrection in Jerusalem in the face of their enemies a few weeks after the crucifixion shows that what they proclaimed was true, for they could never have proclaimed the resurrection under such circumstances had it not occurred.” Secondly, realize these are men and women of integrity. They were taught the value of righteousness. A faith that demands absolute righteousness before God could not be founded on a lie.

But the most obvious evidence against the idea that the disciples simply lied is that their sincerity was proven genuine by their willingness to die for their faith. People lie to gain personal advantages in life. The disciples had nothing to gain by lying except persecution, imprisonment, and possibly death. What advantage did the “conspirators” derive from their “lie”? “They were hated, scorned, persecuted, excommunicated, imprisoned, tortured, exiled, crucified, boiled alive, roasted, beheaded, disembowed and fed to lions - hardly a catalog of perks!” Still, the eyewitnesses did not change their story. Such sincerity demonstrates that the disciples obviously believed what they were proclaiming. And what they were proclaiming is that they saw Jesus risen from the dead.

Against the idea that the disciples lied, Pascal writes. . .

The hypothesis that the Apostles were knaves is quite absurd. Follow it out to the end, and imagine these twelve men meeting after Jesus' death and conspiring to say that he had risen from the dead. This means attacking all the powers that be. The human heart is singularly susceptible to fickleness, to change, to promises, to bribery. One of them had only to deny his story under these inducements, or still more because of possible imprisonment, tortures and death, and they would all have been lost. Follow that out. (Pascal, *Pensees* 322, 310).

John Stott agrees as he writes in *Basic Christianity*, "If they had themselves taken Christ's body, to preach His resurrection was to spread a known, planned falsehood. They not only preached it; they suffered for it. They were prepared to go to prison, to the flogging post and to death for a fairy-tale. This does not ring true. It is so unlikely as to be impossible. If anything is clear from the Gospels and the Acts, it is that the apostles were sincere. They may have been deceived, if you like, but they were not deceivers. Hypocrites and martyrs are not made of the same stuff."

If the resurrection was a conspired lie, it violates all known historical and psychological laws of lying. It is, then, as unscientific, as unrepeatably, unique and untestable as the resurrection itself. But unlike the resurrection, it is also contradicted by things we do know. Ultimately, all must agree that the disciples believed that they had seen the Risen Lord. Nothing proves sincerity like martyrdom.

A third possibility that has been suggested for explaining the eyewitness accounts is that these eye-witnesses hallucinated. This is absurd though. To say that 500 people gathered together in one place would experience the same kind of hallucination is beyond the bounds of logic. Five hundred people do not hallucinate the same thing! This is a psychological impossibility. Also, let us realize that these eye-witnesses could not have believed in the "hallucination" if Jesus' corpse had still been in the tomb. . . "

An interesting and astonishing thing about the testimony of all these eyewitnesses is that there was not then, nor has there ever been, a witness come forward to refute their testimonies. The only possible explanation to the massive eyewitness accounts of Jesus's resurrection is that these eye-witnesses actually saw what they say they saw. Jesus is Risen.

Transformed Lives

Jesus died and was placed in a tomb. Three days later, against all odds, the tomb is empty. Over 500 eyewitnesses see Jesus alive again. The evidence is already overwhelming in indicating the historicity of the resurrection. Still, the evidence does not stop. Many surrounding circumstances support the resurrection as well. The most powerful of the circumstantial evidence is the changed lives of the disciples. The disciples who followed Jesus throughout His ministry were on the brink of despair. The one whom they had trusted in as the Messiah was dead. On the night He was arrested, they hid and ran. How could such a cowardice group of men because some of the most courageous men of all time. Just a few weeks after the resurrection, they are no longer hiding. They are preaching in public that Jesus has risen. They are no longer afraid of being arrested. After being given direct orders by the same people who had Jesus crucified to stop preaching, Peter proclaims, “Whether it is right in the sight of god to heed to you rather that to God, you be judged; for we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard.” These are not the words of a fisherman; they are the words of one who has seen the Risen Lord! The followers of Jesus no longer even feared death. For, we see Stephen stoned to death shortly after the resurrection. Such a transformation of so many can only be explained by the resurrection.

It is also important to realize that not only were Jesus followers changed, so were his doubters and persecutors. Thomas said that he would only believe if he saw Jesus’s wounds. Guess what. . . Thomas Believes! Paul persecuted the church, watching over Stephen’s death. Guess what. . . Paul died for the faith for he too saw the Risen Lord!

These first century believers were not the only ones who have had their lives changed by the risen Jesus. Millions have since. I stand before you as a testimony to what the risen savior can do. Though I can not give an eye witness testimony of the resurrection, I can testify that I too have been given a new life and a glorious hope by trusting in the Risen Savior, Jesus Christ. Jesus himself said, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”

What is your Verdict

Christian, as we have examined the evidence together, I hope you have been encouraged by realizing that our faith is built on a firm foundation. We serve a powerful God because the resurrection is real. The Bible tells us that with the same power that raised Christ from the dead, God works in us, giving us new life.

And you who have come here doubting the resurrection, it is time for you to make a verdict. The evidence proves beyond reasonable doubt that Jesus has in fact risen from the dead. To disbelieve the resurrection, you must deliberately make an exception to the rules you use everywhere else in history. And as you make your verdict, realize it has great implications. For, if, as the evidence proves, Jesus did rise from the grave, everything Jesus ever said was true. He is the only way to God the Father. He alone offers eternal life. He alone is the center of all history. He alone has power over life and death.