

Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish prophet who claimed to be the Christ prophesied in the Jewish Scriptures, was arrested, was judged a political criminal, and was crucified. Three days after His death and burial, some women who went to His tomb found the body gone. In subsequent weeks, His disciples claimed that God had raised Him from the dead and that He appeared to them various times before ascending into heaven.

From that foundation, Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire and has continued to exert great influence down through the centuries.

Background

The body of Jesus, in accordance with Jewish burial custom, was wrapped in a linen cloth. About 100 pounds of aromatic spices, mixed together to form a gummy substance, were applied to the wrappings of cloth about the body. After the body was placed in a solid rock tomb, a large stone was rolled against the entrance of the tomb. Large stones weighing approximately two tons were normally rolled (by means of levers) against a tomb entrance. A Roman guard of disciplined fighting men was stationed to guard the tomb. This guard affixed on the tomb the Roman seal, which was meant to "prevent any attempt at vandalizing the sepulcher. Anyone trying to move the stone would have broken the seal and thus incurred the wrath of Roman law.

So many security precautions were taken with the trial, crucifixion, burial, entombment, sealing, and guarding of Christ's tomb that it becomes very difficult for critics to defend their position that Christ did not rise from the dead. Consider these facts:

FACT #1: Broken Romans Seal - The first obvious fact was the breaking of the seal that stood for the power and authority of the Roman Empire. The consequences of breaking the seal were extremely severe. The FBI and CIA of the Roman Empire were called into action to find the man or men who were responsible. If they were apprehended, it meant automatic execution by crucifixion upside down. People feared the breaking of the seal.

FACT #2: Empty Tomb - Another obvious fact after the resurrection was the empty tomb. The disciples of Christ did not go off to Athens or Rome to preach that Christ was raised from the dead. Rather, they went right back to the city of Jerusalem, where, if what they were teaching was false, the falsity would be evident. The empty tomb was "too notorious to be denied." Paul Althaus states that the resurrection "could have not been maintained in Jerusalem for a single day, for a single

hour, if the emptiness of the tomb had not been established as a fact for all concerned."

FACT #3: Large Stone Moved - On that Sunday morning the first thing that impressed the people who approached the tomb was the unusual position of the one and a half to two ton stone that had been lodged in front of the doorway. All the Gospel writers mention it.

Those who observed the stone after the resurrection describe its position as having been rolled up a slope away not just from the entrance of the tomb, but from the entire massive sepulcher. It was in such a position that it looked as if it had been picked up and carried away. Now, I ask you, if the disciples had wanted to come in, tiptoe around the sleeping guards, and then roll the stone over and steal Jesus' body, how could they have done that without the guards' awareness?

FACT #4: Roman Guard Goes AWOL - The guards fled. How can their attrition be explained, when Roman military discipline was so exceptional? Justin, in Digest #49, mentions all the offenses that required the death penalty. The fear of their superiors' wrath and the possibility of death meant that they paid close attention to the minutest details of their jobs. One way a guard was put to death was by being stripped of his clothes and then burned alive in a fire started with his garments. If it was not apparent which soldier had failed in his duty, then lots were drawn to see who would be punished with death for the guard unit's failure. Certainly the entire unit would not have fallen asleep with that kind of threat over their heads. Dr. George Currie, a student of Roman military discipline, wrote that fear of punishment "produced flawless attention to duty, especially in the night watches."

FACT #5: Grave Clothes Tell A Tale - In a literal sense, against all statements to the contrary, the tomb was not totally empty - because of an amazing phenomenon. John, a disciple of Jesus, looked over to the place where the body of Jesus had lain, and there were the grave clothes, in the form of the body, slightly caved in and empty - like the empty chrysalis of a caterpillar's cocoon. That's enough to make a believer out of anybody. John never did get over it. The first thing that stuck in the minds of the disciples was not the empty tomb, but rather the empty grave clothes - undisturbed in form and position.

FACT #6: Jesus' Appearance Confirmed - Christ appeared alive on several occasions after the cataclysmic events of that first Easter. When studying an

event in history, it is important to know whether enough people who were participants or eyewitnesses to the event were alive when the facts about the event were published. To know this is obviously helpful in ascertaining the accuracy of the published report. If the number of eyewitnesses is substantial, the event can be regarded as fairly well established. For instance, if we all witness a murder, and a later police report turns out to be a fabrication of lies, we as eyewitnesses can refute it.

Over 500 Witnesses

Several very important factors are often overlooked when considering Christ's post-resurrection appearances to individuals. The first is the large number of witnesses of Christ after that resurrection morning. One of the earliest records of Christ's appearing after the resurrection is by Paul. The apostle appealed to his audience's knowledge of the fact that Christ had been seen by more than 500 people at one time. Paul reminded them that the majority of those people were still alive and could be questioned. Dr. Edwin M. Yamauchi, associate professor of history at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, emphasizes: "What gives a special authority to the list (of witnesses) as historical evidence is the reference to most of the five hundred brethren being still alive. Paul says in effect, 'If you do not believe me, you can ask them.' Such a statement in an admittedly genuine letter written within thirty years of the event is almost as strong evidence as one could hope to get for something that happened nearly two thousand years ago." Let's take the more than 500 witnesses who saw Jesus alive after His death and burial, and place them in a courtroom. Do you realize that if each of those 500 people were to testify for only six minutes, including cross-examination, you would have an amazing 50 hours of firsthand testimony? Add to this the testimony of many other eyewitnesses and you would well have the largest and most lopsided trial in history.

Christians believe that Jesus was bodily resurrected in time and space by the supernatural power of God. The difficulties of belief may be great, but the problems inherent in unbelief present even greater difficulties. The theories advanced to explain the resurrection by "natural causes" are weak; they actually help to build confidence in the truth of the resurrection.

The Wrong Tomb?

This theory assumes that the women who reported that the body was missing had mistakenly gone to the wrong tomb. If so, then the disciples who went to check up on the women's statement must have also gone to the wrong tomb. We may be certain, however, that Jewish authorities, who asked for a Roman guard to be stationed at the tomb to prevent Jesus' body from being stolen, would not have been mistaken about the location. Nor would the Roman guards, for they were there!

Hallucinations?

Another claim is that the appearances of Jesus after the resurrection were either illusions or hallucinations. Unsupported by the psychological principles governing the appearances of hallucinations, this theory also does not coincide with the historical situation. Again, where was the actual body, and why wasn't it produced?

Did Jesus Swoon?

Another theory is often quoted today. This is the swoon theory, which says that Jesus didn't die; he merely fainted from exhaustion and loss of blood. Everyone thought Him dead, but later He resuscitated and the disciples thought it to be a resurrection. Skeptic David Friedrich Strauss--certainly no believer in the resurrection--gave the deathblow to any thought that Jesus revived from a swoon: "It is impossible that a being who had stolen half-dead out of the sepulcher, who crept about weak and ill, wanting medical treatment, who required bandaging, strengthening and indulgence, and who still at last yielded to His sufferings, could have given to the disciples the impression that He was a Conqueror over death and the grave, the Prince of Life, an impression which lay at the bottom of their future ministry. Such a resuscitation could only have weakened the impression which He had made upon them in life and in death, at the most could only have given it an elegiac voice, but could by no possibility have changed their sorrow into enthusiasm, have elevated their reverence into worship."

The Body Stolen?

Some say that the body was stolen by the disciples while the guards slept. The depression and cowardice of the disciples provide a hard-hitting argument against their suddenly becoming so brave and daring as to face a detachment of soldiers at the tomb and steal the body. They were in no mood to attempt anything like that.

The Resurrection Is A Fact

Professor Thomas Arnold, author of the famous, *History of Rome*, and appointed to the chair of modern history at Oxford, was well acquainted with the value of evidence in determining historical facts. This great scholar said: "I have been used for many years to study the histories of other times, and to examine and weigh the evidence of those who have written about them, and I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better and fuller evidence of every sort, to the understanding of a fair inquirer, than the great sign which God has given us that Christ died and rose again from the dead."

Real Proof: The Disciple's Lives

But the most telling testimony of all must be the lives of those early Christians. We must ask ourselves: What caused them to go everywhere telling the message of the risen Christ? As a reward for their efforts, those early Christians were beaten, stoned to death, thrown to the lions, tortured and crucified. Every conceivable method was used to stop them from talking. Yet, they laid down their lives as the ultimate proof of their complete confidence in the truth of their message.

Where do you Stand?

How do you evaluate this overwhelming historical evidence? What is your decision about the fact of Christ's empty tomb? What do you think of Christ?

On the basis of all the evidence for Christ's resurrection, and considering the fact that Jesus offers forgiveness of sin and an eternal relationship with God, who would be so foolhardy as to reject Him? Christ is alive! You can trust God right now by faith through prayer. Prayer is talking with God. God is not so concerned with your words as He is with the attitude of your heart. If you have never trusted Christ, you can do so right now.

The prayer I prayed is: "Lord Jesus, I need You. Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins. I open the door of my life and trust You as my Savior. Thank You for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. Make me the kind of person You want me to be. Thank You that I can trust You."



Evidence for the Resurrection

by Josh McDowell