

# FACING THE FACTS

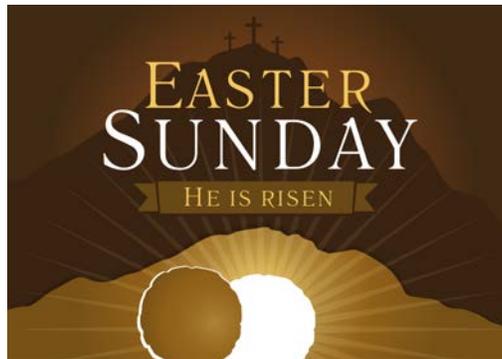
## *Hard Evidence for the Resurrection*

Selected Texts

Written By

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In Acts chapter 17 we see Paul, the former rabbinical scholar and persecutor of Jews who had dared to believe in Jesus, engaging the most gifted Greek philosophers in the world on the Areopagus, or Mars Hill. At this place, which was located northwest of the Acropolis, concepts regarding morals and religion were discussed and debated by Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. For Paul, the topic of discussion centered on one main life question: Who is really God, the countless idols representing the Greek pantheon, or Jesus, the Christ?

With verse 30, Paul's opening word "therefore" introduces us to the culmination of his argument for believing in Jesus as the true God of all so-called gods.

<sup>30</sup>"Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent, <sup>31</sup> because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead (Acts 17).

For Paul, the difference between the gods of the Greeks and the God of Christianity was inexorably wedded to one jaw-dropping historical event, one compelling truth: *the resurrection of Jesus from the dead*. This proof was and is the dividing line between spiritual truth and spiritual error, between obtaining eternal life in God's presence or experiencing eternal judgment for rejecting the evidence. Yes, this proof, if true, changes everything, doesn't it?

Maybe you're here this Easter and you already believe in the risen Savior. But you'd like to acquire some more data points to substantiate His glorious resurrection so you will know how to more effectively speak with others about the event of all events in world history. Or perhaps you, like some of those philosophers, already have your worldview but you recognize it may not be as airtight and comforting as you'd like it to be. So, you're here today on a quest to determine if there is really anything to the resurrection of Jesus.

I am here today to lay some, not all (because our time is limited to just thirty minutes), of the facts of Christ's resurrection out on the proverbial table to help you with some of the life scenarios I just presented. Over the last ten years I've pastored this church I have presented the wealth of biblical facts which support Christ's real-time defeat of death on the third day after His crucifixion. In our current venture I will present more additional, logical, and textual proofs for your consideration in a quest to move Christ-followers to a more intimate and vibrant faith and non-Christ-followers to determine what they will do with the incontrovertible evidence.

So, come with me this Easter as we ask and answer one of the most important questions in life:

## What Is The Factual Evidence Validating The Truth Of The Resurrection?

Our analysis will be based, of course, on the Bible, but it will also use as its foundation the scholastic work of two astute and skilled New Testament scholars, Gary Habermas and Michael Lincon. Their excellent and thought-provoking book *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* is one of the best you can read on the all-important subject. In it, they give us five excellent facts supporting the historical death and resurrection of Jesus. And, yes, it is important to establish Christ's death because if He did not die at the hands of the Romans then the resurrection is nothing more than some type of elaborate hoax.

### Fast Fact #1: Christ Died By Means Of Crucifixion

We have studied in past Easter sermons how the four gospels do, in fact, collectively support the fact that Jesus died by means of Roman crucifixion (Matt. 27; Mark 15; Luke 23; John 19). Matthew and John, both disciples of Jesus, recorded what they saw, while Mark, a scribe for Peter, added the late Apostle's historical account of that tragic day. Luke, a medical doctor and close friend of Paul, used this relationship as well as others (Gal. 1:18-19), along with credible sources like the Gospel of Mark, to record his historical analysis of Christ's death only around 35 years after the event. The first three men were eventually executed for their faith in risen Jesus, and John was tortured by Emperor Domitian and eventually exiled to the lonely, barren Roman prison colony on the Isle of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. How did these valiant men tenaciously hold onto their faith and the resurrection story even in the face of death itself? Yes, why did they do this? Because the story of the risen Savior was true.

If Jesus did not die by crucifixion, then why does extra-biblical historical data say He did? The Jewish/Roman historian **Josephus**, writing around 93 to 94 A.D., states, "When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified."<sup>1</sup> This was only some sixty years after the fact, which was not enough time for myths to develop because people could have still been alive to serve as witnesses of the event. **Tacitus**, one of the most famous Roman historians from the first century, wrote in his annals concerning how Nero attempted to blame the burning of Rome on Christians. Note well what he says,

But all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the Emperor, and the propitiation's of the gods, did not banish the sinister belief that the conflagration was a result of an

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<sup>1</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities* 18:64.

order. Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, the subject for the moment, again broke out not only in Judea, the source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre become popular.<sup>2</sup>

If anyone should have known if Jesus had died by crucifixion it was the Roman Empire. Hence, the words of Tacitus are most informative. Lucian of Samosata, who was known for poking fun at Christianity, writes between 165-175 A.D.,

The Christians, you know, worship a man this day—the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rights, and was crucified on that account. . . . You see, these misguided creatures start with the general conviction that they are immortal for all time, which explains the contempt of death and voluntary self-devotion which are so common among them; and then it was impressed on them by their original lawgiver that they are all brothers, from the moment that they are converted, and deny the gods of Greece, and worship the crucified sage, and live after his laws. All this they take quite on faith, with the result that they despise all worldly goods alike, regarding them merely as common property.<sup>3</sup>

I could cite additional extra-biblical evidence concerning historical death of Jesus; however, these three ancient references serve to substantiate the fact Jesus died his wounds he suffered on the cross. No one survived the brutal nature of the Roman crucifixion, Jesus was certainly no exception. Martin Hengel's *Crucifixion* is a thorough treatment regarding the absolute nature of this form of capital punishment . . . just in case you needed additional documentation.

## Fast Fact #2: The Disciples Believed Christ Died And Rose From The Grave

All of the disciples believed that Jesus died because they were there for the tragic event. What is most interesting, however, is they also collectively believed that he had risen from the grave after the barbaric Roman crucifixion. Paul, for example, who eventually became an Apostle after his encounter with the resurrected Lord, writes in Galatians 1 and 2 that he not only knew the three main disciples, Peter, James, and John, but that they approved of the gospel he preached because it was the gospel they preached, that being, the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:3-5).

<sup>8</sup> Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. <sup>19</sup> But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother (Galatians 1).

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<sup>2</sup>Tacitus, *Annals*, 15:44.

<sup>3</sup>Lucian of Samosata, *The Death of Peregrine*, 11-13.

<sup>1</sup> Then after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also. <sup>2</sup> And it was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but I *did so* in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain. (Galatians 2).

Had Paul's concept of the gospel been erroneous since it was grounded upon the resurrection of Jesus from the grave, this would have been a perfect opportunity for Peter and James to correct him. They did not because Paul merely taught and preached what they, the former covering disciples, boldly taught and preached: *Jesus had risen from the grave and had defeated sin and death.*

One of the oldest creedal formulas in the Bible also substantiates the fact that Jesus rose from the dead. That creedal formula is found in First Corinthians 15, verses three through eight.

<sup>3</sup> For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup> and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. <sup>6</sup> After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; <sup>7</sup> then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; <sup>8</sup> and last of all, as it were to one untimely born, He appeared to me also (1 Corinthians 15).

Since Paul wrote Corinthians around 55 A.D., and it is quite possible he received this creed directly from Peter and James around two to three years after Christ's death and resurrection (30 A.D.) and his conversion (33 A.D.), this demonstrates the early Church had summarized the truth of their gospel into this one pithy and pointed statement which extolled the resurrection of Jesus.

If Christ had not risen from the grave, if he had simply died from the crucifixion, then why did the disciples and the early Church teach, preach, and memorize a gospel story which could have been easily and readily discounted by anyone with a thinking mind? Had there been a dead body to exhume, don't you think that would have occurred? If there was a tomb in Jerusalem holding Christ's body, don't you know the authorities would have welcomed everyone who toyed with His resurrection to stop by and see for themselves the deceased victim? No, the ancient saints told this amazing story because it was factually true based on the evidence at hand. They had not only seen His death; they had personally encountered Him in His resurrected state. Based on this exposure there was nothing else they could do but recount the most amazing and important event in human history: *Jesus had risen from the grave and had defeated sin and death.*

And, as stated, the majority of these men died for the historical story they told. Why would they do this if they were lying? What could they have possibly have benefited? Money certainly was not a question? Fame was not attached to following after Jesus? These men became paupers, nobody's, and scourge of Rome and Jewish society. They willingly became martyrs based on the historical reality of Christ's resurrection. Clement, the Bishop of Rome from 30-100 A.D., writes about the martyrdom of Peter and Paul:

Because of envy and jealousy, the greatest and most righteous pillars have been persecuted and contented unto death let us set the good apostles before our eyes. Peter, who because of unrighteous envy endured, not one or two, but many afflictions, and having borne witness went to the glorious place. Because of envy rivalries, steadfast Paul pointed to the prize. Seven times chained, exiled, stoned,

having become a preacher both in the East and the West, he received honor fitting of his faith, having taught righteousness to the whole world, unto the boundary on which the sun sets; having testified in the presence of the leaders. Thus he was freed from the world and went to the holy place. He became a great example of steadfastness.<sup>4</sup>

Other ancient Church Fathers also write about how the disciples died for their inexorable belief in the resurrection of Jesus (Polycarp; Ignatius/Bishop of Rome, A.D. 110; Dionysius of Corinth, Tertullian, 200 A.D., speaks of Paul's beheading; Origen, 185 A.D., speaks of Peter's crucifixion upside down).

Charles Colson, Nixon's former hatchet man, writes from his own experience as a deceiver in Watergate and how this substantiates the reality of Christ's resurrection:

When I am challenged on the resurrection, my answer is always that the disciples and 500 others gave eyewitness accounts of seeing Jesus risen from the tomb. But then I'm asked, "How do you know they were telling the truth? Maybe they were perpetrating a hoax." My answer to that comes from an unlikely source: Watergate. Watergate involved a conspiracy perpetuated by the closest aides to the president of the United States—the most powerful men in America, who were intensely loyal to their president. But one of them, John Dean, turned state's evidence, that is, testified against Nixon, as he put it, "to save his own skin"—and he did so only two weeks after informing the president about what was really going on—two weeks! The cover-up, the lie, could only be held together for two weeks, and then everybody else jumped ship in order to save themselves. Now, the fact is that all those around the president were facing was embarrassment, maybe prison. Nobody's life was at stake.

But what about the disciples? Twelve powerless men, peasants really, were facing not just embarrassment or political disgrace, but beatings, stoning's, execution. Every single one of the disciples insisted, to their dying breaths, that they had physically seen Jesus bodily raised from the dead. Don't you think that one of those apostles would have cracked before being beheaded or stoned? That one of them would have made a deal with the authorities? None did. Men will give their lives for something they believe to be true; they will never give their lives for something they know to be false.

The Watergate cover-up reveals the true nature of humanity. Even political zealots at the pinnacle of power will, in the crunch, save their own necks, even at the expense of the ones they profess to serve so loyally. But the apostles could not deny Jesus, because they had seen him face to face, and they knew he had risen from the dead.

No, you can take it from an expert in cover-ups—I've lived through Watergate—that nothing less than a resurrected Christ could have caused those men to maintain to their dying whispers that Jesus is alive and is Lord. Two thousand years later, nothing less than the power of the risen Christ could inspire Christians around the world to remain faithful—despite prison, torture, and death.

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<sup>4</sup>*First Clement* 5:2-7.

Jesus is Lord: That's the thrilling message of Easter. It's a historic fact, one convincingly established by the evidence—and one you can bet your life upon.<sup>5</sup>

In all actuality, need I say more? The facts speak for themselves, but there are more facts to consider and we certainly don't want fail to present them.

### Fast Fact #3: Paul's Conversion Is Simply Mind-boggling.

Isn't it? Better yet it is RADICAL. Paul was a highly educated Pharisee who loved Judaism, the Torah, the Prophets, and Jewish ritual, and everything Jewish, down to his bloodline. Listen to his appraisal of himself in his letter to the Philippians:

<sup>4</sup> although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: <sup>5</sup> circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup> as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless (Phil. 3).

Paul was the quintessential Jew in every respect.

- Will I be saved by my Jewish ancestry? Check.
- Will my love of the Torah and the Prophets find favor with God? Check.
- Will my obedience to observe Jewish rituals and feasts find favor with God? Check.
- Will my observance of Oral Tradition find favor with God? Check.

Him believe in Jesus as the Messiah? Have you got to be kidding me?

John Pollock's description of Paul is most pertinent and powerful:

Paul's parents were Pharisees, members of the party most fervent in Jewish nationalism and strict in obedience to the law of Moses. They sought to guard their offspring against contamination. Friendships with Gentile children were discouraged. Greek ideas were despised. Though Paul from infancy could speak Greek, the *lingua franca*, and had a working knowledge of Latin, his family at home spoke Aramaic, the language of Judea, a derivative of Hebrew.

They look to Jerusalem as Islam looks to Mecca. Their privileges as freemen of Tarsus and Roman citizens were nothing to the high honor of being Israelites, the People of Promise, to whom alone the Living God I revealed His glory and His plans . . .

By his 13<sup>th</sup> birthday, Paul had mastered Jewish history, the poetry of the Psalms, and the majestic literature of the prophets. His ear had been trained to the very pitch of accuracy, and a swift brain like his could retain what he heard as instantly and faithfully as a modern "photographic mind" retains a printed page. He was ready for higher education. . . .

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<sup>5</sup>Charles Colson, *BreakPoint Online Commentaries* (4-29-02).

A strict Pharisee would not embroil his son pagan moral philosophy. So, probably in the year that Augustine's died, A.D. 14, the adolescent Paul was sent by sea to Palestine and climbed the hills of Jerusalem.

During the next five or six years, he sat at the feet of Gamaliel, grandson of Hillel, the supreme teacher who, a few years before, had died at the age of more than a hundred. Under the fragile, gentle Gamaliel, a contrast with the leaders of the rival School of Shammai, Paul learned to dissect a text until scores of possible meanings were disclosed according to the considered opinion of generations of rabbis . . . Paul learned to debate in question-and-answer style known in the ancient world as the "diatribe," and to expound, for a rabbi was not only part teacher part lawyer, who prosecuted or defended those who broke the sacred Law. Paul outstripped his contemporaries. He had a powerful mind which could lead to a seat on the Sanhedrin in the Hall of Polished Stones, and make him a "ruler of the Jews."<sup>6</sup>

If anyone was a follower of God based on personal heritage and holiness, it was Paul. If anyone hated Jews for abandoning Judaism for the likes of Christianity, with its belief in a crucified Messiah, not to mention a dead one too, it was Paul. That is why he became *the* persecutor of the fledgling but growing Church. I'm sure he must have thought if he could just eliminate the followers then the movement would simply fold like a house of cards.

Ever been misinformed? Ever held an inferior position? Ever been misled by your own selfish thinking? Ever been afraid of abandoning your so-called faith your parents instilled into you but which rejects Christianity outright? Ever been pushing back so hard against Christ and Christianity you prided yourself in your activity? Ever had the living Lord get your attention? That's what happened to Paul on the road to Damascus to kill more innocent Jewish Christians.

<sup>1</sup> Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, <sup>2</sup> and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> And it came about that as he journeyed, he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; <sup>4</sup> and he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" <sup>5</sup> And he said, "Who art Thou, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, <sup>6</sup> but rise, and enter the city, and it shall be told you what you must do" (Acts 9).

In that one miraculous, marvelous moment Paul passed from being spiritually dead man spiritually alive man. On that rocky, dusty path the magnificent glory of the resurrected Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, gave Paul the incontrovertible evidence he desperately needed to realize the true path to God was through God's son, the crucified and risen One. From the moment forward, Paul was never the same again. Without warning, the resurrected Lord shook up his world, resulting in the salvation of a man no one would have ever believed would be Christ follower, let alone an Apostle to the Gentiles, of all people.

The facts about the resurrection are probably something equivalent to a stun gun insofar as they have the ability to get your attention concerning spiritual truth. They grabbed Paul's

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<sup>6</sup>John Pollock, *The Apostle: A Life of Paul* (Colorado Springs: Cook Communications Ministries, 1985), 16-17.

undivided attention and he went on to Damascus a saint instead of a sinner. Perhaps today God is getting your attention with the same facts about His Son. I pray you will leave this place the same way Paul left that road into Syria . . . a spiritually changed man because of a newfound faith in the compelling evidence for the resurrection.

And as with the other disciples, Paul, too, followed His resurrected Lord through countless persecutions for his faith. During Neronian persecution, Paul was beheaded for his firm belief that Jesus had defeated sin and death and was very much alive. Again, we must ask, “How do you account for the faith in the fire of so many fine, upstanding, even well-educated men when they could have easily walked away from martyrdom with an admission of deception?” They knew firsthand the truth of the story: *Jesus had risen from the grave and had defeated sin and death. That’s why men like Paul were not afraid to face death because they died for what they knew to be true. That is also why Paul adds these words to his life story in Philippians 1:*

<sup>7</sup> But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. <sup>8</sup> More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, <sup>9</sup> and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from *the* Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith, <sup>10</sup> that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; <sup>11</sup> in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead (Philippians 3).

What faith in of such compelling factual evidence for the resurrection. It is point three in our facts, but there are two more.

#### Fast Fact #4: The Conversion of Christ’s Brother

This point is as profound as it is simple. The Bible is clear regarding the truth that Jesus, the eldest, had brothers and sisters. Matthew tells us this much:

<sup>54</sup>And coming to His home town He began teaching them in their synagogue, so that they became astonished, and said, ‘Where did this man get this wisdom, and these miraculous powers? <sup>55</sup> ‘Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? <sup>56</sup> And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this man get all these things?’ (Matt. 13). NAS)

I have been in the synagogue in Nazareth and it is really quite small because the town was small. Everyone would have known Mary and Joseph’s family and their children especially Jesus, their eldest, because of the amount of construction work he did in the area for various homeowners and businesses. Their rhetorical questions clearly illustrate their shock at his level of theological knowledge and pedagogical ability when he was nothing more than a carpenter.

The last sentence is most interesting because it informs us that Jesus had siblings. In light of that truth, I cannot resist asking some logical questions: Could you imagine growing up with your oldest brother eventually informing friends, family, and strangers that He was, in fact, God in the flesh? Would you have immediately bowed down in adoration, or would you have reared

back in quick sarcasm and mocking gestures? How did Jesus's brothers respond to him? As you might expect. John puts their unbelief in bold relief:

<sup>1</sup>And after these things Jesus was walking in Galilee; for He was unwilling to walk in Judea, because the Jews were seeking to kill Him. <sup>2</sup> Now the feast of the Jews, the Feast of Booths, was at hand. <sup>3</sup> His brothers therefore said to Him, "Depart from here, and go into Judea, that Your disciples also may behold Your works which You are doing. <sup>4</sup> For no one does anything in secret, when he himself seeks to be *known* publicly. If You do these things, show Yourself to the world." <sup>5</sup> For not even His brothers were believing in Him. (John 7).

This is an interesting conversation between Jesus and his brothers. John says in verse five that "not even His brothers were believing in Him," he uses an imperfect tense verb to describe their unbelief. This verbal tense is important because it can be classified grammatically as a progressive or durative use of the verb, thereby denoting perpetual action or a perpetual mindset, as in this instance. Seen in this light their request is really a taunt to their oldest brother. The conditional nature of their request shows they are mocking him as they challenge Him to prove himself to be the Messiah by leaving the backwater area of Galilee in performing some amazing miracles in Jerusalem. Jesus put them in their place with one statement:

<sup>6</sup> Jesus therefore said to them, "My time is not yet at hand, but your time is always opportune."

Simply put, He informed them that heading to Jerusalem at this time would circumvent God the Father's precise redemptive plan, which is something He would never do.

Why are we wandering in the details of a passage like this? To set the backdrop of the conversion of Jesus's brother, James. According to 1 Corinthians 15:3-7, Jesus appeared to many people post-resurrection and one of them was James. At that point, faced with overwhelming evidence as to his brother's true identity as the Messiah, James, the former mocking skeptic became a devout believer. Eventually, from what we learn from the Jerusalem Council in Act 15, James became the leader of the Christian church in Jerusalem. He became a mighty witness to stubborn Jews who withstood embracing Jesus as the Messiah as he had done, and most assuredly many came to follow Jesus because of the eyewitness testimony from this brother who had seen his older brother in resurrected, resplendent glory.

His death, as that of Peter and Paul, confirmed his faith and belief in the resurrection of Jesus. Josephus, the Jewish historian from that time period, tells us that the new High Priest, Ananus, a Sadducee, exercised his religious power once appointed by having James, along with other Christians, stoned to death for believing in Jesus.<sup>7</sup> If the faith of James was just a ruse, he would have quickly abandoned it when the Temple police arrived to arrest him, but he did not. Why? He could not contradict what he knew was true. He had actually seen and spoken with His brother, Jesus, after His death and resurrection; hence, that was a fact he could never recant. Mark it well that this is fact we still must contend with today, and it leads to a logical question: How do we best account for the conversion of James, one of Christ's brothers, if that hardened Jewish skeptic had not seen brother? The answer is simple: He converted because of the fact of the resurrection. What will you do with his eyewitness testimony?

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<sup>7</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, XX, IX, 1.

To these four facts we add a fifth:

### Fast Fact #5: The Tomb Was Vacated

Luke tells us in acts chapter 2 that the Church of Jesus Christ started in Jerusalem, the very place Jesus was crucified by the Romans. This is most interesting. Why? The Roman and Jewish authorities could have instantly silenced the claim that Jesus had risen from the dead after his crucifixion by simply exhuming his body from the tomb and showcasing it to the public. They did not and could not because His body was gone right out from under their Roman security detail.

The Romans positioned well-seasoned and well-trained guards guard a dead body. That in of itself is most amusing. Further, to go to sleep on duty or to actually fail to complete your military assignment by actually losing track of the dead body would have meant capital punishment for the soldiers in question. Hence there is no way the soldiers did not give this particular assignment loyalty. Additionally, there is no way a rag-tag group of fearful disciples managed to somehow smuggle the body of Jesus out of that tomb area, especially in light of the massive nature of the stone covering opening to the tomb. That stone could've easily weighed several tons, and moving it in the middle of the night would have created quite a ruckus. So, we must posit that something supernatural happened that night, and it did. Matthew tells us what happened:

Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first *day* of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave. <sup>2</sup> And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. <sup>3</sup> And his appearance was like lightning, and his garment as white as snow and the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men. (Matt. 28).

That's the moment these professional soldier left their post. Wouldn't you have? The glorious and pulsating brightness of the angelic warrior showed them they were not guarding any ol' dead Jewish body, but the resurrected body of the God-man, Jesus. What did they do? Some of them headed to the Jewish authorities to tell them an angel arrived and the body of Jesus had vanished (Matthew 28:11-15). Ironic isn't it that even the enemies of Christianity affirmed the reality of an empty tomb.

This same angel then proceeded to tell the dumbfounded women what was going on:

<sup>5</sup>And the angel answered and said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. <sup>6</sup>He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying. <sup>7</sup>And go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going before you into Galilee, there you will see Him; behold, I have told you" (Matthew 28).

What did they see when they peered into the tomb of Christ? They saw the empty cocoon shaped burial shroud which would have weighed around 100 to 120 pounds. Did you get that? It was empty because Christ's resurrected body had moved right through it. Talk about hard evidence for the resurrection.

One final interesting point about empty tomb and resurrection fact is the presence of the women as the first witnesses of the resurrection. Had this story been a fabrication, an invention

the male Jewish writers would have NEVER included this historical narrative if it had not occurred. Why? Because in the Jewish culture, the testimony of women was not seen as viable. Consider the *Talmud, Rosh Hashannah* 1.8:

Any evidence which a woman [gives] it is not valid (to offer), also they are not valid to offer. This is equivalent to saying that one who was Rabbinically accounted a robber is qualified to give the same evidence as a woman.

Translated: Female testimony in court was equal to that of thief and nothing more. To this Josephus adds,

But let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex, nor let servants be admitted to give testimony on account of the ignobility of their soul; since it is probable that they need not speak truth, either out of hope of gain, or fear of punishment.<sup>8</sup>

Given the unfortunate inferior status of woman in the Jewish culture, coupled with the fact select women supplied the first testimony of Christ's resurrection clearly underscores the believability of their account. These brave women merely recounted what they saw: *Jesus had risen from the grave and had defeated sin and death.* Those are the historical facts, and they, by definition, calls for each person to respond to them.

What are possible responses to the five facts I have presented? Let us circle back to how the philosophers of Greece responded to Paul's factual presentation on Mars Hill.

<sup>32</sup> Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, "We shall hear you again concerning this." <sup>33</sup> So Paul went out of their midst. <sup>34</sup> But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them (Acts 17).

Some sneered. Some pondered. Some believed. What will you do with this evidence this Easter? The greatest thing you can ever do is believe the facts for the moment you do the resurrected Lord forgives your sin and makes you His child for all eternity. What are you waiting for? More proof? I think you have enough proof. Today is the day of decision.



<sup>8</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, IV, VIII, 15.