

## **Why is Jesus' resurrection such a big deal for Christians and what proof exists that it actually happened?**

The resurrection is indeed a big deal for Christians. It is a big deal for a number of reasons. First, because Jesus said he would rise from the dead. If he didn't, then his words cannot be trusted. Second, when a person predicts his own resurrection and pulls it off, that ought to make everyone sit up and take notice. Third, the Christian hope in life after death is only sustained if Christ showed us that the power of sin and death has been defeated through his own resurrection. So important is the resurrection to the Christian, that the Apostle Paul essentially said, "Take away the historical, bodily resurrection of Jesus, and you can throw the whole Christian faith out the window" (1 Corinthians 15:12-19). But even if the resurrection is a big deal for Christians, that doesn't mean you should jump on the bandwagon unless there is some good evidence that Christ actually did rise from the dead. Below, I will present some evidence for your consideration.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Tomb Was Empty**

The first piece of evidence is that of the empty tomb. One of the remarkable elements of the resurrection story is that it originated in Jerusalem where Jewish leaders could have easily disproven the Christian claim by producing the dead body of Jesus. They certainly knew where he was buried, for it was they who asked for it to be guarded. Furthermore, the early response by Jewish religious leaders to the disciple's claim that Jesus has risen from the dead was to fabricate a story about the body being stolen (Matthew 28:11-15). Why was this necessary? Precisely because the tomb was empty. No reason to say it was stolen, if the body was still in the tomb. For this very reason, even New Testament critic Jacob Kremer wrote: "By far most scholars hold firmly to the reliability of the biblical statements about the empty tomb."<sup>2</sup>

### **The Risen Jesus Showed Up**

Second, the resurrection is supported by the number of bodily appearances Jesus made after his resurrection. At least, twelve different appearances are presented in the biblical account. Some say these records are biased; they were made up either by the disciples or by church leaders much later. But consider first that a church creed speaking of Jesus resurrection exists that is dated to within five years of Jesus' resurrection; that in itself lets us know it wasn't an added embellishment supplied years after Jesus died. Consider also that it was women who first discovered the empty tomb and saw the risen Jesus. If the story was made up, would the fabricators be so foolish as to present women as the first witnesses when their word had no legal or social standing in first century Palestine? And if the story was made up by the disciples to gain a following, why would they be represented as doubting the resurrection when it was first reported to them, or being confused by Jesus when he spoke about it before his death? Some argue the appearances of the resurrected Jesus were indeed "experienced" by Jesus' followers but were only hallucinations. People saw Jesus, but the Jesus they saw was not real. The problem with this slant is that while individuals can hallucinate there is no such thing as group hallucinations and many of the appearances were to several and even hundreds of people at one time.

### **Changed Lives**

The third piece of evidence is the reaction people had to Jesus' appearances after his resurrection. In the first century, the Jews' conception of a Messiah was that he would triumph over Israel's enemies and re-establish the enduring and victorious throne of David. "Messiahs" had come and gone, and those who had followed them either made themselves scarce or took the mantle of a new messiah. Not so for the early Christ followers. Instead, they went from little known apprentices to hated and feared leaders of a movement that gathered thousands in the span of just a few weeks. Furthermore, two of the most

significant church leaders, Paul and James (the brother of Christ), were both unbelievers before encountering the resurrected Jesus. Paul was even hired to be the main persecutor of the early Christian church. Upon seeing the resurrected Jesus, however, both men immediately left a life of societal acceptance to become hated proclaimers of Christ who would ultimately be executed for their faith. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, why did they so boldly claim he did when they knew they would be persecuted for a claim they would have known was false? Some people may endure persecution and even death for something they believe to be true (but cannot verify), but few people will die for something they know to be false. And for a whole group of men to do so seems implausible. Charles Colson, Special Counsel to President Nixon, who served time for his involvement in Watergate, was particularly taken by this last point. He wrote:

Here were the 10 most powerful men in the United States . . . . With all that power, and we couldn't contain a lie for two weeks . . . . Take it from one who was involved in conspiracy, who saw the frailty of man firsthand . . . . There is no way the 11 apostles, who were with Jesus at the time of the resurrection, could ever have gone around for 40 years proclaiming Jesus' resurrection unless it were true.<sup>3</sup>

### **A Crazy Idea, Unless It Is True**

Finally, the concept of bodily resurrection was non-sensical in pagan thought, denied by the liberal wing of the Jewish elite, and was something that would only happen at the end of time according to the conservative Jewish elite. In other words, the biblical record of Jesus' resurrection doesn't fit with any of these views when it presents a Messiah who came back to life, to speak, to eat, and to walk. And yet as odd as Jesus' resurrection is when compared to cultural expectations and understandings, the biblical records are in complete agreement on the matter.<sup>4</sup> If the resurrection was fabricated, would it not have made more sense for the writers to speak of some sort of spiritual resurrection? Would not that have been a quicker way for the disciples to gain some traction in establishing a legion of followers if the resurrection was just a fabricated story?

### **Accounting for the Evidence**

When considering the above, one is forced to ask: what best accounts for the evidence? Certainly, a historical bodily resurrection can account for it. It explains...

- the empty tomb
- the reported appearances of the resurrected Jesus
- why the historical record does not make the disciples look good or make them the first witnesses of the resurrected Jesus
- the about-face of Paul and James and all of the disciples
- how the gospel writers could be unified in writing about such an odd, new kind of resurrection

Indeed, unless one begins with the presupposition that a bodily resurrection is not possible, he is hard pressed to find an alternative explanation which is more plausible. An actual bodily resurrection is simply more plausible than that a lie was fabricated and died for, that Jesus' body was lost in some forgotten tomb, that the appearances were just hallucinations, or that Christians made up the whole thing long after Jesus' time. None of the latter suggestions have any weight of evidence. As leading British New Testament scholar James D.G. Dunn wrote: "alternative interpretations of the data fail to provide a more satisfactory explanation."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a very accessible examination of the evidence for the resurrection, see Gary R. Habermas & Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004). For a more scholarly examination, see N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in William Lane Craig, *On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2010), 230.

<sup>3</sup> Marjorie Hyer, "[Colson Preaches That Watergate Proves the Bible](#)," *The Washington Post* (September 28, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> These thoughts are attributed to N.T. Wright as taken from Antony Flew, "The Self-Revelation of God in Human History: A Dialogue on Jesus with N.T. Wright," *There Is a God* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 185-212.

<sup>5</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Evidence for Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 76.