

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

Robert S. Keyes, MD, PhD

The central truth of Christianity is that through a relationship with Jesus Christ, we will live beyond death of our current bodies and be resurrected into permanent, eternal bodies. This hope is based upon the historical resurrection of Jesus Christ as the first among many who will be resurrected after Jesus comes to earth a second time. The apostle Paul stated that “if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith” (I Corinthians 15:14). Christianity is worthless unless Jesus was raised from the dead in his body after he was crucified the first time that he was on earth. Because the resurrection of Jesus Christ was a historical event, it can be evaluated historically to determine whether it actually happened or not.

In his book, The Resurrection of Jesus, Jewish theologian and rabbi Pinchas Lapide wrote:

“I accept the resurrection of Easter Sunday not as an invention of the community of disciples, but as a historical event.”

In The Phenomenon of the New Testament, Cambridge historian C. F. D. Moule states:

“If the coming into existence of the Nazarenes [Christians], a phenomenon undeniably attested by the New Testament, rips a great hole in history, a hole of the size and shape of the Resurrection, what does the secular historian propose to stop it up with? . . . the birth and rapid rise of the Christian Church . . . remains an unsolved enigma for any historian who refuses to take seriously the only explanation offered by the church itself.”

What evidence do these scholars find so compelling? What historical proof can we find that tells us that the resurrection of Jesus Christ actually happened? There are four central historical facts¹⁻² that support this conclusion:

1. Jesus was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

Joseph of Arimathea was a Jewish religious leader who was also a follower of Jesus. When Jesus was crucified, Joseph arranged for Jesus to be buried in his own tomb. The importance of this fact is that we know that Jesus was dead, and the location of his tomb was known. The burial story in Mark 15 and recounted in I Corinthians 15 comes from eyewitness accounts most likely from within 5 years of the event itself. Several 1st-century historians, including Tacitus and Josephus, confirm that Jesus was crucified.

2. The tomb was found empty on the third day after the burial.

Four major attempts have been offered to explain how the tomb could be empty apart from a miracle:

A. The disciples stole the body.

A group of Roman guards was placed at the tomb of Jesus to prevent anyone from disturbing the body. After the events of Sunday morning, the guards were afraid that they would be blamed for the disappearance of Jesus. The Jewish leaders told the guards to claim that the disciples of Jesus stole the body (Matthew 28:11-15). However, it's hard to believe that anyone would take such a story seriously. The idea that a group of untrained men could overpower a Roman military unit and steal Jesus' body is ridiculous. What would be their motive? They had no expectation that Jesus would rise from the dead and, thus, no reason to try to fake it. Furthermore, most of the disciples died horrible deaths for their beliefs. For instance, Peter was crucified upside down. To claim that they died for a lie or that they would not admit to such a conspiracy to avoid death is simply unreasonable.

B. The disciples went to the wrong tomb.

As we saw in fact number 1, the location of Jesus tomb was well known to everyone involved. This explanation requires that not only the disciples go to the wrong tomb but also that the Jewish leaders, Roman leaders, Joseph of Arimathea, and the angels also go to the wrong tomb!

C. Jesus was only apparently dead.

Some have argued that maybe Jesus merely passed out from all of the blood loss, dehydration, and pain. Then, in the cool, damp environment of the tomb, he was revived and managed to push away the large stone sealing the tomb, overcome the guards, and appear to his disciples as their Savior. Although once taken seriously, scholars no longer find this explanation of value. The Romans had executed countless numbers of people by crucifixion. They could tell if a person was still breathing or not. In the case of Jesus, a spear was thrust into his side to confirm death. Unexpectedly, blood and water flowed from the wound. This mixture of blood and water was most likely blood from a perforation in Jesus' heart in combination with pleural and pericardial fluid from the linings around his lungs and heart.³ Furthermore, the spear would have penetrated Jesus' lung causing it to collapse. Therefore, Jesus was dead. In addition, it is not reasonable to argue that Jesus could move the stone, which was probably about 1½-2 tons, and appear as Lord of Life to his disciples after the ordeal of scourging and crucifixion.

D. It wasn't Jesus on the cross.

The Gospel of Barnabas claims that it was the traitor Judas Iscariot who was crucified rather than Jesus. This work was written in the 14th century and, therefore, was certainly not written by the disciple Barnabas and is far too late historically (by about 1300 years) to be of value in challenging eyewitness accounts from the 1st century.

This leaves us with a supernatural bodily resurrection as the only reasonable explanation for the empty tomb. This was the understanding of the early church and no

better explanation has ever been offered. In Palestine during the days of Jesus, there were over 50 tombs of prophets or other holy persons where followers would go to remember the individuals. After the resurrection, we have no evidence that anyone ever went back to the tomb of Jesus. The reason: the tomb was empty.

3. Jesus appeared to groups of disciples on multiple occasions.

Jesus appeared to his followers on at least 12 different occasions after the tomb was found empty. In one instance, he appeared to more than 500 individuals (I Corinthians 15:6). One of the most amazing aspects of these appearances is that they occurred to people who had no expectation of seeing Jesus. This is one of the reasons that these experiences cannot be explained as hallucinations.⁴ The concept of an individual being resurrected to an eternal body prior to the general resurrection at the end of time was foreign to the Jewish mind. They were familiar with resuscitations such as Lazarus, where the dead body was revived but would have to die again; however, resurrections did not occur and were not expected. Furthermore, when a hallucination does occur, the same one doesn't happen to different people on multiple occasions. Thus, these were unique, unexpected experiences with Jesus after his death.

4. The resurrection is the only explanation for the birth of the church.

What was the spark that ignited the Christian church? It is clear from the Bible and from history that it was the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It was the resurrection that changed a group of ordinary individuals into a focused movement that, through ongoing persecution, took the message of Jesus Christ throughout the Roman Empire.

What was the source of this concept of resurrection?

- A. Christian source – This was the birth of Christianity and, therefore, there was no Christian understanding of resurrection to draw upon.
- B. Jewish source – The Jewish expectation was that there would be a general resurrection of all people at the end of history. There was no concept of an individual resurrection occurring in history prior to that time.
- C. Pagan source – Popular writings on mythology⁴ suggest that the idea of a resurrecting god was common among 1st-century mystery religions. However, since the early part of the 20th century, scholars have found this explanation unconvincing.⁵⁻⁷ Some of the reasons for the failure of this hypothesis include:
 - 1. Most of the examples given occurred after the life of Jesus and, therefore, if there was any borrowing of ideas, it was from Christianity to the mystery religion.
 - 2. The idea of dying and rising gods was generally found in fertility cults that focused on seasonal changes and crop harvests.
 - 3. There is no evidence for any mystery religion having any influence upon the thinking of the people of 1st-century Palestine.

- D. Unexpected event – The only explanation that is consistent with history is that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was a unique event which was not rooted in any previous thought.

These four facts of history provide a solid case for proving that Jesus Christ rose from the dead in fulfillment of his own prediction. Simon Greenleaf, Harvard Professor of Law, authored the book, Testimony of the Evangelists: Examined by the Rules of Evidence Administered in Courts of Justice, where he once wrote:

“All that Christianity asks of men . . . is, that they would be consistent with themselves; that they would treat its evidences as they treat the evidence of other things; and that they would try and judge its actors and witnesses, as they deal with their fellow men, when testifying to human affairs and actions, in human tribunals. Let the witnesses be compared with themselves, with each other, and with surrounding facts and circumstances; and let their testimony be sifted, as if it were given in a court of justice, on the side of the adverse party, the witness being subjected to rigorous cross-examination. The result, it is confidently believed, will be an undoubting conviction of their integrity, ability, and truth.”

References

1. Matthew 27-28, Mark 15-16, Luke 23-24, John 18-21
2. Craig, William Lane (1985) “Contemporary Scholarship and the Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ” *Truth* 1: 89-95.
(www.leaderu.com/truth/1truth22.html)
3. Edwards, W.D., Gabel, W.J., and Hosmer, F.E. (1986) “On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 255:1455-1463.
(www.godandscience.org/apologetics/deathjesus.pdf)
4. For instance, Dan Brown’s The Da Vinci Code and Joseph Campbell’s The Power of Myth
5. Yamauchi, Edwin M., “Easter: Myth, Hallucination, or History?”
(www.leaderu.com/everystudent/easter/articles/yama.html)
6. Holding, J.P., “Comparing Osiris, Horus, and Jesus”
(www.tektonics.org/copycat/osy.html)
7. Holding, J.P., “Did The Mithraic Mysteries Influence Christianity?”
(www.tektonics.org/copycat/mithra.html)