



Questioning Christianity

Did the Resurrection Really Happen?

The Significance of the Resurrection

- In the last session, we considered the rationality of belief in miracles, those events defined as violations of the laws of nature with a divine cause.
- While followers of Jesus may not have a problem accepting miracles as they're presented in Scripture, the naturalistic, materialistic worldview of our day rejects the supernatural outright, for accepting such a possibility would make a compelling case for the existence of God and thus would require reckoning with Him.
 - **Romans 1:18-23** *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.*
- Not only is the resurrection questioned by an atheistic worldview, but because of the miraculous nature of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ has been derided in the public square, some liberal theologians have suggested alternative understandings to make the Christian faith more palatable:
 - **The resurrection as metaphor** - The resurrection represents the victory of love and justice over evil and oppression, a moral encouragement for Jesus's followers to similarly follow His difficult path of love and peace in a cruel world.
 - **The resurrection as transformation** - The resurrection was a metaphor for the kind of transformation God wants to work in the hearts of his people, the rising of Jesus in the hearts and minds of his disciples a picture of the new community dedicated to Jesus's teachings.
 - Not only do these theories not align with the history presented in Scripture, but they do not account for the significance that the New Testament writers themselves place on the literal, bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

- **The Truth:** The centerpiece of the Christian faith is the historical, bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.
- The Scriptures themselves testify to its importance:
 - **1 Corinthians 15:1-19** *Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, ² and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. ³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ... ¹² Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ¹⁵ We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.*
 - If there's no resurrection from the dead, then:
 - There's no forgiveness of sins, for the resurrection is evidence of Jesus's sufficient payment for sin on the cross.
 - There's no reconciliation with God, for the resurrection is proof that the payment was accepted by the Father.
 - There's little value to Jesus's other teachings, for he repeatedly claimed to be God and predicted both his death *and* resurrection.
 - There's no future hope, for the resurrection is what secures everlasting life for followers of Jesus.
 - "Of all the world's religions Christianity alone purports to be based on the resurrection of its divine founder."¹
 - "It is quite clear that without the belief in the resurrection the Christian faith could not have come into being. The disciples would have remained crushed and defeated men. Even had they continued to remember Jesus as their believed teacher, His crucifixion would have forever silenced any hopes of His being the Messiah. The cross could have remained the sad and shameful end to His career. *The origin of Christianity therefore hinges on the belief of the early disciples that God had raised Jesus from the dead.*"²
- In short, the historicity has profound implications as proof for the Christian faith.

¹ McDowell, Josh, and Sean McDowell. 2017. *Evidence That Demands a Verdict: Life-Changing Truth for a Skeptical World*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 237.

² Ibid.

Facts Concerning the Resurrection³

- **Pre-Resurrection Facts**

- Jesus was dead.
 - The Romans were masters at execution, and likely learned crucifixion from the Carthaginians (during or after the Punic Wars) who themselves imported it from the Assyrians. The Romans may not have invented the practice, but they perfected it, becoming the region's principle utilizer for five centuries.
 - Even in the cases where people were alive post-crucifixion, it was never an accident; in one recorded example from the historian Josephus, three men were brought down from their crosses and given medical care after Titus Cesar changed his mind regarding their execution, but even after receiving the best medical care, they later died from their wounds.
 - Crucifixion was embraced due to its uniquely excruciating nature and it's incredibly negative social stigma.
 - In all four gospels, Jesus's death is confirmed by those around him, and John records the Romans' confirmation by piercing with a spear.
 - Pontius Pilate confirmed the death of Jesus (Matthew 27, Mark 15, Luke 23, John 19)
- The nature of the tomb.
 - The tomb was owned by a man named Joseph of Arimathea. With a name provided, this means people would have known where it was.
 - Even non-Christian historians have confirmed the types of tombs used in Jesus's day, and they accord with the testimony of Scripture.
 - The tomb was artificially hewn with a single entrance, sealed with a large stone.
- The burial.
 - The time that elapsed between death and burial was very short, usually taking place on the day of death.
 - Joseph of Arimathea seems to have been further motivated by Jewish law that requires a 24-hour limit and burial to avoid the sabbath.
 - Those buried would be wrapped in linen clothes, aligned with the Scriptural accounts.
 - Regarding the account: First, Paul confirms it in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, second, the burial account is unembellished, third, there are no conflicting burial accounts, fourth, the Jewish authorities were most assuredly guaranteeing Jesus's burial, and fifth, Christians inventing

³ This section adapted from: McDowell, Josh, and Sean McDowell. *Evidence That Demands a Verdict: Life-Changing Truth for a Skeptical World*. Fourth edition. Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2017, 246-275.

“Joseph of Arimathea” as a member of the very court that condemned Jesus is incredibly unlikely.

- The stone.
 - The round stone shape that’s described in the gospel accounts (being rolled away) is consistent with the stones used to seal tombs in that day.
 - Sealing stones weighed about 400 pounds or more. How was it moved in the first place? The stones were typically held up with a wedge on a slight incline until the burial. Upon burial, the wedge was removed and gravity moved it into position.
- The seal.
 - The sealing of the stone would have only been done in the presence of Roman guards who were left in charge.
 - The purpose of sealing was to prevent tampering with the tomb.
 - After a guard inspected a tomb, a cord was stretched across the stone and fastened at the ends with sealing clay; these clay packs were stamped with the signet of the Roman government.
- The guard.
 - Matthew’s gospel (chapter 27) records the request of the Roman guard specifically in light of the religious leaders’ disbelief in any resurrection and their motivation to deter the stealing of the body.
- The disciples.
 - Upon Jesus’s death, the disciples were scattered. They weren’t emboldened and plotting to create a new religion; Scripture depicts them as dejected and confused without Jesus.
 - This is called the “criterion of embarrassment;” we have reason to believe these accounts because the disciples are not cast in a positive light.

- **Post Resurrection Facts**

- The empty tomb.
 - Even most “alternative explanations” for the resurrection grant an empty tomb.
 - Women were the first witnesses, but the testimony of women was not seen as credible. If one were fabricating such a story, one would not have relied on the accounts of women, an inclusion that would have cast their “new religion” in a poor light or been rejected as evidence outright.
 - There were multiple attestations to the empty tomb (see all four gospels: Matthew 28:11-15, Mark 16:1-8, Luke 24:1-12, Joh 20:11-18).
 - Other sources that pre-date the gospel accounts reference the resurrection, including the sermons in Acts and the creedal statement

of 1 Corinthians 15:3-8.

- The location of the empty tomb, Jerusalem, was also the center of the Christian preaching that included testimony of a resurrected savior. This is incredibly unlikely if it was fabricated.
- The lack of tomb veneration supports that the tomb was empty.
- The empty tomb was common knowledge in the early church, assumed to not be a matter of dispute or confusion.
- The Jewish response and polemic against Christianity doesn't question the empty tomb (see Matthew 28:11-15).
- The tradition of the empty tomb was very early, providing good evidence.
- The grave clothes.
 - The grave clothes were left behind as evidence of the empty tomb (John 20:3-9).
- The appearances of Jesus.
 - There are no fewer than 12 distinct instances where Jesus is mentioned appearing to individuals or groups after his resurrection.
 - The appearances in every case were described as physical, not merely spiritual or a vision. Furthermore, a physical, resurrected Jesus is not an idea they would have borrowed from any other religious system, including their own.
 - The Greek language itself used to describe Jesus's appearances rules out any sense of an "ethereal" or merely spiritual presence.
 - Paul himself claims to have seen the resurrected Christ (1 Corinthians 15:3-8).
 - Paul notes that there were more than 500 others that saw Jesus resurrected, and invites his readers to ask them - for many were still alive (1 Corinthians 15:6)!
 - The disciples themselves were slow in caution and disbelief to recognize their Messiah, which is actually evidence for their psychological soundness and lends additional credence to their seeing him physically alive.
- No opposing Jewish refutation.
 - Simply put, besides the body being stolen, there are no other explanations provided by the Jews or the Romans for the empty tomb despite the fact that they'd have every reason to find an explanation.
 - The book of Acts demonstrates that the preaching of the resurrection is what drudged up the consternation of the religious leaders; all they'd need to do is prove an alternative theory or produce a body, and they could have quelled the uproar of this "new religion".

- **Established Psychological Facts**

- When one reads the gospel accounts and Acts, one must ask: what was it that changed a band of frightened, cowardly disciples into men of courage and conviction? There's no explanation for their radical change of heart, action, and demeanor except that they encountered the risen Christ.
- One may die for something they think is true, but no one dies for something they know to be a lie. The fact that all of the Apostles faced intense persecution and most faced the threat of death works against any explanation that they fabricated the story of the resurrection.

- **Established Sociological Facts**

- **The existence of the early church.** The foundation of the early church was the preaching of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Any theory that attempts to explain away the historicity of the resurrection must also provide an alternative explanation for the origin of the church.
- **The change of the sabbath day.** Keeping in mind that the first Christians were Jewish, it's astounding that they would give up worshipping on the sabbath (Saturday) and move worship to Sunday unless something significant occurred that would warrant such change.
- **The change in the meaning of baptism.** In Romans 6:1-5 and Colossians 2:12, Paul links baptism to the resurrection, a marking of new identity in following a risen savior.
- **The change from Passover to communion.** Similar to baptism, the celebration of the Lord's Supper was instituted at Passover and was a ceremony instituted by Christ to commemorate a new covenant.
- **The change of social structures and beliefs.** Philosopher J. P. Moreland notes a few significant changes that differentiated Judaism from Christianity that would have posed significant hurdles for Jewish converts were it not for a compelling reason:
 - The importance of animal sacrifice.
 - The importance of the Old Covenant law.
 - The importance of the Sabbath.
 - Non-Trinitarian monotheism.
 - The conception of political Messiah, not a suffering servant.
- **The phenomenon of radically changed lives.**
 - The transformation experienced by the disciples is powerful evidence for the truth of their beliefs.
 - Had there been visible benefits arising from their proclamation of the gospel and their service to Jesus, one may look to those as explanation for their actions. However, they received no such reward of prestige, wealth, or status; instead, they received beatings, stoning, and torture, laying down their lives for the love of God and others.

Alternative Resurrection Theories⁴

- **The Apparent Death Theory (Sometimes called the “Swoon Theory”)**
 - **Theory:** Jesus didn’t really die on the cross, but only *appeared* to die.
 - **Problems:**
 - No serious scholar supports the idea that Jesus merely swooned and then was revived after being taken down from the cross.
 - The crucifixion most assuredly resulted in death (see arguments above).
 - From a medical perspective, scientific research has shown that the apparent death theory is way off-target.
 - Besides the medical unlikelihood of Jesus surviving the scourging, nails through his wrists, and the other elements of the crucifixion, even if he did survive, he would have had to escape the grave linens by himself, removed the sealed and guarded stone from the inside, and walk to Emmaus (7 miles away) to talk to the disciples, all with severe injuries.
- **The Theft Theory**
 - **Theory:** One version asserts that disciples stole the body from the sealed and guarded tomb and then conspired to teach that Jesus had been resurrected with the knowledge that he hadn’t. Another version suggests that grave robbers stole the body, but the disciples happened upon the empty tomb and assumed Jesus was resurrected.
 - This theory originates back to the time of the resurrection itself when the religious leaders bribed the soldiers that guarded the tomb to say that the body had been stolen (Matthew 28:11-15).
 - **Problems:**
 - A version of this theory rests on the assumption that the disciples deliberately conspired with one another to steal the body and make up a false story that Jesus was raised. If this was the case, it means they would have given their entire lives to a story they knew wasn’t true, including building a movement around it at great cost and with nothing to gain.
 - Both versions fail to account for the physical appearances of Christ *after* the empty tomb.
 - Furthermore, the disciples were scared and in hiding and would not have approached a sealed and guarded tomb given the likelihood that they would experience the *same fate* as Jesus – crucifixion.
 - Resurrection wasn’t expected by Gentiles or Jews, and they themselves immediately jumped to naturalistic conclusions as explanations before seeing Jesus raised (see John 20:2, John 20:13-15, Luke 24:1-11 where it was assumed the body was moved or the women were confused).

⁴ McDowell and McDowell, *Evidence*, 275-302.

- **The Hallucination Theory**

- **Theory:** The disciples merely saw a vision or dream of Jesus, motivated by their significant grief, guilt, and angst following the death of their leader.
- **Problems:**
 - Many people saw Christ appear, not just one or two; you'd have to assert that hundreds of people all had the same hallucination at different times and places.
 - People saw Christ together, not individually.
 - They saw him appear multiple times, not just once.
 - They saw him *and* touched him, conversed with him, and ate with him.
 - This still doesn't answer why the body wasn't found; if it was just a hallucination, then they should have been able to produce a body.
 - Group hallucinations lack scientific support. There was no shared, external stimulus that can account for multiple people all seeing the same thing. There's no documented case in all psychology of a group hallucination, especially of the same thing with no external stimuli.

- **The Wrong Tomb Theory**

- **Theory:** Those who went to the tomb on Sunday morning to pay their respects to Jesus went to the wrong tomb, mistaking the empty tomb for Jesus' resurrection.
- **Problems:**
 - Even if they went to the wrong tomb, this doesn't account for the belief that they had seen Jesus.
 - The gospels themselves note that the empty tomb convinced nobody but John. The other disciples were confused until they saw Jesus.
 - The persecutor Paul converted based on the appearance of the risen Jesus, not the empty tomb. Paul would have assumed the body was stolen or a wrong tomb was visited.
 - No sources, including early critics, cite this as a possibility. In fact, if they visited the wrong tomb, all the Romans and religious leaders would have had to do is go to the *right* tomb and exhume Jesus's body.
 - The evidence shows that the tomb's location was well-known, and belonged to a well-known leader, Joseph of Arimathea.

- **The Family Tomb Theory**

- **Theory:** Jesus was reburied in Jesus' family tomb at Talpiot, a tomb excavated five kilometers south of Jerusalem that bore names resembling Jesus's family members, after spending the Sabbath buried in Joseph's tomb. This was popularized by a documentary produced by James Cameron and directed by the host of the History Channel's *Naked Archaeologist* and followed up with conferences and symposiums.

- **Problems:**
 - The names on the tomb inscriptions were both common and uncertain.
 - The closeness of the names to those of Jesus's family are overstated.
 - The supposed DNA evidence that was collected proves very little; it shows that there was a man and woman not related by blood, but it's not warranted to infer marriage.
 - There are no Christian markings on the tomb, nor was it venerated or visited by pilgrims.
 - The scholars whose work was cited protested that their contributions to a referenced conference on the topic were misrepresented.
 - In short, the Talipot tomb theory rests on media sensationalism rather than archaeological evidence and scholarly support.
 - This theory still doesn't account for the post-resurrection appearances of Christ.
- **The Conclusion: Jesus is Risen!**
 - The naturalistic explanations fail in multiple ways: they don't account for all the facts, and they usually depend on heavy speculation.
 - These theories are typically put forward by those with a bias, rejecting the supernatural outright.
 - The most logical conclusion to draw from the accounts and the evidence is that Jesus Christ was resurrected bodily from the dead, appeared to the disciples, and then ascended to heaven – just as it says.
 - To lose the resurrection, as Paul says, is to lose Christianity.
 - When one considers the empty tomb, the post-resurrection appearances, the incredible conversions of thousands at Pentecost, the unlikelihood of fabricating the story, and the willing sacrifice of the disciples, only one conclusion makes sense: Christ is risen!