

Apologetics – The Resurrection of Jesus

“Christianity rises or falls on one historical event: the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If Jesus rose from the dead, then everything he claimed is true—he is the Son of God, the Savior, the Messiah. If he did not rise from the dead, then all the things he said and taught are worthless. Paul says that if Jesus is not risen from the dead, the Christian faith is empty and meaningless ([1 Cor 15:17-19](#)). Christians believe that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead. One cannot claim to be a Christian unless he believes this central doctrine (cf. [1 Cor 15:1-4](#)).

Note the Quote: “We need to see clearly that there can be positive theological implications of the resurrection only insofar as its historical reality is affirmed. While many theologians may find such a conviction hopelessly antiquated, the man in the street knows better. His common sense tells him that there is no reason why a dead man should be decisive for his existence today, and I agree with him. Once doctrinal teachings are detached from their historical realities, we have entered the arena of myth. And there is simply no good reason to prefer Christian myths over other myths or, for that matter, secular philosophies. The resurrection is only real for our lives today if it is a real event of history.” William Craig, *Knowing the Truth About the Resurrection, Our Response to the Empty Tomb*

Remember the central aim of the apologetic task: to defend or make highly probable the truth-claims of Christianity. The central truth-claim of Christianity is the resurrection of Christ. Our desire is to show non-believers that it’s reasonable to believe that Jesus did rise from the dead. So how do we go about our task?

We must first admit that almost everything we know about this event is based on what the Bible says about it. There is very little extra-biblical information about Jesus’ death and resurrection. So what we know is based on the accounts from the Bible. If one does not accept what the Bible says about Jesus’ resurrection, then there is no hope of making any headway.

We’ve already seen that there is good reason to believe that the NT documents are trustworthy. History, archaeology, and manuscript evidence support the authenticity of the NT accounts. So, given that what we find in the NT is true, we can suggest the following in support of Jesus’ resurrection.

1. The death of Jesus was actual, literal and genuine. He did not just pass out, faint or temporarily lose consciousness. The crucifixion extinguished Jesus’ physical life.

Roman soldiers crucified Jesus and finished the execution. To quicken death, they broke the legs of the two criminals crucified on each side of Jesus. But when they came to Jesus they did not break his legs, because from experience they knew he was already dead. As a final precaution, however, they thrust a spear into his side, thus insuring his death. Further, those who handled Jesus’ body after removing it from the cross were convinced that he was really dead.

2. The gravesite was secure. The Jewish leaders met with Pilate to urge him to secure the gravesite. They said Jesus had predicted he would rise in 3 days. To assure that the disciples could not conspire in a resurrection hoax, Pilate ordered the official seal of Rome to be attached to the tomb to prevent any grave robbers from tampering with the tomb. To enforce the order, soldiers stood guard. A huge stone was rolled in front of the tomb as added security.

3. The tomb was found empty. On the morning after the Sabbath, some of Jesus’ followers went to the grave to anoint his body. But when they arrived, they were surprised at what they found: the huge stone had been moved and Jesus’ body was gone. As word got out, two disciples rushed to the burial site. The tomb was empty except for Jesus’ burial wrappings, which were lying

neatly in place. In the meantime, some of the guards had gone into Jerusalem to tell the Jewish officials that they had fainted in the presence of a supernatural being that rolled the stone away. And when they woke up, the tomb was empty. The officials paid the guards a large sum of money to lie and say that the disciples stole the body while the soldiers slept.

4. Many people claimed to have seen the resurrected Christ. Paul wrote that himself, Peter and the other apostles, James, and more than 500 people at one time had seen the resurrected Christ ([1 Cor 15:5-8](#)). By making such a public statement, he gave critics a chance to check out his claims for themselves. In addition, Luke begins his second book (Acts) by saying that Jesus “presented Himself alive after his suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by [the apostles] during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God” ([Acts 1:3](#)). Eyewitness testimony is very strong.

5. The apostles changed dramatically after the resurrection. Jesus’ disciples were in a state of panic and utter depression after the crucifixion. Even Peter, who earlier had insisted that he was ready to die for his teacher, lost heart and denied that he even knew Jesus. But the apostles went through a dramatic change after the resurrection. Soon they were courageously standing face to face with the ones who had crucified their leader. Their spirit was like iron. They became unstoppable in their determination to obey the risen Christ. Even threats of imprisonment, torture and death did not stop them ([Acts 5:42](#)).

6. The apostles were willing to die for their claims. While it’s not uncommon for people to be willing to die for what they believe to be the truth, few if any will die for what they know to be a lie. That fact is important because the disciples of Christ did not die for deeply held beliefs about which they could have been honestly mistaken. They died for their claims to have seen Jesus alive and well after his resurrection. They never would have willingly gone to their deaths for what they knew to be a lie.

7. Jewish Christians changed their day of worship.

The Sabbath day of rest and worship was basic to the Jewish way of life. Any Jew who did not honour the Sabbath was guilty of breaking the Law of Moses. Yet Jewish followers of Christ began worshipping with Gentile believers on a new day. The first day of the week, the day on which they believed Christ had risen from the dead, replaced the Sabbath. For a Jew, it reflected a major change of life. The new day, along with the Christian conversion rite of baptism, declared that those who believed Christ had risen from the dead were ready for more than a renewal of Judaism. They believed that the death and resurrection of Christ had cleared the way for a new relationship with God.

8. Jesus and the prophets predicted the resurrection.

Jesus repeatedly claimed that it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem to die and be resurrected from the dead. Isaiah also predicted a suffering servant who would bear the sins of Israel, being led like a lamb to the slaughter ([Isaiah 53](#)). David said that God would not allow “thine Holy One to see corruption” ([Ps 16:10](#)). Peter, in his famous sermon in [Acts 2](#) referred to this Messianic Psalm and concluded, “This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses” ([Ac 2:32](#)).

9. The resurrection is central in the preaching of the Gospel.

The message that the apostles took to the “ends of the earth” was a message of the resurrection of Christ. As one reads through the book of Acts, he finds that the good news always included the fact that Jesus rose from the dead. The resurrection was not added to the message years later. The Gospel without a resurrection is no Gospel at all. Faith in the resurrection is not a side issue; it is the essence of Christianity.

10. The very existence of the Church argues for the reality of the resurrection.

If the resurrection never happened, what explains the transformation of that small band of terrified disciples into men and women who were willing to suffer and die because of their refusal to renounce Jesus’ resurrection? What changed them into bold, confident, courageous witnesses, willing to carry the gospel to every corner of the world? Only the resurrection explains it.

The conclusion to all this evidence strongly suggests that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead. Good, honest, trustworthy people who had nothing to gain and everything to lose believed that Jesus rose from the dead. However, skeptics and critics of the Bible suggest the following false theories as to what “really” happened after the crucifixion:

- The Swoon Theory

Jesus did not really die, he only fainted; therefore the disciples saw only a revived or resuscitated Christ. When he was placed in the tomb, he was still alive and the disciples, mistaking him for dead, buried him alive. After several hours, he revived in the coolness of the tomb, arose, and departed. The absurdity of this theory is apparent. First, the Roman soldiers were convinced that he was dead even before they speared him. Second, the idea that Jesus could revive in the tomb, push away the stone, overcome the soldiers and convince his disciples that he had miraculously risen from the dead is simply beyond belief. Third, the linen wrappings that clothed Jesus’ dead body were undisturbed in the tomb.

- The Hallucination Theory

Those who claimed to see Jesus after the crucifixion were hallucinating. The apostles so desired and expected to see Jesus that they experienced mass hallucinations. Again, the impossibility of this is apparent. How could so many people have hallucinations—especially 500 at one time? Hallucinations are not contagious. Furthermore, the appearances happened under different conditions and at different times. And, don’t forget, the disciples were reluctant to believe in the resurrection in the first place! Plus, they didn’t simply see Jesus; they touched him and spoke to Him. This false theory simply is irrational.

- The Impersonation Theory

This is the view that the appearances were not really Christ at all, but someone impersonating Him. This, the opponents say, is evident because in some cases they did not recognize him at first (or at all). However, several facts show this theory to be implausible.

1. The disciples were reluctant to believe in the resurrection, were doubtful and would have been hard to convince unless it was really him, as was the case with Thomas.

2. It would have been impossible to impersonate Christ's wounds. This was Christ's proof to Thomas that it was really he (cf. [John 20:24f](#)).
3. At times their inability to recognize him was a phenomenon of his glorified body brought about by his own purposes as in [Luke 24:16](#), "But their eyes were restricted that they should not recognize Him."
4. These men had close personal interaction with the Lord for three years. It is highly improbable that an impersonator could have deceived them.
5. They were meeting in locked chambers in some instances, and he suddenly appeared and then vanished. No one could fake such miraculous acts.
 - The Spiritual Resurrection Theory

This is the view that Christ's resurrection was not a real physical resurrection. Proponents of this theory assert that Christ's body remained in the grave and his real resurrection was spiritual in nature. The story was told as it was to illustrate the truth of spiritual resurrection. This is what many liberals believe. However, this theory lacks credibility for several reasons.

1. A physical body did disappear from the tomb. If it was only a spiritual resurrection, then what happened to the body? History shows there was a body there and it disappeared.
2. The resurrection accounts are not presented in parabolic or symbolic language, but as hard fact. [John 20](#) is full of what Greek grammarians call vivid historical present tenses to stress the historical reality of the Gospel message.
3. The record states he was touched and handled, that he had a body, and that he even ate with the disciples ([Luke 24:30, 41f](#); [John 21:12f](#)).
4. [First Corinthians 15](#) teaches us that Christ not only arose, but that he arose bodily. He possessed a glorified body which had unique capacities. [First Corinthians 15:44](#) calls it a spiritual body, but it was nevertheless a physical body as well. Note the following facts about the body of Christ:
 - He could appear in different forms ([Mark 16:12](#)).
 - He could eat, though it was not needed for sustenance ([Luke 24:30](#)).
 - He could appear and disappear and could pass through solid objects ([John 20:19, 26](#)).
 - He could pass in a moment from one place to another ([Luke 24:31](#)).

[Philippians 3:21](#) shows that his body was glorious and unique, but nevertheless, still a body according to which our bodies will one day be fashioned. So, it was spiritual, glorified, and yet a physical body of flesh and bone.

- The Theft Theory

The disciples or someone else stole the body. [Matthew 28:11-15](#) indicates that the Jewish leaders paid off the soldiers who guarded the tomb, encouraging them to tell the authorities that the disciples stole the body.

Who *could* and *would* steal the body under the circumstances?

1. The Romans *could* have but *would not* have. Pilate had agreed to have guards watch and seal the tomb in order to prevent such a theft.
2. The Jewish leaders *could not* and *would not*. They were the ones who had requested a guard to protect the tomb against theft ([Mt 27:63-66](#)). The presence of the soldiers and the seal over the door made it virtually impossible for anyone to steal the body.

If any of the enemies of Jesus had taken the body, they would have brought it forward as soon as any claims of resurrection were made. The easiest way to end the whole affair would have been to parade the corpse of Jesus through the streets of Jerusalem, proving to everyone that he was still dead. The fact that they didn't do that suggests that they didn't have the body.

3. The women *could not* and *would not*, for they were wondering who would remove the stone for them when they went early Sunday morning to finish burial preparations (cf. [Mark16:3-4](#)).
4. The disciples *could not* and *would not* because they were perplexed and scattered, huddled together in locked rooms. Some had even left town. The likelihood of these timid, anxious, disorganized men stealing the body of Jesus out from under the noses of a guard of highly disciplined and skilled soldiers while they all slept (an offense punishable by death) is ridiculous.

- The Mistaken (or Unknown) Tomb Theory

One of the earliest false theories suggests that the disciples did not know where the tomb was located and probably went to the wrong empty tomb. This theory depends on the belief that those who were crucified were tossed into a common pit and that no one was sure where the authorities put the corpse.

This theory also disregards the straightforward historical narrative about the events surrounding Christ's burial and the post-resurrection scene. The Gospel record indicates that Joseph of Arimathea received permission from Pilate to take the body to his own private tomb, not to a public mass burial ground. According to Scripture, the body of Christ was prepared for burial according to the burial customs of the Jews. Everyone involved knew where the tomb was. It's simply irrational to think that the disciples would all go to the wrong tomb.

None of these theories adequately deals with the evidence of the known facts that surrounded the resurrection of our Lord. In order to believe such theories, one must totally reject the NT record, which there is no good reason to do. The evidence clearly asserts that he arose, and the resurrection marks him out as the Son of God ([Rom 1:4](#)), the Saviour of the world.

If one comes to the conclusion that the NT records are basically reliable, he would also have to grant that Jesus must have risen from the dead. If so, He is exactly who he claimed to be.