

# The Proof in the Empty Tomb

## Various Texts

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Throughout our school careers, we are taught about all sorts of mythologies. We learn about Greek and Roman mythology and sometimes we even learn a bit about Norse mythology. Some of these myths have even become popularized in books and movies. But for the most part, everyone views them as simply being made-up stories.

Sometimes, people imagine that the story of Jesus is no different, just another myth ancient people made up and believed. Some believe that the accounts of Jesus contain no more truth than the stories about Zeus or Poseidon. But this morning, I want us to look critically at the story of Jesus to determine whether His story is true or not. If it is, it has a profound impact on everything we do, both now and forevermore.

### The Claims of Christianity

To begin, we should start by stating what Christians believe about Jesus. There are several aspects of Jesus' story that have significance to how we view Him.

**First, was Jesus' miraculous birth.** We celebrate Jesus' birth each year at Christmas, and most people are familiar with the story. Christians believe Jesus' mother, Mary, became pregnant with Jesus even though she was a virgin. We believe God caused Mary to become pregnant by supernatural means. Jesus' virgin birth is a central tenet of the Christian faith.

**Second, was Jesus' ministry.** At around age 30, the Bible tells us Jesus began His public ministry. He started teaching people about the things of God and challenging them to dig into the scriptures. His teachings moved beyond surface-level and focused on having hearts that were right. People were amazed when they heard Jesus teach.

Jesus performed many miracles. He healed people of diseases, raised several people from the dead, and performed some miracles (such as the feeding of the 5,000 and the feeding of the 4,000) in which there were thousands of witnesses. Jesus became well-known throughout the nation of Israel as both a teacher and a miracle-worker.

While many people followed Jesus and came to hear Him teach, there were 12 men in particular that Jesus chose to be His disciples. These men went everywhere with Jesus, learning from Him as they went. Due to Jesus' popularity and His radical teachings, the religious leaders saw Jesus as a threat and looked for a way to get rid of Him. They tried to get Him in trouble but failed time and time again. Eventually, one of Jesus' followers, Judas Iscariot, volunteered to betray Jesus in exchange for money. And that's exactly what happened.

**Third, was Jesus' crucifixion.** When the religious leaders finally got their hands on Jesus, they seized upon the opportunity and petitioned the governmental leaders (who

worked for the Roman Empire) to have Jesus executed. Even though Jesus had not done anything that merited death under the law, the governmental leaders eventually caved to the demands of the religious leaders and ordered Jesus to be killed by crucifixion. He was nailed to a cross between two criminals who had also been sentenced to death and was left to hang there until He died. Late that afternoon, Jesus did, in fact, die. The Romans were surprised at how quickly Jesus had succumbed, so just to make doubly sure He was dead, they jabbed a spear into His side, likely puncturing His heart.

That evening, some of the Jewish religious leaders who had secretly been supporters of Jesus asked for His body so they could give it a proper burial. Because all work had to cease at sundown, they hastily prepared the body and laid it in a tomb that belonged to one of them. The tomb was then covered by a large rock that took several men to move, a Roman seal was placed over it so if it had been tampered with it would be readily apparent, and guards were posted to prevent people from trying to steal His body.

**Fourth, was Jesus' resurrection.** Saturday is the Sabbath in the Jewish faith, and people were not allowed to do any work on the Sabbath, including carrying a large load of cloths and spices, like would be used to treat the body. So, the disciples had to wait until Sunday morning to finish preparing the body. Early Sunday morning, some of Jesus' female followers headed to the tomb, only to discover that the stone had been rolled away, the guards were gone, and the tomb was empty! Jesus' body was no longer there, all that was left were the cloths in which He had been wrapped.

Shortly thereafter, the women and then the male disciples encountered angels who told them Jesus had risen from the dead, just as He had said He would. Soon, the disciples began to boldly claim that Jesus had risen from the dead and that He later ascended into Heaven.

These are some of the central claims of the Christian faith. Admittedly, they sound almost mythical. For us to believe all these miraculous events happened, we would need a great deal of evidence to support it.

## **What Do We Know?**

So let's look at the evidence and see where it leads us. We can start by looking at what other ancient historians (outside of the Bible) say about Jesus. Interestingly, no ancient historian disputes the claim that Jesus was a real person. They also do not dispute the fact that His followers claimed that He performed many miracles, that He was crucified in Jerusalem, or that His followers claimed He rose from the grave. So, all these elements of the story are undisputed by ancient historians. People who want to argue that Jesus never existed, or that the claims about Him have been exaggerated are simply wrong. Other ancient historians record much the same thing as the Bible when it comes to Jesus.

So, what evidence is there that the testimony of the disciples is reliable? What makes us believe that the disciples' claims that Jesus had risen from the grave were true? I think there are several things that lead us to this conclusion.

**First, the accounts do not seem fabricated.** If you read the biblical accounts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, many elements would probably have been excluded if the accounts were made up. As you read the gospel accounts, the disciples often are not painted in the best light. They are depicted as selfish, impulsive, and fearful. Jesus rebukes these men frequently for their lack of faith and understanding. Even on the night of Jesus' betrayal, we read about all the disciples running away and leaving Him to die. Peter later tried to get close to find out what was going on, but when people recognized him as one of Jesus' followers, he denied even knowing Jesus three different times! If the disciples were going to invent a legend about Jesus, they would surely have tried to paint themselves in a better light. If you read the accounts, they do not read at all like legends or myths. They read like real stories of what actually happened.

Similarly, if you were going to fabricate an account of Jesus' resurrection, you would not have the first people who saw Jesus risen from the grave be women. In ancient Israel, women were second-class citizens, and were seen as unreliable witnesses. As such, a woman's testimony was not admissible in court. So, if you were trying to convince people to believe something as incredible as a person rising from the dead after being killed two days before, the last person you would put forth as your star witness would be a woman...unless that is what actually happened!

The fact that the gospels are full of inconvenient truths and accounts that paint the disciples in a less-than-flattering light leads us to believe that they were probably legitimate accounts of what happened—warts and all.

In addition, these accounts were circulated widely within the lifetimes of people who were there. In other words, if the stories about Jesus had been exaggerated, embellished, or just plain fabricated, the people who witnessed what happened would have discredited them. The fact that these accounts persisted is a testament to the fact that the opponents of Jesus couldn't discredit them, because they were true.

Think about it like this: imagine what would happen if someone tried to argue that the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 never happened. Many of us remember that day vividly. We watched the towers fall on live TV. Those images are etched in our memories. And some of us have been to the site where the towers once stood and visited the monument that stands there instead. If someone tried to publish a history book that claimed that 9/11 never happened, it would be instantly discredited by the many people who were eyewitnesses. The gospel accounts of Jesus have stood the test of time. They were never discredited, even by Jesus' opponents (both ancient and modern), and they simply don't read like myth or legend. We can have reasonable confidence that these accounts are accurate.

**Second, the disciples' claims of Jesus' resurrection weren't disproven.** If someone claims a person has risen from the dead, but they haven't, it's pretty easy to disprove: just show the dead body, and the lie is squashed. But nobody did that with Jesus. What is fascinating about this is that the religious leaders were concerned Jesus' disciples might try to steal His body, so they sealed the tomb and posted guards, so that if there was any attempt at funny business, it would be stopped in its tracks. And yet, Jesus' body still disappeared.

The gospels tell us the guards fled in fear after an angel appeared and there was an earthquake. They also tell us the guards were told to tell people the disciples had stolen the body of Jesus. The problem is that if the guards had failed in their duties like this, they would have been killed! So the mere fact that they were trying to tell people the disciples had stolen the body from under their noses discredited their account from the beginning. Despite the vigorous attempts of Jesus' opponents to discredit the disciples' claims of resurrection, they were unsuccessful in doing so.

**Third, the change in the disciples only makes sense if the resurrection is true.** Think about what happened when Jesus was arrested. The disciples all fled for their lives, and Peter pretended he didn't even know Jesus. They went into hiding, fearful that they would be the next targets of the Jewish leaders. And then suddenly they were in public declaring that Jesus had risen from the dead! In the book of Acts, we are told the disciples were preaching in the temple courts, when they were arrested and told to stop. The same people who had executed Jesus threatened the disciples, and rather than going into hiding (as they had before), they were emboldened in their preaching. The only thing that explains such a change is if they really had seen the risen Jesus.

At the same time, we find ourselves asking what they would have had to gain from lying about it? While it is true today that the Christian Church has at times amassed power and even wealth, that was never the case for the disciples. They were all persecuted for their faith, and all but one of them were killed for refusing to renounce their belief in Jesus. If they knew this was a lie, or even if they had an inkling of doubt about it, this would not have happened. After all, who would die for a lie?

I love how Chuck Colson, who was once known as Richard Nixon's "hatchet man" and went to prison for his involvement in the Watergate scandal and then later became a believer put it,

"I know the resurrection is a fact, and Watergate proved it to me. How? Because 12 men testified they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years, never once denying it. Every one was beaten, tortured, stoned, and put in prison. They would not have endured that if it weren't true. Watergate embroiled 12 of the most powerful men in the world-and they couldn't keep a lie for three weeks. You're telling me 12 apostles could keep a lie for 40 years? Absolutely impossible."

**Fourth, the Christian faith persists.** People have tried to discredit Christ and Christians for 2,000 years, and yet no one has been able to do so. The number of

Christians, people who believe the resurrection actually happened, numbers in the millions, if not billions. Why has no one been able to finally dismiss and discredit such fantastic claims?

Actually, the Bible gives us an answer to this as well. When the Jewish leaders were trying to bully the disciples into keeping quiet about Jesus, one man, named Gamaliel spoke up with great wisdom. Listen to what he said.

<sup>35</sup> Then he said to his colleagues, “Men of Israel, take care what you are planning to do to these men! <sup>36</sup> Some time ago there was that fellow Theudas, who pretended to be someone great. About 400 others joined him, but he was killed, and all his followers went their various ways. The whole movement came to nothing. <sup>37</sup> After him, at the time of the census, there was Judas of Galilee. He got people to follow him, but he was killed, too, and all his followers were scattered.

<sup>38</sup> “So my advice is, leave these men alone. Let them go. If they are planning and doing these things merely on their own, it will soon be overthrown. <sup>39</sup> But if it is from God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You may even find yourselves fighting against God!” (Acts 5:35-39, NLT)

I would argue that the reason the gospel message persists today is for one simple reason: it is true! As fantastic as it seems, the evidence points us to one unmistakable conclusion—Jesus of Nazareth really did rise from the grave, just like He said He would.

## Conclusion

So, perhaps the bigger question is, why does it even matter if the resurrection is true? There are several reasons.

**First, it demands a response.** If Jesus really did rise from the grave, then He stands unique over all of human history. It demonstrates definitively that He has authority over life and death—that He is God. The crux of Christianity is this: If Jesus really rose from the grave, then He is who He said He was and the only appropriate response is to follow Him. Refusing to do so is an act of rebellion of the worst kind.

Many people like Jesus and look at Him as a great moral teacher, but stop short of recognizing Him as God. I believe this is because they know that it requires a change in their lives—a reorientation of values, direction, and committing to follow Him rather than trying to take control. If the resurrection is true, that option of seeing Jesus as just a teacher is off the table. Each of us must decide what we are going to do with Jesus and the resurrection. We must decide whether it’s merely a good story, or the truth that demands a response. I hope today you will choose to respond in the only appropriate way—and fall before Jesus in worship and follow Him with your life.

**Second, it gives us confidence for the future.** Because Jesus has risen from the grave, it gives us hope in the hard times of life. It shows us that God can bring beauty out of the most awful of situations. Jesus’ resurrection also points us to the reality of life

beyond the grave. He shows us this life is not all there is, and He proved it by conquering death! Listen to the promises Jesus made in His ministry, remembering that He has the power to deliver on these promises.

“Don’t let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me. <sup>2</sup> There is more than enough room in my Father’s home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? <sup>3</sup> When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am. (John 14:1-3, NLT)

Jesus promises that He is the way to eternal life. By trusting in Jesus, we can be forgiven of our sins and spend eternity in Heaven with Him. If Jesus has risen from the dead then everyone who trusts Him to forgive them can face their own death with confidence, because we can know Jesus can deliver on His promises.

**Third, it is a picture of God’s love for us.** Most of us look at ourselves in the mirror and see all the flaws in our bodies and in our character. Many struggle with a sense of self-worth. They imagine that they don’t really matter. But the resurrection shows us otherwise. One of the most famous verses in the Bible is famous for good reason.

<sup>16</sup> “For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16, NLT)

Jesus made it very clear during His ministry that every person has broken God’s laws. Every one of us therefore deserves condemnation, because we cannot erase our sin and must bear the penalty our sin has incurred. Our only hope is for a sinless person to die as our substitute and take upon Himself the punishment we deserve. God loved us enough to send Jesus to make it possible for us to be forgiven and to spend eternity with Him in Heaven. He could have simply abandoned us to the consequences of our sin, but He didn’t. Jesus is the ultimate picture of God’s love for you and me. If you ever doubt that you matter, you need to look no further than the cross and the empty tomb. They are the proof that you matter to God. God knows your flaws, He knows your failures—which is why He sent a redeemer. You matter enough that God wanted to save you. Jesus came for you. The resurrection proves it.

I hope this morning you see the truth of the resurrection. I hope you see that it is not a mere fairy tale invented to make people feel better, but a genuine miracle and historical fact. Even more than that, I hope you understand why the resurrection matters, and that it demands a response. Every one of us must decide what we will do with Jesus. Will we follow Him as Lord and trust Him as our Savior? Or will we ignore Him and pretend it doesn’t matter? One choice leads to us bearing the penalty we deserve for our sin, the other leads to forgiveness and new life. I hope you choose wisely, because if you do, then Easter is a day on which we can celebrate the greatest gift we were ever given—the gift of assurance, of forgiveness, and of new life both now and forevermore.

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