

The Resurrection of Christ; Myth or Reality?

Christianity stands or falls with the historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The five most important “generally accepted historical facts” that pass the current tests for historical verification and are nearly all universally accepted as facts.

1. Jesus suffered death by crucifixion under Pontius Pilate in 30 or 33 AD (CE), after being beaten and interrogated all night.
2. Friends placed His body in a new tomb, and guarded by Roman soldiers.
3. Jesus’ friend Mary Magdalene and other followers found the tomb empty on the third day.
4. The disciples (the apostles, the women, and other groups of up to 500) had real experiences that they thought were appearances of the risen Jesus.
5. Among the earliest converts to Christianity were Paul of Tarsus and James, who was raised as a brother to Jesus; both of whom 15-20 years later were so changed that they had become two major voices for Christianity.

The only options regarding the tomb are that it was empty or it was not. And with each of those there are also options (see *I’m Glad You Asked*, Boa & Moody).

First, if someone believes that the tomb was not empty, then they have four alternative theories.

- 1) The location of the tomb was unknown, or Jesus wasn’t buried in a tomb at all.
- 2) The women and disciples went to the wrong tomb.
- 3) Jesus was resurrected spiritually, not bodily.
- 4) A look-alike was crucified.

Secondly, if someone believes that the tomb was empty then there are four alternative theories.

- 1) One or more of Jesus’ friends stole His body.
- 2) The enemies of Jesus stole the body.
- 3) Jesus “swooned” on the cross and appeared to be dead.
- 4) Other conspiracy theories (i.e. *The Passover Plot*, *The DaVinci Code*)

In spite of the various theories, the tomb of Jesus is empty, and hundreds of people claimed to have seen Jesus alive after His death. But again, there are theories people attempt to use to answer this as well.

- 1) The disciples all lied about seeing the resurrected Jesus.
- 2) The post-resurrection appearances of Christ were all hallucinations.
- 3) The whole story of the resurrected Jesus is an elaborate legend created by the early church (cf. Lee Strobel *The Case for Christ*, William Lane Craig *A Reasonable Response*, and Josh McDowell’s *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* provide lengthy and scholarly refutations to each of these theories).

Let us now discuss some of the Circumstantial Evidence.

- 1) Christ predicted His own resurrection on the third day and announced that this would be the most significant sign for the affirmation of His truth claims (e.g. Mark 8:31; 10:33-34; Matt. 12:38-40). It is unlikely that these predictions would be included in the material circulating so early about the teachings of Jesus if the church tacked on the Resurrection story much later.

- 2) The entire crucifixion saga came about because the Jewish leadership wanted to end the Jesus movement. If there was a body to be found or some other clear refutation of the Christian claim, they would have shouted it from the rooftops. But the silence of the Jewish leaders about the Resurrection eloquently testified that they knew the basic facts were undeniable.

- 3) Before the Resurrection, the disciples were fearful men whose faith was weak and all abandoned Jesus after his arrest. But by the Day of Pentecost seven weeks later, they were boldly proclaiming Christ to the multitudes in Jerusalem. This transformation was complete, permanent, and unanimous. According to early church tradition, all of them suffered for the sake of the message of the resurrected Lord, and almost all died as martyrs. It is clear that they were totally convinced of the truth of the Resurrection, and they were certainly in a position to know whether the Resurrection had indeed taken place. They would not have died for a lie. Furthermore, James and Paul and others like them who were hard to convince prior to the resurrection, also were transformed in to bold ambassadors willing to die for their faith.

- 4) The success of the early Christian church in spite of fierce opposition is another evidence for the Resurrection. The number of people who followed Christ up to His crucifixion was at most a few hundred. Then something happened, and what we now know as "Christianity" exploded into history. Within 30 years after the resurrection there were a multitude of Christians in Rome. At the end of the first century "Christians" could be found in every major city in the Roman Empire. At least two major attempts to quash this new religion (under emperors Nero and Domitian) failed, and countless attempts on the local level. With no military campaign or unifying leader walking the earth, by 300 AD the church had grown from a few hundred to a population in the millions. And the church began right in Jerusalem, the city of the empty tomb, and the apostles' preaching centered on the resurrected Savior. Without the Resurrection, the church would not have come into existence, and would certainly not have started in the very town of Jesus' tomb, where if what they were teaching was false, their message would have been disproved.
- 5) The shift from Saturday to Sunday as the day of worship for the early Jewish Christians (cf. Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:1-2) was a radical act that would never have taken place if Christ had not been raised on the first day of the week (Matt. 28:1; Luke 24:1).
- 6) The sacraments of baptism and communion are both related to the Resurrection, and would have been senseless in the early church apart from the historical reality of the Resurrection.
- 7) The disciples began preaching the news of Jesus' resurrection very soon after the event itself; in fact, Peter's Pentecost sermon (Acts 2) occurred within 50 days of the Resurrection. And textual research indicates that the written accounts of the Resurrection, especially the creedal statement of 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, are astoundingly early in origin, possibly within less than two years of the event. Such early origins argue against any notion that the Resurrection accounts are legendary.
- 8) Hundreds confirmed they had seen the bodily resurrected Christ, and witnesses were provided by name. At least 16 individuals are mentioned by name as witnesses in the various accounts, and the mention of Joseph of Arimathea as the man who buried Jesus would have been terribly dangerous if the gospel accounts had been faked or embellished, because as a member of the Sanhedrin, a Jewish "Supreme Court," Joseph would have been well-known, and therefore easily confirmed or refuted. Both reputable and culturally disreputable witnesses were named.
- 9) The lack of embellishments and other spectacles should also be considered. Jewish scholar and theologian, Dr. Pinchas Lapide, who taught at the Hebrew university in Tel Aviv, Israel, came to the conclusion that the God of Israel raised Jesus from the dead, and he believed Jesus was the Messiah to the Gentiles. Lapide wrote of the events surrounding the resurrection; "We do not read in the first testimonies [of the Resurrection] of an apocalyptic spectacle, exorbitant sensations, or of the transforming impact of a cosmic event. ...because none of the evangelists dared to 'improve upon' or embellish this unseen resurrection, the total picture of the gospels also gains in trustworthiness."
- 10) The broken Roman seal on the tomb, punishable by death.
- 11) The larger than normal stone (over 2 ton) that was, according to John 20, picked up and moved away.
- 12) The failure of the Roman guard unit, a crime punishable by death, being set on fire.
- 13) The empty graveclothes.
- 14) The location of the tomb was not a secret. The Gospel accounts describe the owner of the tomb (Joseph of Arimathea) and its location ("At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb," John 19:41), and they identify Jesus' resurrection as a physical bodily one (John 20:27).
- 15) The fact that the enemies of Christ gave no credible refutation of the resurrection.
- 16) The fact that there are slight differences and apparent varying perspectives in the resurrection accounts between the various writers supplies additional evidence of their authenticity, as they display an naive lack of collusion.
- 17) The disciples never tried to portray themselves as heroic co-conspirators, nor did they ever discourage anyone from doing their own investigation, nor did it stop them from preaching a message of repentance that invited opposition and persecution.
- "Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, but with gentleness and respect" — 1 Peter 3:15*