

The Eyewitness Testimony That'll Make You Never Doubt the Resurrection Again

Christianity's core belief is that the Son of God took on human form, died for our sins and then rose from the dead to give us eternal life. But if Jesus Christ didn't come back to life, it undoes His claim to be the all-powerful, eternal Son of God, Savior and Messiah. So, Christianity hangs on the resurrection.

To believe the events around that first Easter, you pretty much have to believe that Jesus did indeed exist and that the New Testament can be trusted.

At the Impact 360 school in Pine Mountain, Georgia, Prof. Jonathan Morrow preps college-bound Christians in how to fight with the facts of their faith.

Jesus Isn't Just in the Bible

He told CBN News, "Investigating the resurrection is a historical question that you can do with eyes wide open; it's not a blind faith kind of thing, like believing in the Easter Bunny or a lucky rabbit's foot. This is real-world kind of stuff. And you can investigate the data for it."

Morrow added, "So when it comes to the Resurrection, we say 'Well, how do we know Jesus existed?' Some people even doubt that. The fact is, we have far more sources for Jesus of Nazareth than we do for many historical figures in the first century. We have at least 18. Twelve of those are non-Christian sources."

There's more evidence Jesus existed than Julius Caesar. Anyone doubt Caesar existed?

As for the Scriptures, Prof. Darrell Bock of the Dallas Theological Seminary explained that any piece of a surviving ancient work is called a manuscript. And more ancient pages or fragments of the Bible have survived by far than any other book from antiquity.

“It’s exceptional,” Bock said. “You’re talking about over 5,800 Greek manuscripts, over 8,000 Latin manuscripts. Most books that we work with in the ancient world have maybe at best a dozen manuscripts.”

Christians: If Jesus Is Dead, So Is Your Religion

Some people might be ready to believe the Bible is legitimate, but they have a hard time believing Jesus Christ could have actually risen from the dead.

The problem with that, as far as Morrow is concerned, is that everything hangs on that fact.

This author of *Questioning the Bible* explained, “Paul made the argument in I Corinthians 15, saying ‘Look, you can test this: If the Resurrection didn’t happen, Christianity is false. Whether you believe it or not, whether you’re sincere about it, if the resurrection didn’t happen, Christianity’s false – go to the next religion.’”

If He Died, Then They Lied

Some suggest that the apostles all lied in a vast conspiracy to turn the deficit of Jesus’ death into the positive of a risen Lord. But biblical apologists insist when you examine it all the way through, it’s actually easier to believe in the Resurrection than its alternatives.

Such Bible experts say that to dismiss the Resurrection, any theory you come up with to explain the historical happenings has to explain away three historical facts:

1. There was an empty tomb three days after Jesus’s body

had been placed in it, though it had been constantly guarded by Roman soldiers,

2. Jesus appeared to hundreds of people in numerous places for almost seven weeks after His crucifixion,
3. And something huge did happen to suddenly and forever turn all the cowering, cowardly disciples into bold believers, proclaiming a risen Messiah they were willing to be tortured and die for.

Did Jesus Die, or Just Almost Die?

Still, alternative theories live on.

Some theorize that Jesus didn't die on the cross but just went into a death-like state that fooled everyone who checked His body. Then, under this theory, He awoke in the tomb, got up and walked out. Proponents say that explains His many appearances after His supposed death.

What this doesn't explain is how in a near-death state and with exceedingly crippling wounds, He could work His way out of tightly-wrapped, glued-on burial garments and then roll away the massively heavy stone sealed onto the tomb by the Romans. And it doesn't explain why He'd suddenly disappear after several weeks among His disciples, never to be seen again. Nor does it explain how so many people saw Him ascending up into the heavens.

Oops, Wrong Tomb

Some suggest the female disciples who first found the empty tomb might have just had the wrong one, and the other disciples took advantage of that, concocting a resurrection myth to explain the empty tomb. But surely the Jewish leaders who'd had Roman guards placed by Jesus' burial place, and Joseph of Arimathea who owned the tomb where Jesus' body had been laid, would have quickly displayed the body and corrected the mistake if indeed the women had gone to the wrong tomb.

“If you’re going around preaching Jesus was physically raised from the dead, and people knew where He was buried and knew where they could find His bones, that message wouldn’t even get off the ground,” insisted Bock, author of *Truth Matters*.

Not Smart to Lie Where Everyone Knows You’re Lying

Josh McDowell, author of *New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, said the disciples knew this well.

“In the Resurrection, where was the hardest place in the world to convince anyone it was true if it was false? Jerusalem, where a 15-minute walk by anyone could confirm the emptiness of the tomb,” McDowell said.

Matthew 28 points out the Jewish leaders bribed the tomb’s guards to say they’d fallen asleep and the disciples then stole Jesus’ body. But if these guards were asleep, how would they know it was the disciples? And how could they have slept through the disciples rolling away the huge stone that covered the entrance to the tomb, a stone some have suggested was so heavy, it may have taken more than a dozen men to push it away?

Debunking this conspiracy idea, Morrow said, “Conspiracy theories unravel very quickly because people will eventually tell what they know. And the more people who are involved, and the more people who saw the event, you multiply your chances of the story getting out. So that’s the first thing. The second thing is the Gospels, the earliest historical record we have, don’t show the tales of being doctored to say the same thing, like they got their stories straight. They had the ring of truth to them.”

Would You Die for a Lie You Made Up?

And if the disciples were making up Jesus’ Resurrection, would they have lived and died for Him and a fiction they themselves made up?

McDowell explained, "They said after He was crucified and buried, He was raised from the dead and for 40 days—not 40 hours, not four days—for 40 days, they lived with Him and walked with Him, with overwhelming proof that He'd been raised from the dead."

McDowell concluded, "If the Resurrection was a lie, they had to know it. And if they knew it, then you'd have to say here were these men who not only died for a lie, but they knew it was a lie. I challenge you to find others in history who that's true of. It's not."

Morrow added, "The earliest disciples would have known—not just believed, but would have known—that either Jesus was who He claimed to be and was actually raised from the dead or they were making this thing up. And yet history tells us that we have good reason to think they all went to their death with the exception of one for that core belief: that Jesus was raised from the dead. They didn't recant that. Conspiracies break down under pressure. And this conspiracy would have cost them their lives."

What Would Cause Such Radical Transformations?

These and other experts say that in truth, it would take something as radical as Jesus' resurrection to completely transform the disciples like cowardly Peter, who was so scared just before the crucifixion, he swore he didn't even know Jesus.

But just a few weeks later, Morrow pointed out, Peter went from hiding away, fearful the Jewish leaders might have him killed as well, to boldly preaching salvation through Christ before a crowd of thousands, including some who sought Jesus' death.

Morrow explained, "You see Peter with this radical transformation, going from coward to this courageous champion who's saying 'Look, here I stand, this is what I'm saying,

this is what's true. You crucified this guy, but this is what He offered.' You've got that radical transformation right at the heart of what's going on around that earliest Christian movement."

From Christ-Hater to Christian Martyr

Morrow pointed out Jesus' doubting brother James was also instantly changed.

He said, "James—the brother of Jesus—didn't follow Jesus during His earthly ministry; thought He was crazy."

McDowell agreed, saying, "James despised his brother. Thought He was embarrassing the family. And then Jesus appeared to him in James' own word, and he became the leader of the church of Jerusalem."

Morrow added, "And after the fact, James becomes an early leader in the church and was persecuted and eventually killed for that belief."

And biblical apologists say it could only be a resurrected Jesus showing up forcefully and vividly two to three years later that could transform the church's worst persecutor into its main missionary.

Greatest Murderer Turned to Greatest Missionary

"Saul of Tarsus was anything but a follower who believed in Jesus," McDowell said. "He went from city to city, casting his vote to have them imprisoned and executed. But in his own words, Christ appeared to him. Whether you believe that or not, something took. One of the greatest murderers into one of the greatest missionaries. A Christian-hater to a Christian-lover."

Morrow stated, "What in the world would flip Paul—or actually, Saul of Tarsus—to Paul, the chief proclaimer in the early church? He was a smart guy. He was holding the coats when

people were killing the first Christians. He was adamantly opposed to this movement. And then he became a Christian. What accounts for that?"

Short of the risen Jesus appearing to Paul, Bock believes it's an unfathomable transformation.

As he put it, "So the main thing is just explaining how someone like a Saul who becomes Paul even exists."

McDowell concluded, "Something happened in Paul's life that I've never found any other explanation that even comes close to satisfying me intellectually except: 'And Jesus appeared to Paul after the Resurrection.'"

Liars Wouldn't Have Testified About the Female Disciples' Role

Another crucial factor that debunks the idea all these disciples were trying to sell a false Resurrection to the world: the fact that they proclaimed it was females who found the empty tomb and let the male disciples know Jesus was missing.

The first century Jews believed women were second-class citizens. So if the disciples were lying about the resurrection, they made their story all the harder to accept by putting women at the forefront.

"Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—they all recount Jesus' earliest women followers finding the empty tomb," Morrow said. "In the first century, where a woman's testimony would have been about the level just above a slave, that would not be your best foot forward."

Bock imagined being with the disciples plotting how they'll push a false Resurrection.

The Criterion of Embarrassment

“‘We’re going to sell this difficult idea, and the people we’re going to get to sell it are people that the culture doesn’t believe have the right to be witnesses,’” Bock imagined them saying.

But he insisted, “You’d never make up a story that way. This is what’s called the Criterion of Embarrassment in historical Jesus studies: that you’d never make up the story this way. So the reason the story is this way is because it must be grounded in what happened.”

Morrow completely agreed, stating the Gospel writers testifying about the women’s role has “the ring of truth.”

Morrow said, “That would have been an embarrassing detail you would have never led with—unless it actually happened. And the fact that all four (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) say it happened just gives it that much stronger evidence that it actually did happen.”

Hard to Simply Dismiss 500 Eyewitnesses

Saying the disciples lied about Jesus’ Resurrection doesn’t explain His post-Resurrection appearance before 500 people. The Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 15 suggested doubters go talk to them.

Morrow said of that, “You’ve got living history. You’ve got the people who were there to cross-check whatever message is being put out there. So, it’s not as though these things could have been invented and no one would have challenged it. You’ve got this idea that ‘there are witnesses; go investigate them.’”

He added about this call in I Corinthians to talk to witnesses, “Ancient historians loved eyewitness testimony. That’s what they all wanted. Livy, Herodotus, Tacitus, Thucydides—they all wanted eyewitness testimony to get back to the original. And that’s what you have.”

McDowell said of such eyewitness testimony, "I put a lot of weight on this. You see, people today say, 'How do you know Jesus said that? How do you know He did that?' Well, they had the same question in the New Testament times. Even more so than today because they were dying for it. And they wanted to know: 'Is this true? Did Jesus really do this? Did He really say this?' "

'Can't Get Much Better Evidence'

McDowell pointed out, "In I John 1, how did John answer that? They said 'How do we know this is true?' John said, 'What our eyes have seen, what our eyes have heard, what our hands have handled is what we're declaring unto you.' In other words, 'We were eyewitnesses. We were there.' And then with their opponents they would say, 'You were there, too. You saw Jesus do this; you heard Him do this.' And you can't get much better evidence historically than that. And we have that in the Scriptures."

Morrow returned to how Paul pushed his readers in I Corinthians 15 to gather proof that Jesus rose from the dead: "He says, 'It's not a matter of wishful thinking. Investigate this.' That's why he mentions the eyewitnesses. He mentioned that Jesus appeared to more than 500, and as well as His disciples, and to Paul himself and to others. Because eyewitnesses authenticated that event. And it was central to Christianity."

Morrow concluded, "It has all the ring of truth and not the ring of that conspiracy theory where they just made this thing up to invent their own religion."

Could 500 People Have the Same Hallucination?

Some doubters try to do away with all the post-Resurrection appearances by saying those who thought they were seeing, talking to and touching Jesus were all hallucinating, even the 500 Paul discussed in I Corinthians.

McDowell told CBN News believing that takes more faith than simply accepting that Jesus really did rise from the dead.

The writer explained, "Here's the key: what is a hallucination? A hallucination is an internal experience, not triggered by anything externally. This is why no two people ever have the same hallucination. Because it's all internal; subjective. Well, to have 500 people have the same hallucination would be 500 miracles equal to the Resurrection."

Speaking of miracles, Morrow called on people to not dismiss them as casually as most folks do these days.

If God Exists, so Can Miracles

"When historians investigate this, in our modern mindset, there's this idea that 'Look, miracles are out of bounds.' Well, why? Because if it's at least possible that God exists, then miracles become possible," he insisted.

But Morrow added, "We shouldn't believe just any and every miracle. We then investigate them on a case-by-case basis. And when you look at the Resurrection evidence, it's pretty remarkable how strong it is, and that's why it's at the core of Christianity. And so, I don't think it's intellectually credible to rule out miracles before you investigate the event, out of hand."

Bock insisted, "The faith is very, very defensible. That's why it's lasted for 2,000 years. And not only that. There's a rationale that shows the uniqueness of what Jesus is that's important to appreciate as well. And so all the time that's often spent on the Resurrection makes sense because that really is the hub of the discussion."

Morrow added, "Christians don't believe that Jesus rose from the dead because the Bible says so. They believe He rose from the dead because that's what the earliest and best historical

documents show, and that's what's the best explanation of the data."

Early Is Important

Just like historians put great weight on eyewitness testimony, they also give more respect to early historical writings done close to the events they discuss.

With Peter, John and James, you have both: They're eyewitnesses who wrote early.

"You can push the earliest core teaching of Jesus—His death, deity, and Resurrection—within months of the Resurrection. Because then it goes back to Peter, James, and John," Morrow said. "These people were eyewitnesses, they were there, and it was early."

Paul's encounter with Jesus came just two or three years after Christ's death and Resurrection, and not long after that, he interviewed Peter, James, and John.

"Then 18 years later he cross-checked himself again," Morrow said of Paul. "In I Corinthians 15, he goes 'Look, I met with them again and they added nothing to my gospel. We're preaching the same exact thing.' This is the core message. And you can trace it back to the beginning, that there was never a Christianity without that at the heart of it."

Bock said that's crucial knowledge for those who might instead have believed these key Christian doctrines were dreamed up much later.

He explained, "The issue that's sometimes raised up: 'Well, these books were written many decades later. And so they reflect a theological development coming down the road.' All that shrinks back when you look at the person of Paul."

"He was writing within a few years of the time of Christ," McDowell added. "And this is why for many of the scholars will

give I Corinthians incredible credence: because of its closeness.”

The Resurrection Proves Jesus Was Who He Said He Was

Morrow said of Paul, “He understood why Jesus of Nazareth was different in the unique claims that He made, but that then those claims were authenticated through His Resurrection that said ‘What I said is what is real. This is who I am.’”

Morrow summed up, “These claims to forgive sins sound crazy unless you’re the Son of God, you’re the Son of Man, you’re the Messiah. And that’s who He showed Himself to be. And Paul is probably our earliest and best witness to that. And our critical scholars will grant us Paul being that eyewitness.”

McDowell spoke of evidence that can help readers believe the words of Paul and other New Testament writers, like archaeological findings.

He explained, “Right now you can almost say every single reference in the Book of Acts has already been verified through archaeology: 600 some references to kings, people, places, everything. In Luke 3, in the first three verses, there are 17 historical references. Every single one now has been confirmed by archaeology.”

‘The Evidence Is Only Getting Better’

Biblical expert Bock flat-out stated, “These books are the best-attested pieces of ancient literature we possess.”

Morrow added, “One of the fascinating things about New Testament manuscripts: We have over 5,700 Greek manuscripts alone. And more manuscripts are being discovered all the time.” He summed up, “I think what Christians need to know is that there’s really good reason why we believe what we believe, and the evidence is only getting better. The more we discover and the more we find, the more confidence you can

have that this is really true.” {eoa}

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