

The Resurrection: Myth or Mystery?

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How can we know for sure that Jesus actually died and rose again? And what difference does it make?

The Apostle Paul answered this last question emphatically in 1 Corinthians 15:14-19, saying that if Christ did not rise bodily from the grave, then Christianity is false, we are still in our sins and there is no hope beyond the grave.

Of course, if Jesus did die and rise physically from the dead, then Christianity is true, our sins are forgiven, and there is hope for Heaven. Which is it? According to the Bible, we have certainty (Luke 1:4) and “convincing proofs” (Acts 1:3) that Jesus actually died on the cross and physically rose from the grave three days later.

The Evidence for Christ's Death

Few things have greater historical certainty than that Christ actually died on the cross. The Old Roman Creed—the earliest surviving Christian creed outside of the Bible—declared in the second century A.D. that Jesus was “crucified under Pontius Pilate,” and other sources both inside and outside of the Bible agree. Consider the following cumulative evidence:

The nature and extent of Jesus' injuries indicate that He must have died. He was beaten several times and whipped. He suffered a tremendous loss of blood from wounds to His hands and feet while on the cross for more than six hours, from 9 in the morning until just before sunset.

The nature of the crucifixion assures death. Crucifixion

demands that one constantly pull oneself up in order to breathe, thus creating excruciating pain from the nails in the hands and feet. Failure to do this every few minutes means one dies of asphyxiation.

Those at the cross heard Jesus' death cry. Luke 23:46 says, "Jesus called out with a loud voice, 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.' When he had said this, he breathed his last."

The professional Roman executioners pronounced Jesus dead. They were so convinced that Jesus was dead that they did not break His legs to speed death by preventing Him from lifting himself to breathe (John 19:33).

The piercing of Jesus' side with the spear is proof that He had physically died before the piercing (John 19:34). The Bible records that blood and water came out of Jesus' side, which is medical proof that a person has already died.

Pilate made sure Jesus was dead before he gave the corpse to Joseph to be buried. "Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph" (Mark 15:44-45).

Jesus was wrapped in about 75 pounds of cloth and spices and placed in a sealed tomb for three days (John 19:39-40, Matthew 27:60). If Jesus were not dead by then, which clearly He was, He would have died in the tomb from lack of food, water and medical treatment.

The earliest Christian writers after the time of Christ affirmed His death on the cross by crucifixion. Polycarp, a disciple of the Apostle John, spoke of "our Lord Jesus Christ, who for our sins suffered even unto death." Justin Martyr noted in his Dialogue With Trypho the Jew that Jews of his day claimed that "Jesus [was] a Galilean deceiver, whom we crucified."

Josephus, the Jewish historian of the time of Christ, confirmed His death. He wrote: "Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us, had condemned him to the cross." The Jewish Talmud says, "On the eve of Passover they hanged Yeshu (of Nazareth). They found naught in his defense and hanged him on the eve of Passover." Likewise, the Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus confirmed it: "A wise man who was called Jesus ... Pilate condemned Him to be condemned and to die." And the Roman writer Phlegon speaks of Jesus having been crucified but then "he rose after death, and exhibited the marks of his punishment."

But can we trust the records that bring us these facts? The answer is a powerful yes—for many reasons. First, the records are both biblical and non-biblical, written by believers and unbelievers. As for the biblical records, we have some 5,700 manuscripts of the New Testament beginning with a gap of only one generation from the original text. Most books from the ancient world survive on only 10 to 20 manuscripts that are separated from the original on average by nearly 1,000 years.

In addition, there were at least eight writers of the 27 books of the New Testament. Most other events from the ancient world had only one or two writers. Even critics admit that these New Testament writers were eyewitnesses or contemporaries of the events. Further, the noted British manuscript authority Sir Frederic Kenyon affirmed, "The last foundation for any doubt that the Scriptures have come down substantially as they were written has now been removed. Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established" (*Bible and Archaeology*, p. 288).

The Evidence for Christ's Resurrection

While there are few who doubt Jesus of Nazareth died under Pontius Pilate in the early part of the first century A.D., many doubt that the physical body of Jesus that was laid in

the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea came back to life. What, then, is the evidence for the physical resurrection of Christ? Again, it is overwhelming. First, the guarded and sealed tomb was found empty a few days later. The same physical body placed in the tomb permanently vacated it alive (Matt. 28:6). Second, the same body that had been placed there, crucifixion scars and all, appeared for the next 40 days to more than 500 people on 12 different occasions.

During these appearances, Jesus proved that He was raised in the same physical body in which He died by revealing that He had flesh and bones, showing His crucifixion scars and challenging Thomas to touch His wounds. We're told of four times when He ate physical food after the resurrection. Mary and the other women touched Him. He could be seen with the naked eye and heard with natural ears. He taught His disciples for 40 days and performed miracles in their presence. There is no other way possible that Jesus could have proven that He had risen in the same body in which He had been crucified and which was laid in Joseph's tomb.

Little wonder that Peter, an apostle and eyewitness of Jesus' death and resurrection, declared: "We did not follow cleverly devised stories" (2 Pet. 1:16). And John added, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life" (1 John 1:1-3).

Jesus was a prominent figure in Israel, and many people knew His burial site. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and John record the exact location. Both Roman and Jewish sources testify that the tomb was found empty on the third day after Jesus' crucifixion. Matthew 28:12-13 specifically states that the chief priests invented the story that the disciples stole the body. There would be no need for this fabrication if the tomb had not been empty. And the preaching of the apostles would not have lasted if the tomb had not been empty, because the

Jewish authorities could have easily put an end to Christianity by producing Jesus' body.

Also, the Gospels record that while Jesus was on trial, the disciples deserted Him in fear.

Just a few days later, however, they suddenly returned to Jerusalem—the city where the event happened and could be investigated—and began preaching that Jesus was the Messiah and had risen from the dead. The disciples knew this message would bring them a life of suffering and even death. Ten out of 11 remaining apostles after Judas' death were martyred because they believed Jesus rose from the dead. Why would they do this if they knew that Jesus had not risen from the dead? And why would thousands of people in Jerusalem abandon the tenets and practices of their faith and join the disciples in following Jesus?

The Difference the Resurrection Makes in Our Lives

What difference does it make whether Jesus rose from the dead? In Jesus' own words, "Because I live, you also will live" (John 14:19). As the Apostle Paul put it, Jesus "destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Tim. 1:10). If the sinless Son of God did not beat the rap of death, then we don't have a ghost of a chance.

A number of years ago I shared much of this evidence with a large group of my non-Christian relatives at my father's funeral. As I stood by the graveside, I pointed out that this was not the final resting place of my departed father but rather a temporary one. For the Scriptures declared that one day, "all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out" (John 5:28-29). Jesus added, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die" (John 11:25-26).

As I quoted these words, I could feel the very power of God

through them. After the service, one of my cousins approached me and said, "Every funeral I have ever attended I have always felt worse after it was over. This is the first time I have ever felt better!"

Why is that?

Because the resurrection of Jesus, and His resurrection alone, brings hope that our sins are paid for (Rom. 4:25), death has been defeated (Heb. 2:14), and we have the hope of eternal life when we repent and turn to Christ, accepting what He has done for us.

The Difference the Resurrection Makes in Our Witness

What is more, we have a message to proclaim to the nations: Christ died for our sins and is alive forevermore! Of all the world's religious leaders, Christ is the only one who died for our sins, defeated death and is alive forevermore. Confucius, Buddha and Muhammad are all dead. Only their memory lives, and their bodies have all rotted in a grave. Only Christ left behind an empty tomb. Christians alone have the living message for a dying world: that only Jesus can save them from sin (John 14:6, Acts 4:12).

For many years after I became a Christian, my favorite song was "He Lives." Some 60 years later, this refrain still rings in my heart—and it is based in historical fact, not fiction: "You ask me how I know He lives. He lives within my heart!"

Jesus Christ still lives and wants a relationship with you. Begin a relationship with Him today.

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