



Christ's Resurrection: The Historical Record

Jesus rose from the dead. That is certainly the principal belief that propelled the spread of the Christian faith across the Roman Empire, inspiring thousands who persisted in that belief in the face of either a martyr's death or loss of fortune or even family. Had these early Christians not believed in the resurrection of Jesus, it is almost certain that Christianity would not exist today, because it would never have existed at all.



So, why did the early disciples of Jesus Christ believe in His resurrection? Is the resurrection of Jesus historical?

When historians attempt to determine what happened in the ancient world, they must rely on what we call legal-historical proof. In the study of history and in the courtroom, we examine evidence and draw conclusions. While we can no longer cross-examine the eye witnesses who assert they saw the resurrected Christ, we can look at the character of those witnesses. Based upon the evidence that is available, we can certainly draw some reasonable conclusions.

In First Corinthians chapter 15, verses 3-7, the Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth what was apparently an early creed, or statement of belief, on this very subject. "For first of all, I delivered unto you that which I received." Received from whom? After Paul's dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, he made his way to the leaders of the early church in Jerusalem, and spoke to some of them such as the Apostle Peter, and heard first-hand their accounts of the risen Christ.

He told the Corinthians that he was told "how Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he arose the third day, according to the Scriptures, and that he was seen of Cephas (Peter), then of the twelve. After that, he was seen of more than five hundred brethren at once, whereof many remain unto this present, and some also were asleep. After that, he was seen of James (the half-brother of Jesus, who became the leader of the Jerusalem church)."

"Last of all, he was seen also of me," Paul concluded, recalling his own encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus.

This establishes there were a multitude of witnesses who claimed they saw Jesus alive, risen from the dead, after His brutal death on a Roman cross. Clearly, if this were a reference to any other event in the ancient world, historians would not even question its historicity.

Certainly it was an unusual event. One does not expect to see someone at the shopping mall one week after you have been to their funeral. Dead people tend to stay dead.

But we cannot conclude simply from what is the ordinary that the resurrection of Jesus Christ did not happen. By its very nature, however, it is to be expected that it is very much out of the ordinary. If resurrections happened all the time, then the resurrection of one man — Jesus — would be, simply put, no big deal. But, of course, it is a very big deal.

The question is simple. What did happen on that first Easter Sunday?



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First of all, we can assume that the tomb where the dead body of Jesus was placed on Good Friday, was empty on Sunday morning. Clearly, if Jesus was in the tomb — dead — that would have been the end of it. But, of course, the tomb was empty.

Why was the tomb empty?

Those who reject the resurrection of Christ cite one of the following alternative scenarios: (1) the disciples stole the body; (2) the enemies of Jesus stole the body; (3) everyone went to the wrong tomb; (4) the Swoon Theory, i.e. Jesus really did not die on the cross; and (5) The Myth Theory — which asserts that the disciples of Jesus never believed or taught that Jesus rose from the dead.

What possible motivation would the disciples of Jesus have had for stealing His body from the tomb? Clearly, they gained no wealth or power from such a claim, but rather faced persecution instead. While some might die for a lie, no one has presented a logical explanation for why the disciples would not only lie about the resurrection, but that they would lie about it for the rest of their lives.

The argument that the enemies of Jesus stole His body is no better. Why would they want to create a resurrection myth of a man and a movement they hated? When the disciples went public with their testimonies that they had not only seen, but had touched and spoken with the risen Christ, if His enemies really did have his body, all they would have needed to do to snuff out the movement was produce His body. But, they did not — because they could not. They did not have His body.

Then there is the proposition that the tomb was just thought to be empty because everyone — the Roman guards, the women disciples, the apostles Peter and John — all just forgot where Jesus was buried and all went to the wrong tomb. Under this reasoning, the body of Jesus has been in some unknown tomb for over two millennia. This is absurd.

Another theory is the so-called Swoon Theory. This is the belief that Jesus did not die on the cross, but just passed out. Under this theory, the Roman authorities allowed a still-alive Jesus to be taken down from the cross, and placed in the tomb of a man named Joseph (under the Wrong Tomb Theory, Joseph also forgot where his own tomb was). There, in the cool of the tomb, He revived, had enough strength after having been flogged and crucified to push away the stone, and then appear to His disciples as “risen from the dead.” Exactly what happened after that, the proponents of the theory are not quite sure.

There is also a Myth Theory. Under this belief, Jesus’ followers never believed or taught that Jesus rose from the dead. As Denny Kuhn, apologetics professor at Hillsdale Free Will Baptist College, said of this belief: “These stories of Jesus’ Resurrection represent mythological or legendary developments by later Christians long after the earlier eyewitnesses had already fallen off the scene. Accordingly, the claim is that the early followers of Jesus only believed Him to be a wise spiritual and moral teacher, not the Resurrected Lord. After the death of the eyewitnesses, mythical accounts of a divine Jesus who resurrected from the dead gradually crept into Christian belief at a much later date. However, just like the previous theories, the Myth Theory cannot be reconciled with the historical evidence.”

Indeed it cannot. This is why Paul’s letter to the Corinthians is so relevant to this discussion. He specifically cited the resurrection of Jesus as a belief he had “received” from men who had personally witnessed the risen Lord, which takes the belief back to a very short time after the actual event.

Why did they believe they had seen Jesus? It wasn’t just an empty tomb. They saw Jesus. They heard Him speak. They witnessed Him eating a broiled fish. They touched Him. He was not just a disembodied spirit. He was flesh and bones. And, as Paul told the Corinthians, over 500 people testified that they had



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seen the resurrected Jesus, and most were still alive.

Some have lamely argued that this was a case of “mass hallucination.” According to this theory, the disciples only thought they saw Jesus. Now, one can understand that one person might hallucinate and think they saw Jesus, but it is simply not credible to believe that over 500 were all hallucinating, all at the same time.

These disciples believed so strongly that they had seen a risen Jesus that many endured martyrdom. There is not one single incident that can be cited of a person who at first claimed to have seen a resurrected Jesus and later recanted. Not one.

From these early witnesses, we can also create a “chain of evidence,” which is similar to what we do with other historical events. After all, there is not one person living today who could testify to having seen George Washington cross the Delaware River, but no one doubts that it happened. It is considered a historical event. If anyone posited the thesis today that all those Hessians just hallucinated that Washington’s Continental Army defeated them at the Battle of Trenton, that person would — rightly — be laughed at.

And just so with the resurrection. There were, simply put, just too many witnesses. In this case, the Apostle John had his own disciples, prominent among them Ignatius and Polycarp. Ignatius (AD 35-117) was the bishop at Antioch, and he wrote letters about John’s recollections of the resurrection of Jesus with a physical body and His appearances to many. Likewise, Ignatius’ friend Polycarp (AD 69-155) also wrote of John’s remembrances of the resurrection of Jesus.

These two men taught Iranaeus (120-202). Iranaeus wrote of Polycarp’s personal conversations with John in which they discussed the bodily resurrection of Christ. And, Iranaeus related these events to Hippolytus (170-236).

John was exiled as an old man on the island of Patmos, off the coast of Asia Minor. There he wrote the last book of the Bible, The Book of Revelation, in which he not only continued in his belief that Jesus had arisen from the dead, but that He would return physically, in that resurrected body, to the earth.

Why would John persist in his belief that Jesus rose from the dead, several decades after the event? Why did all the other disciples also believe in the resurrection?

The most logical conclusion is that Jesus did, indeed, rise from death. It is clearly a historical event, with overwhelming evidence.

Happy Easter!

This article was originally published on March 25, 2016.

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