

THE CASE FOR THE RESURRECTION

No resurrection, no Christianity.

- The resurrection is “of first importance” (1 Cor. 15:3). *If the resurrection did not happen Jesus is a fraud, Christianity is a hoax, you are still in your sins, and Christians are most of all to be pitied (cf. 1 Cor. 15:12-19).*
- “If Jesus rose from the dead, then you have to accept all he said; if he didn’t rise from the dead, then why worry about any of what he said? The issue on which everything hangs is not whether or not you like his teaching but whether or not he rose from the dead” (Keller, *Reason for God*, 202).

The tomb was empty.

- The tomb was empty. This is not debated; what *is* debated is *why* it was empty.
- The Jewish polemic recorded in Matthew 28:11-15 doesn’t dispute the empty tomb but gives an alternate explanation.
- If Jesus’ tomb was not empty, the early Christian community could not have possibly preached the resurrection in Jerusalem where Jesus was buried.

An empty tomb (by itself) doesn’t mean resurrection.

- “If there had been only an empty tomb and no sightings, no one would have concluded it was a resurrection. They would have assumed that the body had been stolen.” (Keller, *Reason for God*, 205).
- “Had the tomb been empty, with no other unusual occurrences, no one would have said that Jesus was the Messiah or the lord of the world. No one would have imagined that the kingdom had been inaugurated. No one, in particular, would have developed so quickly and consistently a radical and reshaped version of the Jewish hope for the resurrection of the body. The empty tomb is by itself insufficient for the subsequent evidence” (Wright, *Resurrection*, 689).

Post-crucifixion appearances of Jesus (by themselves) don’t mean resurrection either.

- “If there had been only eyewitness sighting of Jesus and no empty tomb, no one would have concluded it was a resurrection” (Keller, *Reason for God*, 205). Ghost? Maybe. Hallucination? Sure. But not resurrection. After all, the tomb is “there” and Jesus is still in it.

Yet if both are true together, the impossible may be...possible.

- Only if the two factors were both true together would anyone have concluded that Jesus was raised from the dead” (Keller, *Reason for God*, 205).
- “Neither [the empty tomb or eyewitness appearances], without the other, makes the sense that the early Christians believed they made. They are like the two parts of a road sign, the arm which indicates the road and the vertical post which supports it. Without the post, the arm cannot be seen; without the arm, the post cannot say anything. Join them together and they point to the truth” (Wright, *Resurrection*, 692).

This we *do* know—something happened that changed the lives of the disciples and the course of history.

- “Something had *happened*, something which was not at all what they expected or hoped for, something around which they had to reconstruct their lives and in relation to which they had to redirect their energies” (Wright, *Resurrection*, 700).
- Imagine yourself in a boat on a still lake. There is no wind. But all of a sudden there are waves in the lake and the boat starts rocking. Around 30/33 AD, something happened in Jerusalem that sent shockwaves around the globe—something that rocked the boat. The question is, “What caused those ‘ripples’ or ‘waves?’”

Four-fold case for the resurrection.

(1) Nobody was expecting or this kind of thing or would have invented it.

- The resurrection was unthinkable to the Greeks.
 - The Greeks would not have invented a story like this. According to Greek, Platonic thought, the body is bad and the spirit, good; “no soul, having gotten free from its body, would ever want it back” (Keller, *Reason for God*, 206).
- The resurrection was unthinkable to the Jews.
 - The Jews did not expect one person to rise before the others—and certainly not the Messiah! (The Messiah wasn’t supposed to die let alone be raised.)
 - According to the Jews, the resurrection was something that (1) would happen at the end of the age when (2) *all the righteous* would be bodily resurrected and (3) God would renew the entire world, removing all evil and suffering.
 - “The idea of an individual being resurrected, in the middle of history, while the rest of the world continued on burdened by sickness, decay, and death, was inconceivable” (Keller, *Reason for God*, 207).
 - “Nobody was expecting this kind of thing; no kind of conversion-experience would have generated such ideas; nobody would have invented it, no matter how guilty (or how forgiven) they felt, no matter how many hours they pored over the scriptures. To suggest otherwise is to stop doing history and enter into a fantasy world of our own” (Wright, *Resurrection*, 707).

(2) Brand new worldview overnight.

- “After the death of Jesus the entire Christian community suddenly adopted a set of beliefs that were brand-new and until that point had been unthinkable” (Keller, *Reason for God*, 208).
 - “Jews believed in a single, transcendent, personal God. It was absolute blasphemy to propose that any human being should be worshipped. Yet hundreds of Jews began worshipping Jesus literally overnight” (Keller, *Reason for God*, 209).
 - “The Christian view of resurrection, absolutely unprecedented in history, sprang up full-blown immediately after the death of Jesus. There was no process of development” (Keller, *Reason for God*, 209).
 - Jews changed their day of worship from Saturday to Sunday and practiced new rituals like baptism (instead of circumcision) and the Lord’s Supper.
- The disciples had nothing to gain by lying and starting a new religion.... These men were Jewish theists. It may seem easy for a modern agnostic to think about making up a new religion for gain. But to a first-century Jew, such an act was tantamount to lying against the God of Israel.... Lying against God and perverting his revelation would mean risking the damnation of one’s soul to hell. Would such a person risk eternal torment for a few years of prestige as a leader of a new religion? The answer can only be no” (Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, 172).

(3) The gospel narratives themselves are too counterproductive to be made up.

- Women as first eyewitnesses.
 - “Women’s low social status meant that their testimony was not admissible evidence in court. There was no possible advantage to the church to recount that all the first witnesses were women. It could only have undermined the credibility of the testimony. The only possible explanation for why women were depicted as meeting Jesus first is if they really had” (Keller, *Reason for God*, 205).
 - If you were making this stuff up, you would’ve made the disciples the first eyewitnesses—not women. In fact, there must have been tremendous pressure on the early proclaimers of the Gospel to remove the women from the accounts (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3-6, speeches in Acts).
- The early Church leaders are cast in a negative light.
 - “In the narratives, the disciples are slow to believe. This casts the leaders of the early church in a negative, unbelieving light, and thus the picture of them in these narratives would be counterproductive to their authority and ministries. The accounts of their unbelief are most likely accurate” (Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, 174-175).

(4) Transformation of the disciples.

- “When this scared, frightened band of the apostles which was just about to three away everything in order to flee in despair to Galilee; when these peasants, shepherds, and fishermen, who betrayed and denied their master and then failed him miserably, suddenly could be changed overnight into a confident mission society, convinced of salvation and able to work with much more success after Easter than before Easter, then no vision or hallucination is sufficient to explain such a revolutionary transformation” (Lapide, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 125).
- “Virtually all the apostles and early Christian leaders died for their faith, and it is hard to believe that this kind of powerful self-sacrifice would be done to support a hoax” (Keller, *Reason for God*, 210).
- “I believe those witnesses that get their throats cut” (Pascal).

RESURRECTION DEFEATERS

Stolen body (by a disciple or non-disciple).

- A lack of motive.
- A lack of drive. It is hard to overestimate how crushed the disciples were on Friday and Saturday.
- Even if they wanted to steal the body, they wouldn’t be able to; after all, Roman soldiers guarded the tomb.
- This theory doesn’t explain the resurrection appearances and cannot account for the conversion of doubters like Paul.
- “[The disciples] faced hardship, ridicule, hostility, and martyr’s deaths. In light of this, they could have never sustained such unwavering motivation if they knew what they were preaching was a lie” (Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, 172).

Wrong tomb.

- Women saw the tomb where Jesus was laid.
- John and Peter entered the tomb and saw the empty linen clothes.
- Joseph of Arimathea was a public figure (member of the Sanhedrin), and people would've known the location of his tomb.
- Jews, Romans, and/or skeptics could've easily proceeded to the right tomb and presented Jesus' body.

Hallucinations.

- "Perhaps [the disciples] had such vivid dreams about [Jesus] that he seemed thoroughly alive, so that they began to speak of him as being alive, not dead at all, and then, bit by bit, to use the language of resurrection....[But] they knew perfectly well about things like that, and they had language for it; they would say, 'It's his angel' or 'It's his spirit' or 'his ghost.' They wouldn't say, 'He's been raised from the dead'" (Wright, *Resurrection*, 695 and *Surprised By Hope*, 62).

Swoon theory—Jesus wasn't really dead.

- Romans knew how to kill people.
- Joseph and Nicodemus handled Jesus' dead body (no breathing, no pulse, wrapped him in approx. 100lbs. of spices, etc.).
- A half-dead, broken, beat-up Jesus would not be able to roll back the large stone and break past the Roman guards.
- A half-dead, broken, beat-up Jesus would never be able to convince his disciples that he conquered death and the grave—that he was, in fact, the Prince of Life. Nobody seeing a "resuscitated Jesus" conclude, "Hallelujah! The resurrection! New bodies and new life!"

Narratives are inconsistent.

- The "inconsistencies" are minor.
- Differences indicate independence and thus reliability.
- Differences attest to an early date. As time goes on, there is a movement towards harmonization.

Narratives are late and legendary.

- Ignores the genre of the gospels (historical-biographical); oral tradition was not a game of telephone—historical accounts were carefully transmitted.
- Ignores the presence and role of eyewitnesses in the gospels.
- Ignores the presence and role of eyewitnesses in other New Testament writings.
 - The earliest account of the empty tomb and eyewitnesses of the resurrection is not in the gospels but 1 Corinthians 15:3-6 (c. 55 AD).¹ "Paul was inviting anyone who doubted that Jesus had appeared to people after his death to go and talk to the eyewitnesses if they wished....Paul could not have made such a challenge if those eyewitnesses didn't exist" (Keller, *Reason for God*, 204).

¹ "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have died" (1 Cor. 15:3-6). 1 Cor. 15:3-6 is a creed that critical scholars date to c. 31 A.D. This is what Paul received and passed on. What this means is that from its inception the Church is preaching mere Christianity: the deity, death and resurrection of Jesus.

- The New Testament narratives hardly reference the Old Testament, meaning there was very little time for theological reflection.
- Absence of legendary features.
 - “The resurrection appearances are reported with extreme reserve. When one compares them with the reports in the apocryphal gospels (second century on), the difference is startling....For example, the Gospel of Peter (mid-second century) reports a cross coming out of the tomb after Jesus, and Jesus is so tall he extends above the clouds” (Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, 175).

Miracles are impossible.

- They are only impossible if the God of the Bible doesn't exist.
- If the God of the Bible exists, miracles are logically possible.

Resurrection story is a recycled myth.

- The resurrection is presented as a historical, time-space event.
- It is a “true myth,” the one to which all good stories point (C.S. Lewis).

CONCLUSION

- The resurrection of Jesus *really happened*. It is not just a nice idea—it is good *news*.
- “It is not simply enough to simply believe Jesus did not rise from the dead. You must then come up with a historically feasible alternate explanation for the birth of the church” (Keller, *Reason for God*, 202).
- “If the coming into existence of the Nazarenes, a phenomenon undeniably attested by the New Testament, rips a great hole in history, a hole of the size and shape of the Resurrection, what does the secular historian propose to stop it up with?” (C.F.D. Moule, *The Phenomenon of the New Testament*, 3).
- “We are left with the secure historical conclusion: the tomb was empty, and various ‘meetings’ took place not only between Jesus and his followers (including at least one initial skeptic) but also, in at least one case (that of Paul; possibly, too, that of James), between Jesus and people who had not been among his followers. I regard this conclusion as coming in the same category, of historical probability so high as to be virtually certain, as the death of Augustus in AD 14 or the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70” (Wright, *The Resurrection*, 710).

RESOURCES

Harris, Murray. *Raised Immortal: Resurrection and Immortality in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1985).

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_____. *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

Timeline:
Jesus'
Crucifixion-
Ascension

Saturday: Chief priests and Pharisees gather before Pilate and request that a guard of soldiers secure the tomb. Pilate consents.
Matthew 27:62-66

Friday PM: Jesus is crucified and buried in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. Nicodemus helps with the burial. Mary Magdalene (MM) and Mary (mother of James and Joses) note where the tomb is located.
Matt 27:57-61; Mark 15:42-47; Luke 23:50-56; John 19:38-42

Day 1: Sunday AM: Roman guards report to the chief priests all that has happened; they are bribed to say the disciples stole the body.
Matt 28:11-15

Day 1: Sunday AM: Several women (incl. MM, Mary (mother of James and Joses), Salome, Joanna) encounter an angel at the empty tomb. The angel instructs them to tell the disciples the good news: "Jesus is risen and will meet them in Galilee." In Matt and John, Jesus physically appears to one or more of the women. In Luke (Peter) and in John (Peter and John) run to the tomb and find Jesus's linen cloths but no Jesus.
Matt 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-18

Day 1: Sunday PM: In Jerusalem, Jesus appears to the 11 disciples plus the two he met on the Emmaus Rd. Jesus tells them to touch his hands and feet; he eats a fish.
Luke 24:36-44; John 20:19-25

Day 1: Sunday PM: Jesus appears to two disciples on the Emmaus Rd.
Luke 24:13-35

Days 9~39: In Galilee, Jesus ministers to the disciples. He meets 7 disciples (incl. Peter) by the Sea of Galilee. He gives the disciples the Great Commission on a mountain in Galilee. Sometime afterwards, he appears to more than 500 at one time as well as his brother James.
Matt 28:16-20; Luke 24:45-49; John 21:1-25; Acts 1:1-5; cf. 1 Cor 15:5-7

Day 8: Sunday: In Jerusalem, Jesus appears to Thomas.
John 20:26-29

Day 40: Thursday: Jesus leads the disciples out to Bethany and ascends into heaven from Mt. Olivet. The disciples remain in Jerusalem waiting for the gift of the Holy Spirit.
Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:6-14