

I Believe in the Resurrection

The resurrection of Jesus Christ has been called the central teaching of the Christian faith, the heart of the Gospel, the cornerstone of our theology, and the basis of our hope as believers. Perhaps that explains why the truth of the bodily resurrection of Christ has been under attack since the very day the tomb was discovered to be empty (Matthew 28:11-15).

Over the years, many have followed in the path of those first chief priests and elders who tried to explain away the resurrected Christ. The ancient Gnostics taught that Jesus switched places with a bystander before the crucifixion and later came out of hiding to appear to His followers. Docetists proposed the idea that Jesus only *seemed* to have a physical body. Enlightenment thinkers imagined that Jesus swooned at the cross and later woke up in the tomb, pushed away the stone and appeared to His disciples. Present day Jesus Seminar scholars marginalize the resurrection, teaching that it was only metaphor and not an actual event. But the Apostle Paul said, “And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins” (I Corinthians 15:17 ESV). We need to have a clear understanding—just why *do* we believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ?

Both Jesus and the Old Testament prophets predicted the resurrection. When the Jews asked for a sign of Jesus’ authority, He said, “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19–22). Other instances include Matthew 20:19, Mark 14:28, and Luke 9:22. Old Testament prophecies include Job 19:25-27 and Psalm 16:10 (cf. Acts 2:31).

The detailed accounts of the resurrection found in Matthew 28:1-8, Mark 16:1-11, Luke 24:1-12, and John 20:1-18 are eyewitness records of the event. Though each author chose to include slightly different details, the four narratives stand as legitimate historical documentation. Few events in history have as precise detail from multiple witnesses as do the accounts of the resurrection found in the Gospels.

The Roman guard that stood watching the tomb (Matthew 27:64-66) knew that falling asleep on their watch meant certain execution. It is preposterous to believe that the same timid disciples who fled the crucifixion would so soon be willing to face the danger of the guard, move the heavy stone from in front of the tomb, steal the body, and were able to accomplish all without waking the soldiers, who were conveniently asleep on duty.

The empty tomb and the uninhabited grave clothes were enough to convince John of the resurrection (John 20:8), along with the women’s account of angelic testimony (Matthew 28:5-7).

Many of the details in the Gospel accounts are unlikely from the perspective of the authors, and must have been bewildering to them. For example, the fact that

Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene instead of a man like John or Peter would have been confusing in the male-dominated culture of the day. The disciples had seen Lazarus and others raised from the dead, but never resurrection to a glorified body like Jesus experienced—thus His ability to vanish (Luke 24:31) and to appear suddenly in a locked room (John 20:19). Including these unheard of events in the narrative shows that the authors were recording history as it occurred, not inventing fiction.

The wounds in Jesus’ hands and side are evidence that it was indeed He who suffered on the cross, not a stand-in as the Gnostics taught. The scars verified by Thomas (John 20:27-28) and the meal shared with the disciples in Jerusalem (Luke 24:41-43) prove that the resurrection was physical, not a spiritual or solely metaphoric event. You can’t touch a spirit; metaphors do not eat.

Jesus appeared to many people after His resurrection, including those who knew Him well, like Mary Magdalene (John 20:15-17) and the disciples. He also appeared to over 500 people at one time (I Corinthians 15:6). Nearly all would have been present when Peter preached about the resurrected Jesus in Acts 2:32. We have no record of any of Christ’s contemporaries objecting to Peter’s mention of the resurrection in this sermon, preached before the very people who had crucified Jesus. Many of these same witnesses would have been alive to confirm the testimony of the Gospels when they were written.

Since the beginning, Jesus’ followers have suffered. The first-century church was brutally persecuted. Thousands of followers, strengthened by the Holy Spirit, withstood poverty, imprisonment, beatings, torture, and death for their belief. Tradition tells us that all but one of the Apostles died a martyr’s death. If they were not completely convinced of Christ’s deity and resurrection, they would not have suffered and died for those beliefs.

Finally, the entire New Testament confirms the centrality of the resurrection. Belief in the resurrection is a requirement for salvation (Romans 10:9). Resurrection is pictured in baptism (Romans 6:4, Col. 2:12). It is the basis of hope for our own resurrection (Romans 8:11) and the resurrection of other believers who have died (I Thessalonians 4:14). It is the demonstration of God’s great power (Eph 1:19). It is why we are able to hope in God (1 Peter 1:21) and the means by which we are born again (1 Peter 3:23).

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. I Corinthians 15:20

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