

THE EVIDENCE FOR THE RESURRECTION  
MATTHEW 28:1-10; 1 CORINTHIANS 15:12-19

INTRODUCTION

According to the Gospel of John #14 v. 6 (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 14:6), Jesus said, **“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”** Jesus also said in his Gospel account in #3 v. 3 (JOHN 3:3), **“...unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”** Jesus’ disciple Peter declared, according to Acts #4 v. 12 (ACTS 4:12), **“...there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”**

To our modern, and postmodern, ears these statements sound harsh and politically incorrect. They are claims to absolute truth, and claims to absolute truth are not received well in our society. Speaking about his experience of living in the Middle East and dealing with various religious groups, ABC anchorman Peter Jennings (PETER JENNINGS) commented shortly before his death, **“I have become convinced there is no one truth, nor two; there are often several truths.”** (*Reader’s Digest*, October 2002)

Historian Arthur Schlesinger (ARTHUR SCHLESINGER) wrote in the *New York Times* (7/23/1989) , **“It is this belief in absolutes, I would hazard, that is the great enemy today of the life of the mind.”** I find such statements ironic, because they are in themselves claims to absolute truth. But the point that this intellectual is trying to make is that evangelical Christians who talk about absolutes are not just politically and culturally incorrect, but they are also anti-intellectual. We evangelicals are enemies of a good education. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Claims to have the only route to God are also not received well by the other major world religions, the Islamic faith being an exception. Modern Judaism says that people may be acceptable to God apart from their religious persuasion. The Hindu concept of salvation does not really require adherence to a religion. Buddhism does not recognize a need for personal salvation.

The Christianity of the New Testament says, “If we place our trust in the God-man Jesus Christ, we will go to heaven. If we don’t place our trust in Jesus, we will spend eternity in a place called the Lake of Fire.” If that is not true, it is a terrible, mean-spirited, cruel thing to say. If it is true, we better tune in carefully to what this Jesus claimed about Himself.

The unique thing about Christianity is that it provides an objective test about its claim to truth. The other major world religions are based upon philosophies and moral principles. You could take away Buddha, and you would still have the teachings and principles of

Buddhism. You could remove Mohammed from the picture, and the Islamic faith could still operate on the principles taught in the Koran. You could forget about Joseph Smith, and the Mormon Church could still get along on the principles taught in the Book of Mormon.

But you cannot do that with Christianity. If you take away Jesus Christ, you still have the teachings of Christ. But the whole system would collapse, because it is based upon a claim concerning a historical event in the life of the founder of our church. It is based upon the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Christianity says, "If this resurrection deal happened as Jesus said before hand that it would happen, you better listen to what He had to say. If he did not literally rise from the dead in time and history, forget about the nice moral teachings of Jesus. He was a fraud, a liar, and a deceiver."

The Apostle Paul put it this way in his first letter to the Corinthians #15, beginning in v. 14, (PROJECTOR ON--- 1 CORINTHIANS 15:14), **"...if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. (1 CORINTHIANS 15:15-16) We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised."** (1 CORINTHIANS 15:17) **And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins."** Skipping to v. 19 (1 CORINTHIANS 15:19), **"If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied."**

Christianity says that its claim to possess absolute truth rises and falls with the resurrection of Christ. If it truly happened in history, our eternal destiny is dependent upon how we respond to His claims. If this resurrection deal is a myth, if it is a nice story that cannot be taken literally, then forget about it. Don't waste your time with this religious bologna. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Because this resurrection is presented as a literal historical event, we have the opportunity to look at the historical evidence to make a reasoned judgment about whether it is true, about whether it really happened.

So we are going to do that for a few minutes this morning. For those of you who may be thinking about whether you should take this Christianity thing seriously, I hope that there will be some benefit that comes from considering the evidence concerning the resurrection. For those of us who have bought into this deal that we need to trust in Christ as our Savior from sin, I hope that there will be benefit in having our faith strengthened and in being better able to give a defense for the hope that is within us concerning Jesus.

I.

I would like for us first to consider THE BIBLE'S WITNESS TO THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF THE MESSIAH. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE BIBLE'S WITNESS TO...) The four Gospels, the first four books of the New Testament, record a number of statements by Jesus where He predicted His own death and resurrection.

One example of this is Matthew #16 v. 21. (MATTHEW 16:21) The text there says, **“From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”** Jesus was showing this to His disciples through His references to Old Testament Scriptures that spoke about the suffering and death of the coming Messiah.

Isaiah #53 is a classic example of this Old Testament prophecy. (ISAIAH 53:4) Beginning in the fourth verse the prophet in the eighth century before Jesus wrote, **“Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. (ISAIAH 53:5) But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.”**

Later in that chapter the prophet speaks of the Messiah being headed for the death of the wicked but being buried in the grave of a rich man. It speaks of Him dying as a guilt offering. The things which Isaiah described 700 years earlier happened on that Easter weekend. That is the claim, anyway, of the New Testament Gospels. (PROJECTOR OFF)

All four Gospel accounts give considerable attention to the death of Christ. That is the story of Good Friday. All four Gospels also devote considerable space to the resurrection of Christ from the dead. That is the story of Easter. We earlier heard read an excerpt from 1 Corinthians #15. At that beginning of that chapter the Apostle Paul claims that 500 people saw Jesus alive after He was crucified. The Gospel of John says that one of the apostles, Thomas, was skeptical about the claim of the other apostles that they had seen Jesus alive. He would not believe it until he put his hands on Jesus' wounds in His wrist and His side. According to the Book of Acts there were many witnesses who later saw Jesus ascend physically into the sky.

The Biblical record then is clear and straightforward in claiming that Jesus died physically and that on the third day He came back to life as He had predicted that He would do.

II.

Let's consider then the ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS FOR THE RESURRECTION. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS...) One way to consider the truth or falsity of this claim that Jesus died and rose again physically from the grave is to look at other possible explanations for the historical and literary evidence. Saying that certain things happened in history does not make them true, especially when we are dealing with a claim that contradicts science and biology--- that someone could return to life after being dead for two or three days. A critical examination is warranted. Are there other reasonable explanations for the data?

A.

The first theoretical possibility to consider is that THE STORY WAS MADE UP. (II. A. THE STORY WAS MADE UP) There may or may not have been a real man named Jesus. Perhaps there was, but perhaps it was years after He lived that a story about Him rising from the dead was made up. There may have been a real Robin Hood. There may have been a real King Arthur. But legends were added to the original stories so that we can't really know what is true or false about these characters in terms of their actual lives. Perhaps the same thing is true with Jesus, especially in regard to this resurrection deal.

The historical evidence concerning that theoretical possibility is this: We have four biographies in the New Testament which were written by people claiming to have lived at the same time as Jesus, three of them claiming to have known Jesus personally and to have witnessed with their own eyes key events in His life.

Someone might then legitimately raise this issue: Perhaps the authors of these three books actually lived many years after the time of Jesus. Maybe they just made up things or recorded legends that did not have any basis in fact, or little basis in fact. Maybe they just falsely claimed to be original disciples of Jesus.

There are a number of difficulties with this idea. First, WE HAVE EARLY COPIES OF PARTS OF THE GOSPELS. (II.A.1. WE HAVE EARLY COPIES OF PARTS OF THE GOSPELS) Scientists have dated parts of copies of the Gospel of John to 125 AD, less than 100 years after Jesus died. There are about 6000 early Greek manuscripts that contain parts or all of the New Testament.

Second, WE HAVE OTHER BOOKS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT WHICH DESCRIBE THE RESURRECTION. (II.A. 1. 2. WE HAVE OTHER BOOKS IN ...) These other New Testament books have different authors who sometimes quote from the four Gospel accounts. The Apostle Paul, the author of other New Testament books, claims to have seen Jesus risen from the dead.

Third, WE HAVE WRITINGS FROM EARLY CHURCH HISTORIANS WHO REFER TO THE RESURRECTION. (II. A. 2.3. WE HAVE WRITINGS FROM EARLY...) These writers stress the importance of the resurrection in Christian doctrine. They lived in the second and third centuries. They also quote passages from the four Gospels. One of these men is Ignatius, who lived between 50 and 115 AD. He claimed to be a pupil of John, the apostle of Christ. One excerpt from his writings says, “[**Christ**] **was crucified and died under Pontius Pilate. He really, and not merely in appearance, was crucified, and died, in the sight of beings in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth. He also rose again in three days.**”

Christian scholar Bernard Ramm summarizes this evidence and says, “**In both ecclesiastical history and creedal history the resurrection is affirmed from the earliest times. It is mentioned in Clement of Rome, Epistle to the Corinthians (AD 95), the earliest document of church history, and so continuously throughout all of**

**the patristic period [i.e., the period of the early church leaders]. It appears in all forms of the Apostles' Creed and is never debated."**

Fourth, EARLY NONCHRISTIAN WRITERS TALK ABOUT JESUS. (II. A. 3.4. EARLY NONCHRISTIAN WRITERS...) Most of them do not describe the resurrection of Jesus, but they do speak about Him being the founder of a religious sect. These include the Roman writers and historians Tacitus, Lucian, Suetonius, and Pliny. Josephus, the Jewish historian, lived in the first century. He refers to Jesus and the crucifixion. There is also a disputed passage in his writings that speaks about the resurrection of Christ from the dead on the third day.

So the possibility that there never was a real Jesus is clearly ridiculous. The idea that the story of the resurrection was concocted many years after Jesus lived does not fit the evidence. Belief in the resurrection of Christ, and stories about it, go back to the earliest times.

B.

A second theoretical explanation for the resurrection is that THE DISCIPLES STOLE JESUS' BODY FROM THE TOMB. (II. B. THE DISCIPLES STOLE JESUS' BODY FROM THE TOMB) That is why visitors to the tomb found it empty on that Easter morning. This theory goes back to the time of Jesus. It is mentioned in the Gospels.

Matthew #28 vv. 11-15 provide us with this account: (MATTHEW 28:11-12) **"While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers (MATTHEW 28:13-14) and said, 'Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.'** (MATTHEW 28:15) **So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day."**

In more recent times a German scholar by the name of Reimarus said that the disciples stole Christ's body because they were unwilling to abandon the kind of life that they had led with Jesus, and they started saying that Jesus would come back again.

Consider how this possibility fits with the evidence which we have available. First, THE DISCIPLES WERE PSYCHOLOGICALLY UNABLE TO STEAL THE BODY. (B. 1. THE DISCIPLES WERE ....) When humans write about themselves, they tend to put themselves in the best possible light. The Gospel writers say that they were clueless about what happened to Jesus and were depressed after His death. They ran away when Jesus was arrested, and most of them went into hiding. They were avoiding any possible contact with the authorities. They seemed to lack initiative to do much of anything until after the coming of the Holy Spirit described in Acts #2.

Second, the Gospel accounts tell us that PILATE SENT SOLDIERS TO GUARD THE TOMB. (B. 1. 2. PILATE SENT SOLDIERS...) The Jewish leaders talked Pilate into

sending a squad of soldier to guard the tomb, which was sealed with a large stone. That kind of planning seems reasonable and prudent, given the claim that Jesus had talked about rising from the dead. The Roman governor had troops available to perform that kind of duty. The Roman governors in Judea were always concerned about quelling any kind of disturbance. If there were indeed Roman soldiers guarding the tomb, the disciples would have had a problem in getting past the Roman soldiers. The Romans would have witnessed any attempted theft of the body.

The Gospel accounts indicate that there was a large stone blocking entrance of the tomb. Archaeological excavations of first century tombs show that this was the usual burial practice of the Jews. If the guards had been sleeping, the noise of that stone being moved would have wakened them. The guards would have had to be killed or chased off. There is no hint of anything like this happening in the early records.

For the sake of argument, let's suppose that there wasn't any squad of soldiers guarding the tomb where the body of Jesus was laid, and let's suppose that the disciples did steal the body. There is still a third major problem with this explanation. JESUS APPEARED ALIVE AFTER HIS DEATH. (B. 2. 3. JESUS APPEARED ALIVE...) How do we explain the appearances of Jesus after His death?

The Apostle Paul claimed that he knew of 500 people who saw Jesus alive after the crucifixion. It was not the case that this Christian church thing got started in some place hundreds of miles away from Jerusalem and years after the event supposedly happened. The church got started soon after the death and resurrection of Jesus right in Jerusalem where the events allegedly happened.

Fourth, CHRISTIANITY PROMOTED THE HIGHEST ETHICAL STANDARDS. (B. 3. 4. CHRISTIANITY PROMOTED THE HIGHEST...) Jesus taught His disciples that honesty and integrity were essential to their mission. For the disciples to steal Jesus' body and then for all of them to say that Jesus had come back to life would violate all that they had been taught about high moral standards.

Fifth, MOST OF THE TWELVE APOSTLES DIED FOR THE CLAIM THAT JESUS ROSE FROM THE DEAD. (B. 4. 5. MOST OF THE TWELVE APOSTLES...) Judas proved to be a traitor, and John died of old age. But early traditions indicate that the rest of the twelve were killed for their Christian faith, essential to which was the claim that Jesus rose from the dead.

In our day we have seen Islamic terrorists who are willing to participate in suicide bombings because of their conviction that they will go immediately to paradise where they will be attended by 72 virgins. The apostles of Jesus were committed to dying for their cause because they believed that Jesus rose from the dead. Are people willing to die for something which they know is a lie?

Furthermore, could these apostles have kept this theft of Jesus' body a secret for all of their lives? Charles Colson said that there were twelve men who knew the truth when

Richard Nixon was informed that there was a coverup being made of the Watergate affair. Within two weeks one of these Nixon loyalists, John Dean, was talking to federal prosecutors and promising to testify for them about the truth in exchange for a lighter sentence.

Even if we don't accept the early traditions that the apostles were martyrs, we know from secular as well as from Jewish sources that the first Christians suffered persecution for their faith. Do people put up with persecution when it is because of a commitment to something that they know is a lie? The idea that the disciples stole Jesus' body does not fit with what we know about human nature and with the evidence that we have.

C.

Consider a third possible explanation for the resurrection of Christ. Perhaps JESUS NEVER ACTUALLY DIED. (II. C. JESUS NEVER ACTUALLY DIED.) This has been called "the swoon theory." A German by the name of Paulus suggested this idea in 1828. In more recent years a scholar by the name of Hugh Schonfield wrote a book entitled *The Passover Plot*, which popularized this notion.

There are variations of the theory, but the basic argument goes like this: Jesus planned His own crucifixion. He orchestrated the events so that He would be hung on the cross on Friday. He was confident that He would not have to hang there very long, because the Sabbath began at sunset, and the Jews would not let him hang there after sunset. That would be sacriligious.

When Jesus said, "I thirst" while on the cross, someone who was in with Him on the plot gave Him a powerful drug in a sponge that would make Him appear to be dead. So when Jesus was put in the tomb, He either revived and was able to escape, or Joseph of Arimethea, or someone else, helped Jesus escape.

There are at least eight problems with this theory. First, THE IDEA WAS NEVER MENTIONED FOR CENTURIES. (C. 1. THE IDEA WAS NEVER...) The Christian message was attacked by Jews and pagans throughout the history of the church. But to my knowledge it is only in relatively recent years that this idea has been proposed.

Second, THERE IS MUCH EVIDENCE THAT JESUS' WOUNDS WERE FATAL. (C. 1. 2. THERE IS MUCH EVIDENCE...) The Gospel accounts indicate that Jesus was whipped once the guilty verdict was handed down on Friday morning. Scourging was done by the Romans with a whip called a *flagrum*, which had pieces of bone and metal attached to a cord. When applied to the human body the flagrum did considerable damage. So Jesus began to bleed early in the morning from these substantial wounds.

The Gospels tell us that Jesus was also beaten on the head and face and that a crown of thorns was placed on His head. He was then forced to carry the crosspiece of His cross through the streets of Jerusalem. He had to have help in doing that, because He had already become too weak. Then His wrists and ankles were nailed to the cross.

Already there was a fair amount of blood that had been lost. Then He hung on the cross from 9 AM until 3 PM. Finally, He was pierced in the side by a Roman soldier to make sure that He was dead. All of this is consistent with what we know about the historical practice of Roman crucifixion.

Dr. William Edwards, a pathologist at the Mayo Clinic, wrote an article years ago in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. (JAMA 1986;255:1455-1463) He looked at this evidence and concluded, **“I think what we can conclusively say is that Jesus died on the cross.”** He went on to argue that Jesus was probably already in a state of shock when He was placed on the cross. Death would have resulted from shock, respiratory failure, heart failure, or some combination thereof. Jesus’ wounds were fatal.

A third problem with the swoon theory is that PEOPLE PRESENT WERE CONVINCED THAT JESUS WAS DEAD. (C. 2. 3. PEOPLE PRESENT WERE...) Roman Governor Pilate was surprised to learn that Jesus was dead already, perhaps because he was not aware of all of the physical punishment inflicted upon Him. Mark’s Gospel says that Pilate questioned the supervising centurion closely to make sure that Jesus was dead. The Gospel of John says that one of the soldiers pierced Jesus’ side with a spear. When he saw blood and water come out, he was convinced that the victim was dead. Roman soldiers knew about death, and they knew how to recognize it. They would be in big trouble if the condemned men were not, in fact, dead.

Fourth, JESUS’ BODY WAS WRAPPED FOR BURIAL (C. 3. 4. JESUS’ BODY WAS...) Jewish customs were consistent with the Gospel accounts that His body was wrapped tightly with strips of linen cloth. John’s Gospel says that 75 pounds of myrrh and aloe and spices were used. This mixture served both as a preservative and a glue to hold the cloth strips together. It would be difficult for anyone in prime physical condition to get out of this burial shroud, let alone someone in Jesus’ wounded physical condition.

Fifth, THE TOMB WAS BLOCKED WITH A LARGE STONE AND A SQUAD OF SOLDIERS. (C. 4. 5. THE TOMB WAS BLOCKED...) First century stones which blocked Jewish tombs were too heavy for one person to move. They probably required several people, who also had to deal with Roman soldiers.

Sixth, this theory would mean that JESUS WAS A LIAR AND A DECEIVER. (C. 5. 6. JESUS WAS A LIAR...) This is a theoretical possibility, but it would mean that He was acting contrary to the high moral standards which He taught and demonstrated.

Seventh, THE DISCIPLES SAW JESUS ON EASTER SUNDAY. (C. 6. 7. They were convinced that He had risen from the dead. If Jesus had somehow miraculously been able to revive and escape from the tomb as the result of His own conniving, He would have at least been in a weak condition. His followers might well have questioned whether He had really died. But there is no hint of this in the records which they have left us.

Eighth, NO BODY OF JESUS WAS EVER PRODUCED. (C. 7. 8. NO BODY OF JESUS...) If Jesus did revive and went on to live some kind of normal life, why was no body or grave ever found? If Jesus had died a normal death, would not His followers have given great attention to the place where His body was finally laid? Surely the Jewish leaders would have made every effort to capture Jesus or to produce His body to disprove the claims that Jesus had died, been resurrected, and ascended into heaven.

It requires more faith to believe the swoon theory than to accept the Biblical account as it stands. There are a few other explanations which have been offered over the years to explain away the resurrection. But they are even less believable, and we don't have time to look at them.

### III.

What then is THE MEANING OF THE HISTORICAL EVIDENCE? (III. THE MEANING OF THE HISTORICAL EVIDENCE) Simon Greenleaf was a law school professor at Harvard University. In 1842 he wrote a book entitled *A Treatise on the Law of Evidence*, which is regarded by some as the single greatest authority on American legal evidence ever written. Four years later he wrote a book with this catchy title: *An Examination of the Testimony of the Four Evangelists by the Rules of Evidence Administered in the Courts of Justice*. His conclusion? There is no other reasonable explanation but that Jesus really did die and rise from the dead.

Lee Strobel was also a lawyer. He was an atheist and a graduate of Yale Law School. For a number of years he was the legal affairs editor for the *Chicago Tribune*. In 1979 his wife became a Christian. Strobel was skeptical, but he saw positive changes in her life. He set out to undertake a critical examination of the claims of Christians about Christ. The result was that he, too, became a Christian. One of the books that he wrote about his discoveries is *The Case for Easter*.

A reasonable, objective analysis of the historical evidence produces the conclusion that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead. The only thing that would keep a person from coming to that conclusion would be his or her refusal to believe that there is a God who could cause such a thing to happen.

### IV.

Finally, we need to consider THE IMPLICATIONS FOR US. (IV. THE IMPLICATIONS FOR US) If Jesus did indeed rise from the dead, what does that mean for us? It means that we had better pay attention to what Jesus said about the meaning and purpose of His death and resurrection. What did He say about it? He said that His death was designed to pay the penalty for the sins of the world. His resurrection was designed to prove that He really was God who became man.

Jesus said that there is one responsibility that every human being has before he or she can enjoy the benefits of the forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life. In John's Gospel in #3 v. 16 (JOHN 3:16) Jesus said, "**For God so loved the world that**

**He gave His unique Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”**

In order to get to heaven we must trust in Jesus and in what He did for us in dying on the cross. In our inner heart we must sincerely believe that His death paid the penalty for our sins. When we place our trust in this God-man, then we become a true Christian.

To show how this works out in practice, Kathleen Hill is going to come and explain how it was that she became a follower of Jesus.