

A Case for the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth

By Chuck May

- *Is the resurrection of Jesus a historic event?*
- *Did the disciples invent the resurrection to further a cause?*
- *Where is the body of Jesus?*

The resurrection of Jesus is one of those events which most people say you either take by faith or not. But it's not something to which rational investigation is relevant. However, after studying the topic, I've come to the conclusion that the evidence for the historicity of the resurrection is remarkably good.

It seems that if the New Testament speaks the truth, the resurrection is one of the most important events in history *for if Christ has not been raised your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins* (1 Corinthians 15:17). According to the New Testament, if Christ wasn't raised, then He wasn't who He said He was and therefore His atonement was worthless. Because of its importance, I would like to suggest that the resurrection is not an event which has faith as its **only** grounds of belief (although it can be believed by faith alone). Given the historical reliability of the New Testament documents, it is quite reasonable that the resurrection of Christ can also be believed by weighing the evidence of the historical facts which arose after the crucifixion of Jesus.

The evidence for the resurrection of Jesus can be grouped under four headings.

(1) The Death and Burial of Jesus

The fact that Jesus died on the cross is agreed upon by the vast majority of New Testament scholars. Given the severe beating and the crucifixion He underwent, it would be virtually impossible for anyone to survive. Also, given the testimony of the New Testament documents as well as outside sources, it is reasonable to conclude that Jesus did die on the cross and was then buried by Joseph of Arimathea in his personal tomb.

The location of His tomb is highly significant because if the burial sight of Jesus was known to both Jew and Christian alike (and it is likely that most people would have known the location of Joseph's tomb since he was a wealthy Sanhedrin member), then when the disciples began to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus in Jerusalem, the tomb must have been empty. It would have been impossible to proclaim the resurrection of a dead man if everyone knew the body still lay interred.

The fact that Joseph of Arimathea buried Jesus is highly probable since he was a Sanhedrin member. Given the resentment in early Christian circles toward the Jews for their condemnation of Jesus, it is unlikely that the disciples would invent a story of Jesus' honorable burial by His enemies (Sanhedrin), or even that they could invent Joseph of Arimathea, give him a name, place him on the Sanhedrin, and say he was responsible for the burial. The Sanhedrin was too well known to allow either fictitious persons to be placed on it or false stories to be spread about one of its actual members.

Also, there are no other burial stories in existence. If the story were a legend, you would expect traces of other competing stories. There are none. Therefore, the burial story and its credibility is an important facet in the evidence for the resurrection. Also, the burial story is one of the best-established facts about Jesus. Paul verifies it in his source material (1 Corinthians 15) as does Mark (Mark 15). And therefore, we have dual attestation to the facts. **It is clear from the evidence that Jesus of Nazareth died on the cross and was buried.**

(2) The Empty Tomb

On Easter Sunday the tomb was found empty by a group of His women followers (Matthew 28). This part of the gospels is also well attested and early in composition, therefore, it couldn't be a legend which arose decades later.

The witness of women

The fact that women discovered the tomb is highly plausible given the fact that the testimony of women in this culture was regarded as worthless. Women couldn't even serve as witnesses in court because their testimony was regarded as having zero credibility. In light of this fact, any legendary story of the discovery of the empty tomb would have certainly made male disciples the discoverers. The fact that it was women who were the chief witnesses to the empty tomb is best explained by the fact that, like it or not, they were the discoverers of the empty tomb and the gospels faithfully record what was probably an embarrassing fact for the disciples.

The earliest Jewish polemic presupposed the empty tomb

When the disciples began to preach the resurrection, the Jews said the disciples came and stole away His body. The earliest Jewish polemic against the claims of the resurrection itself presupposed an empty tomb. And thus we have evidence from the antagonists themselves that the body was not there.

There was no veneration at Jesus' Tomb

In Palestine during Jesus' day, at least fifty tombs of prophets or other holy persons served as sites of religious veneration. However, there is no evidence that such a practice was ever associated with Jesus' tomb. Since this was customary, and since Jesus was a fitting object of veneration, why were such practices not conducted at His tomb? The most reasonable answer must be that Jesus' body was not in the tomb, and thus the tomb was not regarded as an appropriate site for such veneration. **For these and other reasons, the majority of New Testament critics agree that the tomb of Jesus was found empty.**

(3) The Sightings of Jesus

On various occasions and under different circumstances, different individuals and groups of people claim they saw Jesus alive after His death. This fact is established on the basis of the list of eyewitnesses given by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15. Paul is quoting information which probably goes back to the first five years after the crucifixion.

The evidence of the appearances is stunning. Jesus appeared not just once, but several times, not just to one person, but to various persons, not just to individuals, but to groups, not just in one place, but in various locales, not just to believers, but to unbelievers, skeptics and enemies as well. It is highly unlikely that these people all had hallucinations of the risen Christ as some skeptics have suggested. Also, these appearances are confirmed in the gospel accounts, so again, there is multiple attestation of the stories.

(4) The Beginning of Christianity

The earliest disciples came to believe that Jesus was risen from the dead despite their having every predisposition to the contrary. The situation for the disciples after the crucifixion was as follows: (a) their leader was dead, and the Jews had no belief in a dying, much less rising, Messiah; (b) according to the Old Testament Law, anyone who was crucified was shown to be a heretic, literally under the curse of God (Deuteronomy 21:23); (c) the Jewish belief had no hope of anyone rising from the dead before the resurrection at the end of the world, yet these early disciples came to believe that Jesus rose from the dead **and they were willing to die for that belief.** I know of thousands of people over the course of history that have died for something they believed to be true, but I know of no person throughout history who would die for something he or she knew to be false.

Therefore, to say that the disciples were simply inventing the resurrection story to further a cause is without either logical merit or understanding of man's desire for self-preservation.

These facts are recognized by the majority of New Testament critics today. The only question is, how do you best explain them? I would simply argue that the hypotheses **God raised Jesus from the dead** is the best explanation of the facts, especially when you compare it with the other hypotheses for what happened after the crucifixion. Therefore, I think the rational man cannot be blamed when he concludes, on the basis of the evidence, that a divine miracle occurred on that first Easter morning.

Questions and Answers

Q: *Is the resurrection of Jesus a historic event?*

A: Given the historic evidence, it seems reasonable to conclude that the resurrection really happened.

Q: *Did the disciples invent the resurrection to further a cause?*

A: Given what we know about the events and about human nature, it seems unreasonable to assume the story was fabricated.

Q: *Where is the body of Jesus?*

A: I believe that, given the evidence surrounding the events, the explanation that God raised Jesus from the dead best fits the facts. The reason His body cannot be found is because **HE IS RISEN!!**

The author takes much of this material and its format from the following works:

- Craig, William Lane. "Reasonable Faith." Chicago: Moody, 1984
- Craig, William Lane. "The Son Rises." Chicago: Moody 1981