Did Jesus really rise from the dead?
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Did Jesus really rise from the dead? For most of us in the church, the initial answer to this question is easy: yes He did. But does the resurrection stand up to serious investigation? Are we able to talk to those outside of the church about the reality and facts of the resurrection? Or is it just one of those things we need to show a bit of ‘blind faith’ in?

After all, if there’s any reason to doubt the resurrection of Jesus, or if it could be proven to be a myth, then there would be no hope, future or point to Christianity. The apostle Paul explained this when he wrote:

*For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.* —1 Corinthians 15:16-19
If Christ is dead, then there is no payment for our sin; He has not beaten sin or death. In fact, they have beaten Him. If Christ is dead, then He was just another person, like any of us. It is only in His resurrection that there is an assurance of new life for those who trust Him.

In a sermon he made at Athens, Paul also said:

“[God] now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.” —Acts 17:30-31

All of us are due to stand before God on that final day. On our own, we know we deserve His judgement. Not one of us has lived a fully perfect, God-centred, loving life. But if Jesus was raised from the dead, we are no longer on our own. Jesus has given us a choice: we can either trust Him to pay for our sin with His death and to give us new life in His resurrection; or we can reject Him and the empty tomb as a fairy tale.

The resurrection of Christ is the basis for our hope and trust in Him. If it is true, then we can believe everything Jesus said about Himself and we can confidently give our lives to Him. If He is still in the grave, then our “faith is futile” and most of the Bible is a lie.

So, how certain can we be about Jesus’ death and resurrection?
What some people say . . .

The resurrection is not scientific: It’s not hard to know why we struggle with the idea of the resurrection. When people die, they stay dead. Our day-to-day life experience shows us this. We only have to engage our brains for a nanosecond to know the idea of people coming back to life is a bit far-fetched.

But believing in the resurrection is not about turning our brains off. God has given us our ability to think rationally and critically so that we can test the validity of the things we are told. And so we need to apply this kind of thinking to the resurrection too (which we will do shortly as we consider the evidence).

However, believing in the resurrection does not mean that we no longer believe in science. It just means that we trust in the God who can work outside of the physical laws He created. He has given us science so that we can measure the laws of His world. But He is certainly not restricted by them.

It was just a ‘spiritual’ resurrection: Perhaps when the disciples wrote of Jesus’ resurrection they just meant that He had become ‘alive’ in their hearts. While this can be quite a popular theory, the biblical texts simply do not leave room for such an interpretation.
Firstly, we are told by the gospel writers that Jesus showed His “hands and His side” to His disciples (John 20:20), audibly “spoke to them” (Matt. 28:18), ate food “in their presence” (Luke 24:43) and invited Thomas to “reach your finger here” to touch His wounds (John 20:27). Clearly the eye-witnesses and gospel writers themselves were talking about a very physical resurrection.

Secondly, a ‘spiritual’ resurrection would leave us in the same “pitiable” state which Paul described earlier in this booklet (1 Cor. 15:16-19). If Jesus is not fully raised from the dead, we have no assurance that His sacrifice was enough to satisfy God’s judgement towards our sin, and we are left with no hope that we too will be raised to new life after we die.

The gospel accounts of the resurrection contradict each other: It is true that there seems to be some tensions in the retelling of the story from the different writers. For example, each account appears to record a different number of women approaching the tomb on the morning it was found empty (see Matt. 28:1, Mark 16:1 and John 20:1).

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It is important to remember that the writers all agree on the key points of the story of Jesus’ death and resurrection. However, the events during the morning of the resurrection are actually quite complex. None of the gospel writers focus on every group of people, each meeting that happened and the full sequence of events. Each zooms in on just a few people to tell the story well for their intended audience.

The narratives are therefore quite compressed. On the surface this can make it look like they contradict each other, when actually they are simply telling different stories within the overall story of Jesus’ resurrection. The gospel writers are like witnesses on a witness-stand recalling the same event, but telling it from their own point of view. It means there are four separate accounts which, when put together, actually complement each other to give us a fuller picture of the resurrection and the days that followed.

Let’s take a look at some of those events and details given to us by the gospel writers.
Jesus died: Before we get to the resurrection, we need to be sure that Jesus actually died. After all, you can’t come back to life if you didn’t die in the first place. If Jesus merely fainted on the cross, the coolness of the tomb could have brought Him round. It would certainly look like He’d come back from the dead, when in fact all He’d have done was woken up.

However, the extent of Jesus’ injuries surely guaranteed His death. Jesus was brutally flogged by the Roman soldiers with a whip that had pieces of bone and metal attached to it. Some people died under such cruel torture. Jesus was so weakened by it that He couldn’t then carry His cross to the place of execution (Matt. 27:32).

Secondly, Jesus was crucified. This meant He was nailed through His hands and feet to a rough, wooden cross. Jesus was left bloodied, bruised and gasping for breath as His body sagged under its own weight. There was also a Roman guard to make sure none of those being crucified would be rescued.

When it came to breaking the legs of the victims (which would stop them being able to push themselves up on their crosses to fill their lungs with air), the soldiers found Jesus “was already dead, they did not break His legs. But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out” (John 19:33-34).
Roman soldiers knew a dead body when they saw one; yet to be doubly sure, they stabbed Jesus with a spear.

Finally, when Joseph of Arimathea asked to bury the body of Jesus, Pilate was cautious. Pilate was surprised that Jesus had died so soon, and made sure with the Roman guard that this really was the case (Mark 15:43-45). He only released the body for burial when he was absolutely certain Jesus was indeed dead.

**Jesus was buried:** Jesus’ body was placed in a private tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea “where no one had ever lain before” (Luke 23:53). There was no way the body could have got mixed up with someone else’s. And there was no way the disciples or the women who came to the tomb on the third morning could have got the wrong grave. Jesus was laid in a very specific place which they had already seen (v. 55).

To add to that, Jesus’ tomb was given heavy security at the request of the Pharisees, who knew Jesus had predicted His resurrection and didn’t want the disciples to steal the body and pretend this had indeed come to pass (Matt. 27:62-66). They sealed the grave with a heavy stone, which would have needed several people to roll it away, and they set up a guard at the entrance. No one was going to get to the body of Jesus. He was dead, buried and locked away under the watchful eye of the soldiers. It would take a miracle for Jesus to leave that tomb.

**The tomb was empty:** We can be certain Jesus died and was buried. We can also be certain that on the third day after His execution, His tomb was empty. We don’t need to just take the disciples’ word for it; the Jewish
authorities were actually the first to publicly announce the empty tomb of Jesus:

Some of the guard [of the tomb] came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened. When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, saying, “Tell them, ‘His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.’ And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will appease him and make you secure.” So they took the money and did as they were instructed; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day. —Matthew 28:11-15

After an angel appeared at the tomb, rolled the stone away and declared “He is not here” (Matt. 28:2-6), the tomb guards went straight to the Jewish authorities. This means that the chief priests started spreading the story of the disciples’ body-snatching (and the empty tomb) weeks before the disciples themselves preached that Christ was risen (Acts 2:32). Presumably the religious leaders were trying to land a pre-emptive strike to counter any message of resurrection that the disciples might speak.

Whilst the authorities’ story avoids any miraculous explanation (which initially may make it seem more believable), it is riddled with holes. Surely the guards would not fall asleep whilst on duty? And if they had, how would they have been able to identify that the disciples stole the body? The guards could not have been both asleep to the crime and witnesses of it at the same time! Yet that is precisely the rushed story that
the authorities created in their haste to remove any miraculous detail from the empty tomb.

The fact that the authorities made up such a story is strong proof that Jesus’ tomb really was empty. If the tomb wasn’t in fact empty, the Jewish leaders would have simply produced the body once the disciples started preaching. Instead, the best they could do was invent a flimsy counter-story.

**The eye-witnesses:** As already mentioned, there’s a complex mix of people in the accounts of Jesus’ resurrection. Let’s focus on a few key points:

1. In ancient Israel, women were not considered reliable witnesses. The fact that they have such a prominent role in witnessing the risen Christ makes it unlikely for the story to be ‘man-made’.

2. When John went to the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there “and the handkerchief that had been around His head, not lying with the linen cloths, but folded together in a place by itself … he saw and believed” (John 20:7-8). What was it about the linen cloths that so transformed John’s perspective? The handkerchief was still wrapped! It was as if one moment it had been round Jesus’ head and the next it was not. It hadn’t been unwrapped or ripped, but simply ‘passed through’. John saw it and knew this was no robbery or hoax, but evidence of the resurrection.

3. Jesus appeared to His disciples very personally. Jesus gave comfort and direction to Mary Magdalene who was weeping by the tomb (John 20:14-17); He taught the two disciples on the Emmaus Road who were trying
to make sense of all that had happened (Luke 24:13-27); and He offered evidence to Thomas to relieve him of his doubts (John 20:24-28). Jesus knew His followers intimately; in His resurrection He continued to meet each of them just as they needed.

4. Paul gives us more details about those who saw the risen Christ: “He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present” (1 Cor. 15:6). Many of the resurrection witnesses were still alive when the news of His resurrection was spreading through the world—they were available for questioning. Surely a claim of this magnitude would have been tried and tested! The many named people (like Joseph of Arimathea) must have been questioned repeatedly! Yet there are no records of the Roman Empire or the Jewish authorities successfully proving the resurrection to be a hoax. Not one of the hundreds of witnesses ever said “We made it up.”

5. Finally, perhaps the most compelling evidence given to us by the eye-witnesses is how their lives radically changed. The disciples went from cowering in fear after His death (John 20:19) to boldly proclaiming Jesus’ resurrection to all who would listen (Acts 2:14-38). They were hounded, imprisoned, beaten and killed by the religious leaders, yet the numbers of Christians only grew. Jesus’ followers, and those who believed their message, were so convinced by Jesus’ resurrection, that they were willing to die for their faith and message of hope if necessary.
Even Jesus’ closest friends were disbelieving of the resurrection at first. Thomas went so far as to say: “Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe” (John 20:25). Was Thomas wrong to want to see some evidence of Jesus’ resurrection? Absolutely not! God understood Thomas’ doubts—rather than rejecting him, Jesus presented Himself to Thomas so he could have the proof he needed.

It’s not wrong for us (or, even more crucially, for those outside of the church) to want evidence for Jesus’ resurrection either. We are all free to ask questions and probe for the truth. In fact, God wants us to test His Word and investigate its claims—the more we study the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the more trustworthy we will find Him to be.

God doesn’t want our faith in Him to be ‘blind’ faith, but considered and reasoned faith. No, we can’t see Jesus face-to-face right now like Thomas did. But we do have the eye-witness accounts in the Bible to guide us. As Jesus said to Thomas, “because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29). We cannot see Jesus, but we
have God’s Word and the Holy Spirit to guide us and teach us about Him so we can get to know Him better and trust Him more each day.

Hopefully this booklet has helped you become more confident in the resurrection of Christ and more prepared to discuss it with any non-Christians you know. It’s important to remember that the decision your family and friends make about Jesus’ resurrection is really their decision about everything to do with Him. If He is still in the grave, there is nothing more to say about Jesus. But if He is alive, then He truly is the only One who deserves our trust and praise. He is the only One who can beat death for us and give us new, unending life with God.

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