

THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST - THE BEST-PROVED FACT IN HISTORY
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IMPORTANCE OF THE RESURRECTION

The bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the crowning proof of Christianity. Everything else that was said or done by Christ and the Apostles is secondary in importance to the resurrection. If the resurrection did not take place then Christianity is a false religion. If it did take place, then Christ is God and the Christian faith is absolute truth.

Death is our greatest enemy and it has conquered all men but Christ. No man is wise enough to outwit death or wealthy enough to purchase freedom from death or strong enough to vanquish death. The grave always wins the victory and every person sooner or later returns to the dust.

In fact, the inexorable triumph of death applies not only to people, but to all things. Animals die and plants die, and even whole species atrophy and become extinct. Cities and nations, like people, are born and grow for a season, and then fade away. Homes and automobiles and clothes wear out and must eventually go back to the dust, just as do their owners. Even the universe itself is running down and heading toward an ultimate "heat death."

This universal reign of decay and death is called in the Bible "the bondage of corruption" (Romans 8:21). In science it has come to be recognized as the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Also known as the Law of Increasing Entropy, this Law is now recognized as a universal law of science, with no known exception ever observed. It says, quite simply that every system tends to become disordered, to run down and eventually to die. Its entropy, which is a measure of disorder, always tends to increase.

The universality of the reign of decay and death is the measure of the absolute uniqueness of the resurrection of Christ. All other men, even the greatest men and the holiest men, have died. Buddha, Mohammed, Zoroaster, Confucius, Caesar, Marx—men who made a profound impact on the world in one way or another—are all dead.

But Jesus Christ is alive! It is true that He died and was buried, in common with all other men, but unlike other men He returned from Hades, resurrected His own dead body, made it henceforth immortal, and emerged from the tomb, alive forevermore! This was the greatest of all miracles since the creation itself, and could have been accomplished only if Jesus indeed is God, as He had claimed to be.

In this brief study, we wish to examine carefully a little of the actual evidence for His resurrection. If all of this is somehow a delusion and if Jesus of Nazareth did not really rise from the dead, then He is no different from other great men who are also dead. He is worse than they, in fact, because He is thereby branded as either a charlatan or a madman, since He staked all His claims to be absolute Deity on His promise to return from the dead.

On the other hand, if the resurrection is really a demonstrable fact of history, then not only are His claims vindicated, but so are His promises. Death is not, after all, the great victor, but is a defeated foe. He has "begotten us again unto a living hope, by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (I Peter 1:3). "Now is Christ risen from the dead . . . even so in Christ shall all be made alive" (I Corinthians 15:20,22).

THE FOUNDATION OF CHRISTIANITY

Without the resurrection, it is quite certain there would have been no Christian church. With the ignominious death of their Master, His disciples were utterly confused and afraid for their own lives. There is no possibility that they could have continued as teachers of the Nazarene's doctrines, and even less that others could have been persuaded to follow them, in those circumstances.

But with their assurance that Christ was alive, they went forth everywhere proclaiming the resurrection, and multitudes became believers in their Living Lord. The importance of the resurrection in the preaching of the early church is quickly seen by scanning the book of Acts. (Note: Acts 2: 22-36; 3: 13-18; 4: 10-12,33; 5:29-32; 10:37-43; 13:27-37; 17:23,30-32; 23:6; 24:14-16; 25:19; 26:68,22-23; etc.)

Similarly in the epistles, the resurrection is paramount (e.g., Romans 1:3,4; 6:39; I Corinthians 15:1-58; II Corinthians 4:10-14; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 1:19-23; Philippians 2:5-11; Colossians 2:12; I Thessalonians 1:10; 4:14; I Timothy 3:16; II Timothy 2:8-11; Hebrews 13:20; I Peter 1:21; etc.). Even where the resurrection is not explicitly emphasized, it is always assumed. The final book, Revelation, opens with Christ's identification of Himself as "the first begotten of the dead," and as the one "that liveth, and was dead and behold, I am alive forevermore" (Revelation 1:5,18).

PREDICTIONS OF THE RESURRECTION

The resurrection caught the disciples completely by surprise. There is no indication that they had any hope after Christ's death. In fact, when they did see Him, they were frightened, thinking they were seeing a ghost (Luke 24:37).

And this was in spite of the fact that they should have known that He would die and rise again, both from the Scriptures and from His own words. He later told them: "These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me" (Luke 24:44).

Although the prophecies of His resurrection in the Old Testament were not evident to a superficial reader, they should have been correctly understood by those in Israel who diligently studied the Word. Such prophecies as found in Genesis 3:15, Psalm 2:7, Psalm 16:9-11, Psalm 22:14-25, Psalm 30:29, Psalm 40:13, Psalm 110:1, Psalm 118:21-24, Isaiah 53:9-12, Hosea 5:15-6:3, Zechariah 12:10, and others, if carefully studied, would have indicated that the coming Messiah would be put to death and then rise again.

Even if they had not been able to anticipate the resurrection from the Old Testament, however, they had the clear statements to this effect from the lips of Christ Himself. Note John 2:19; Matthew 12:38-42; 15:21; 17:22-23; 20:17-19; 26:30-32; John 10:17-18; 16:16; and many other passages in the four Gospels.

One thing is certain: the disciples could not have fabricated the story of the resurrection from their own imaginations. On the contrary, they somehow failed to anticipate it even after such an abundance of prophetic preparation for it, both from the Scriptures and from Christ. It took the strongest of evidences to convince them it had actually taken place.

THE EMPTY TOMB

The first evidence the disciples had for the resurrection was that of the empty tomb, and this evidence is still unanswerable. As Peter and John entered the tomb, they saw an amazing thing. The heavy wrappings of linen clothes which Joseph and Nicodemus had wound around the body of Jesus (John 19:39,40) were still there, just as they had been, but the body had vanished out of them and the grave clothes had, as it were, collapsed inward on themselves. No wonder the record says that when John entered the tomb, "he saw and believed!" (John 20:8). His doubts and fears immediately gave way to an amazed faith; the collapsed grave clothes yielded no possible interpretation except that the physical body of the crucified Christ had returned to life, in such a remarkable form that it could simply pass through the linen wrappings and enter henceforth into the power of an endless life!

Peter and John then rushed back to John's home, probably to tell Mary, the mother of Jesus, the tremendous news (note John 19:27; 20:10) and, shortly after, the women who had first come to the tomb entered it and also saw the tomb was empty (Luke 24:3).

The fact that the tomb was empty shows clearly that the resurrection of Christ was a bodily resurrection, not a spiritual resurrection. The latter idea is a self-contradiction, in fact, because the spirit does not die and therefore cannot be "resurrected." Indeed, resurrection takes place when the spirit returns to the body from which it has departed.

So powerful is the testimony of the empty tomb that the enemies of Christ have resorted to many strange and wonderful devices to try to explain it away. The first such attempt was the lie that the disciples had stolen the body (Matthew 28:11-15). Such a thing was utterly out of the question, of course. The disciples were hiding in fear of their lives and nothing could have been further from their thoughts than this. Furthermore, the tomb had been sealed, a great stone rolled in front of it, and a watch of Roman soldiers set to guard it (Matthew 27:62-66).

Others, equally desperate for an answer, have suggested that Jesus did not actually die on the cross, but only fainted from weakness. He was buried in the mistaken belief that He was dead, and when He came back to consciousness in the tomb, He arose and left it. How, in His weakened condition He had managed to disengage Himself from the great weight of wrappings and ointments, then break the Roman seal, roll away the giant stone at the entrance, overpower the Roman soldiers, and then search out the disciples, is apparently of little concern to the proponents of this odd theory. Nor do they explain how the sight of such a pitiful Jesus, beaten almost beyond recognition and weak past endurance by loss of blood on the cross, could have excited such a complete transformation in the cowering disciples. He must soon, or at least eventually, die anyhow, and thereafter any preaching of a resurrection could be nothing but fraud and hypocrisy.

Beside all this, there is no doubt that He really did die on the cross. Pilate was given assurance of this by the centurion (Mark 15:43-45). The savage spear thrust into His side by the soldier (John 19:34) made certain of His death, "and forthwith came there out blood and water," evidencing complete collapse of the heart cavity.

Some have thought that Mary Magdalene, then Peter and John, then the other women, all went to the wrong tomb. Such a stupid mistake was not very likely, however, especially since there was no other tomb there! This was a garden, owned by Joseph of Arimathea (Matthew 27:60; John 19:41), and no one else had been buried there.

Besides, if the body were still in any tomb whatever, it could easily have been produced by the Roman or Jewish authorities. A few weeks later, when multitudes were accepting Christ because of the preaching of the resurrection, these same authorities did everything they could to stop the spread of the new Christian faith, and they utterly failed. If they had simply produced the body of Jesus, on the other hand, the entire movement would have collapsed over night. But this was the one thing they could not do! That body, raised from the grave, had ascended up to heaven.

THE APPEARANCES OF CHRIST

Not only was the tomb empty, but the disciples actually saw their resurrected Lord, on at least ten separate occasions after He left the tomb. These appearances were probably in the following order:

1. To Mary Magdalene (John 20:11-18; Mark 16:9)
2. To the other women (Matthew 28:8-10)
3. To Peter (Luke 24:34; I Corinthians 15:5)
4. To the two on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35; Mark 16:12)
5. To ten of the disciples (Luke 24:36-43; John 20:19-29)
6. To all eleven disciples, eight days later (John 20:24-29)
7. To seven disciples by the Sea of Tiberias (John 21:1-23)
8. To five hundred followers (I Corinthians 15:6)
9. To James (I Corinthians 15:7)
10. To the eleven, at the ascension (Acts 1:3-12)

There were probably many other times He appeared to one or more of His disciples. Luke says: "He shewed Himself alive after His passion by many infallible proofs, being seen of them forty days" (Acts 1:3). He was apparently seen by Stephen (Acts 7:56). Finally, of course, He was seen by Paul (Acts 9:38; I Corinthians 15:8) and once again by John (Revelation 1:12-18).

Now, of course, skeptics have tried to avoid the testimony of these numerous post-resurrection appearances of Christ by pointing out various contradictions in the six accounts which list them (Matthew 28:8-20; Mark 16:9-20; Luke 24:13-51; John 20:11-21, 14; Acts 1:1-11; I Corinthians 15:5-8), or else by charging the writers with fabricating the stories themselves. Of course, the mere fact that there do appear on the surface to be a number of superficial discrepancies and omissions in the account is clear proof that the writers were not engaged in some kind of collusion. If they were making up the tales, each one evidently was doing so independently of all others. This in itself would be quite a remarkable state of affairs, especially since these discrepancies all vanish when they are compared under close examination. It is a well known rule of evidence that the testimonies of several different witnesses, each reporting from his own particular vantage point, provide the strongest possible evidence on matters of fact when the testimonies contain superficial contradictions which resolve themselves upon close and careful examination. This is exactly the situation with the various witnesses to the resurrection.

The only other possible device for explaining away the post-resurrection appearances is to assume that they were all merely hallucinations, or visions, perhaps induced by drugs or hypnosis or hysteria. Such an absurd hypothesis is surely its own refutation.

Such hallucinations, if this is what they were, are quite unique in human history and warrant the most careful psycho logic scrutiny. They were experienced by a large number of different individuals, all seeing the same vision, but in different groups, at different times, both indoors and outdoors, on a hilltop, along a roadway, by a lake-shore, and other places. Furthermore, they were not looking for Jesus at all. Several times they didn't recognize Him at first, and at least once actually believed it was a ghost until He convinced them otherwise. He invited them to touch Him and they recognized the wounds in His hands (John 20:27; Luke 24:39). They watched Him eat with them (Luke 24:41-43). On one occasion, over five hundred different people saw Him at one time (I Corinthians 15:6), most of whom were still living at the time when that evidence was being used.

The vision theory is thus quite impossible and therefore the numerous appearances of Christ must be regarded as absolutely historical and genuine. This fact, combined with the evidence of the empty tomb, renders the resurrection as certain as any fact of history could possibly be.

THE WITNESS OF THE APOSTLES

Now it is completely impossible that the apostles could have preached and written as they did unless they were absolutely sincere and under deep conviction of the truth of what they preached. They had instantaneously changed from craven runaways to bold Spirit-filled proclaimers of Christ and the resurrection. Such preaching cost them the loss of their possessions, intense persecution, and finally the loss of their lives, but they kept preaching as long as strength permitted. Multitudes who believed what they were preaching suffered the same persecutions.

If they were faking all this, if somewhere they had the body of Jesus hidden away, or if He were still barely alive in a sickbed somewhere, or if they were involved in some kind of plot, or if they were not really sure whether they had seen Him or some vision,—is it conceivable that all of them (as well as their hosts of converts) would have continued this make-believe right up to the point of death itself? It would seem there must be some things in this world which no one in his right mind could possibly believe, and this should be one of them!

No wonder then, in view of the combined evidences of the empty tomb, the numerous appearances, the change in the disciples, and the authenticity of the records, not to mention the testimony of two thousand years of Christian history, that such a man as Thomas Arnold, formerly Professor of History at Rugby and Oxford, one of the world's great historians, could say:

"I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better, fuller evidence of every sort, to the understanding of a fair inquirer, than the great sign which God hath given us that Christ died, and rose again from the dead." (1) In like manner, Simon Greenleaf, one of the most skilled legal minds ever produced in this nation, top authority on the question of what constitutes sound evidence, developer of the Harvard Law School, after a thorough evaluation of the four Gospel accounts from the point of view of their validity as objective testimonial evidence, concluded:

"It was therefore impossible that they could have persisted in affirming the truths they had narrated, had not Jesus actually risen from the dead, and had they not known this fact as certainly as they knew any other fact" (2) It is no exaggeration, therefore, to maintain that the bodily resurrection of Christ is as certain as any fact of history can ever be. If there is anything at all in which we can believe with absolute confidence, it is the fact that Jesus Christ died, was buried, then conquered death and is now alive!

CREATION AND RESURRECTION

The universal reign of death in the world is explainable only in terms of the Creator's curse on man and his dominion because of his sin (Genesis 3:17-19). Since God the Creator was the one who imposed this universal law of death, it is only He who can supersede and change it.

The unique bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is clear proof that He is God, as well as man, because only God could conquer death. The great Creator became the Son of Man, that He might die for man's sin, but He also remained God and death could not hold Him!

His first great work—that of Creation—was finished from the foundation of the world (Genesis 2:1-3; Hebrews 11:3). Creation was perfect and complete from the beginning; it needed no further assistance from an imaginary process of evolution to finish the job.

In the same way, His second work—that of Redemption—was now also perfect and complete. After suffering hell itself —spiritual death—on the cross, dying alone under all the weight of the sins of every man, He shouted in victory "It is finished!" (John 19:30). He dismissed His spirit from his body, allowing it to be buried in certain testimony that His death was also physical death. When He returned to the body three days later, imparting to it a glorious, eternal, resurrection life, He

demonstrated to all men of all the ages that He indeed was the Creator, that the problem of sin had been solved, and that death had forever lost its sting.

The redemption price has been paid, and one day, "the creation itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of decay into the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Romans 8:21).

Until that day when He "makes all things new" (Revelation 21:5); His promise of forgiveness, salvation, resurrection and eternal life is available on an individual basis to every person who believes Him and accepts His Word. "For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by His life" (Romans 5:10).

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1 Thomas Arnold, *Sermons on Christian Life, Its Fears and Its Close*, (6th ed., London, 1854), p. 324.

2 Simon Greenleaf, *The Testimony of the Evangelists*, (New York, 1874), p. 28.