

The Resurrection of Christ!

The 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, no matter how great or marvelous, is secondary to the resurrection in importance. 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 man's greatest enemy and it has conquered all men but Christ. No matter how brilliant or rich or strong he may be, 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 man sooner or later returns to the dust.

In fact, the relentless triumph of death applies not only to man, 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. Home 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 Second Law is now recognized as a universal law of science, with no known exception every observed. It says, quite simply, that ***every system tends to become disordered, to run down and eventually die***. Entropy...a measure of disorder...always tends to increase.

This 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 holiest of men, have all died. Buddha, Mohammed, Zoroaster, Confucius, Caesar, Marx - men who made a profound impact on the world in one way or another - are all dead!

However, 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, and could have been accomplished only *if* Jesus indeed is God, as He had claimed to be.

Let's take time to examine carefully the actual evidence for Christ's 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 absolute deity on His promise to return from the dead.

One 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! God has "*begotten us again unto a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus*

Christ from the dead" [1 Peter 1:3]. "*Now is Christ risen from the dead ...even so in Christ shall all be made alive*" [1 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, the disciples were utterly confused and afraid for their own lives. There is not the remotest 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.

However, 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; 17:2-3, 30-32; 23:6; 24:14-16; 25:19; 26:6-8, 22-23; etc.].

Similarly in the epistles, the resurrection is paramount [For instance in, Romans 1:3-4; 6:3-9; 1 Corinthians 15:1-58; 2 Corinthians 4:10-14; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 1:19-23; Philippians 2:5-11; Colossians 2:12; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 4:14; 1 Timothy 3:15; 2 Timothy 2:8-11; Hebrews 13:20; 1 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 spoke 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 30:2-9; 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; 16:21; 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. But once they became convinced, their lives were wholly transformed, and they went forth to live and witness and even to die for their resurrected Lord.

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 body of the crucified Christ had returned to life, in such fantastic 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 of course 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 unconvincing 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 possibly have been further from their thoughts than to attempt to *steal* the body of Christ. 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 die, 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 managed to disengage Himself from the great weight of wrappings and ointments, then, to break the Roman seal, roll away the giant stone at the entrance, overpower or elude 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 such a pitiful sight as Jesus must have been, beaten almost beyond recognition and weak past endurance by loss of blood and horrible suffering 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.

Besides all this, there is no doubt that he died 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; and John 19:41], and no one else had been buried there.

Besides, if the body were still in any tomb whatever, it could have easily 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 overnight. But this was the one thing they could not do! That body, raised from the grave, and 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 as follows:

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; 1 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 20:19-24]
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 [1 Corinthians 15:6]
9. To James [1 Corinthians 15:7]
10. To the eleven, at the ascension [Acts 1:3-12]

There were probably many other times He appeared to one of 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]. Finally, of course, He was seen by Paul [Acts 9:3-8; 1 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; Acts 1:1-11; 1 Corinthians 15:5-8], or else by charging the writers with fabricating the stories themselves. Of course, the mere fact that there does appear on the surface to be numerous 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 begin to vanish when they are compared under close examination. It is 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 ...hardly worth mentioning, but, because it is used as an argument, I'll mention it here...is to assume that they were merely hallucinations, or visions, perhaps induced by drugs or hypnosis or hysteria. Such an absurd hypothesis is surely the last resort of cornered foes.

Such hallucinations, if this is what they were, are quite unique and should warrant careful psycho logic scrutiny. These were experienced by a considerable 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 watch Him eat with them [Luke 24:41-43]. On one occasion, over five hundred different people saw Him *at one time* [1 Corinthians 15:6], most of whom were still living at the time when the 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

Many people at this point try to take refuge in the thought that the New Testament records may not be authentic, and that the various records of Christ's resurrection may have gradually grown through many years of *verbal* transmission and embellishment. However, this possibility we will thoroughly consider and refute in our lesson on "***How We Got The Bible.***"

There is no reasonable way of avoiding the conclusion that the New Testament documents are authentic as to date and authorship. They are, for all practical purposes, preserved in exactly the form in which they were originally written. Thus, they give us honest accounts of what the writers actually saw and heard. We can have absolute confidence that we are reading about what really took place. Nor is it 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 accepted their preaching suffered the same persecutions.

If Christ's disciples were faking all this...if somewhere they had the body of Jesus hidden away, or if He were still barely alive on a sickbed somewhere...if they were involved in some kind of plot...if they were not really sure whether they had seen Him...***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?***

There are some things in this world which no one in his right mind could possibly believe, and that the disciples "*had taken Christ's body and hid it*" should be one of them.

No wonder then, in view of the combined evidence of the empty tomb, the numerous appearances of Christ, 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 enquirer, than the great sign which God hath given us that Christ died, and rose again from the dead."

In like manner, Simon Greenleaf, one of the most skilled legal minds ever produced in this nation, top authority on the matter 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 have narrated, had not Jesus actually risen from the dead, and had they not known this fact as certainly as they knew any other fact."