

Why I Believe in the Resurrection

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the foundation of our Christian faith. As I mentioned last week, it is truly the focus of the Scriptures – everything before Jesus in a sense, points to him, and everything after him is built upon the reality of what the Scriptures report about him in the Gospels.

Paul, in writing to the Corinthians, agrees that the essence of the Faith rests here; he tells us that if Christ has not been raised, the disciple's preaching has been in vain, our faith is worthless, and we are of all people 'the most to be pitied' (1 Corinthians 15:14).

As we read the accounts of the Resurrection in Scripture, and consider how this fits into the whole of the Bible (again, as I pointed out last week, the consistency of its story is one of the most amazing things about the Bible), one thing that people quickly notice and critics gleefully point out is the difference in the details of the four accounts that we have in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Depending on your background as a believer, it may be uncomfortable for you to talk about things like this, but I think we need to be honest and acknowledge something that is very obvious to an impartial observer; but more importantly, it is important that we understand that instead of this making a case *against* the historical reality of the Resurrection, I would content that in the end, exactly the opposite thing happens.

In the case of the Gospel writers, they were writing their accounts, 10 – 20 years after events actually took place. Not long ago, Dianna and I witnessed a near collision of two cars at a local intersection. For some reason, we ended up talking about this just *one day* later, and found that we had very different memories of what actually happened! There was a small white car that almost got hit. (Of course, I was right, but that's incidental to my point!)

If a crime has been committed, and police are interviewing four different witnesses – claiming to be eyewitnesses - *if they were to all give the exact same story, with no variation in details*, serious doubt would be cast on the veracity of their testimony... collusion would be suspected! Why? Because human nature is that we all tend to store and retrieve information differently.

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(So some variation in details doesn't mean that there was no crime committed, or, in the instance of Dianna and me, that there was not a near miss collision!) We just remember it slightly differently.

Throughout the four Gospels, we see this. Jesus says things one way in one, and a different way in another. Things are reported in different orders from Gospel to Gospel; sometimes they agree, some times they do not. At times one story seems to be converged with another, or put in a completely different context. That is *not* an argument against their authenticity, in fact, I think rather, it *supports* it.

We see this clearly in Resurrection accounts:

One gospel, Matthew, writes that Sunday morning two women came to the tomb. The stone was covering the face of the tomb, an angel came, rolled the stone away and sat on it. There were guards there who fainted for fear of all this.

Another, Mark, writes that the same two women arrive at the tomb, but no guards are mentioned and the stone was *already* rolled away. This time there is an angel sitting *inside* the tomb.

Luke reports that two women went to the Tomb in the early morning, and the stone is already rolled back, but there are two angels who meet them outside the tomb.

John: it says that only Mary Magdalene went to the tomb, no other women are mentioned. When she arrives, there were no angels at all, but the stone has been rolled back. She leaves, and then comes back later where she finds two angels *inside* the tomb. *So, which is it?* Some people try to solve this by crunching them all together, but that doesn't do justice to any of the accounts. To me, to be frank, it doesn't matter.

What is much more important is, look at the *agreement* that is there:

In all the accounts there is agreement: the stone was rolled away, the tomb was empty, Jesus' body was gone, and angels (frightening messengers dressed in white) were present. To me, *that's* the point of these accounts, that's the essential information, *and they all agree*. But to receive that

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requires a view of the inspiration of the Scriptures that is broad enough to not get hung up on peripheral details, but recognizes that there is much agreement in the bigger picture and that God has preserved his witness in these texts.

And if, in fact, this was an historic event being reported by four different human witnesses (who in most cases compiled their accounts by their own memories, by interviewing *other* eyewitnesses, and by recalling what we call the ‘oral tradition’) these slight variations, to me, **add** to the weight of evidence that what they are reporting is true. A made up story would have been much more uniform!

Another observational ‘evidence’ of the reliability of our Gospels is something that N. T. Wright called “Double Dissimilarity”, or more popularly, the “Embarrassment Principle”. Basically it goes like this – if an event was embarrassing or awkward for the early church, it is more likely to be historically true. I mentioned this last week (without naming it) in the context of the Old Testament writings, by pointing out how radically different they are from other contemporary manuscripts because of their insistence on pointing out the flaws, sins, and bad choices of even the most revered characters (David and Moses being two obvious examples). The only good explanation for this is that the stories are true, and important!

We find this principle also at work throughout the Resurrection accounts, and it is hard to explain away. If the raising of Jesus was a hoax, or a myth concocted by the early church – aside from numerous other issues that that raises (we’ll get to some of them in a moment) – someone needs to explain who came up with the idea for the first and main witnesses to be people whose testimony was considered worthless at the time? Today we might consider that a brilliantly crafty strategy, but in the day, it was so off the radar that it’s hard to imagine anyone thinking of it.

A fabricated account would not have included women in such a prominent role as the first witnesses to the Resurrection, since women in the day had little to no social status. Obviously, none of the 12 disciples were women, there was no reason to have anyone other than the disciples there at the cross – unless there were there! And yet... we’re told, the empty tomb was discovered by women. (All the gospels agree with that!)

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Women had no status in the Jewish society and their testimony was considered worthless. They were not even allowed to serve as legal witnesses. Is it logical that the Christian church would intentionally humiliate its male leaders by having them hiding like cowards in Jerusalem while ‘mere women;’ carried out the proper burial procedures? At best, it would be a very curious choice for a made up story. A better option is that, it simply happened that way!

I mentioned last week that it was clearly the intention of the Gospel writers to tell the truth. In his second letter, Peter assures us that what he is saying is true. (2 Peter 1:16) “We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.”

Someone asked me to say a word somewhere in this series about the reliability of our New Testament manuscripts. Perhaps this is as good a place as any to do that, because there are those who might suggest that the MSS that we call the New Testament evolved over quite a long period of time and gradually took the shape of what we know today. However, that is not the case, and I say that not so much as zealous believer (which I don’t deny), but as one reporting a fact.

The compilation of New Testament manuscripts is not necessarily a product of people of faith (some who do this work are, some likely are not). It is science. Again, this is one of those things on which entire books have been written. In my edition of the Greek New Testament (which is the original language of the New Testament) there are footnotes at the bottom of each page. They are listings of ‘variant readings’, variations that appear in certain manuscripts and fragments.

These are rated A, B, C, or D, an A meaning ‘virtually certain’, and D meaning, ‘not sure which is correct’. You have to turn many pages before coming across a D variant, and none of these *ever* affect the theological substance of a text. (Most are minor grammatical options.)

We have nearly 25,000 manuscript and manuscript fragments of the Bible. Comparison of those to the Bible we have today puts the accuracy of our text at 99.7% and no fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith rests in a disputed reading. The next closest number of manuscripts of an ancient document is 643 copies of Homer’s Iliad.

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There is a time gap of less than 50 years between our earliest manuscripts and the Bible, but more than 400 years between the earliest manuscript and the writing of the Iliad. Yet no one questions the authenticity of the books of antiquity even though we do not possess a single original copy.

To dismiss the Bible would be to dismiss all of classical literature.

There are 42 authors who mention Jesus within 150 years of his life. Nine of those are Biblical which leaves us with 33 non-biblical authors: Clement, Ignatius, Aristides, Pliny the Younger, Celsus, Tertullian, Josephus, Polycarp and others, Compare this to only 10 authors that mention Tiberius Caesar, the Roman emperor during Jesus' ministry, within 150 years of his life. Needless to say, Caesar's existence is not in question.

As I mentioned last week, this is not a proof that what the writers said is true; but to reject the account of the Resurrection as a creation of people who developed this 'resurrection mythology' over a long period of time is not possible in view of the textual evidence. The story may be true or false, but it was the same story that we know, right from the start.

Now, let's focus for a few moments specifically on the Crucifixion portion of the Passion story. The crucifixion was prophesied in the Old Testament - Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 among others...

14 I am poured out like water and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted within me. 15 My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death. 16 Dogs surround me, a pack of villains encircles me; they pierce my hands and my feet. 17 All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me. 18 They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.

...But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. 6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. 7 He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

The latest of these writings which - read like eyewitness accounts of the Crucifixion - was written 700 years before the actual event. But you can go even further back than that - back to Genesis 22, where we read a story that is only fully comprehensible in light of something that took place nearly 2,000 years later;

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Then God said to Abraham, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you”...So they gather wood, and go to the appointed place.

Isaac (Abraham’s son, and the only heir of God’s promise) says, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” To which Abraham replies: “God himself will provide the Lamb”. The Cross is written into the very fabric of these pages!

History attests: Jesus was crucified. The Crucifixion passes the test of embarrassment. The idea of Judaism’s Messiah being killed on a cross like a criminal instead of freeing the people from Roman oppression was unthinkable. Even Robert Funk, who chaired the infamous Jesus Seminar, [which basically rejected nearly all of the New Testament as a creation of the early church,] called the crucifixion the “one indisputable fact about Jesus.” Interesting.

The Roman soldiers were experienced executioners with their own lives on the line. These were not scientifically sophisticated people to be sure; but they knew when a person was dead. In Jesus’ case he was! They decided not to break his legs (a process which speeded along asphyxiation), because he was clearly already dead. They stuck a spear into his side to make certain.

The details of our accounts are so vivid here have been numerous studies of the descriptions of Jesus’ crucifixion from medical perspectives, such as an article in the American Medical Association (vol. 255, No. 11) which concluded in this way:

“Clearly, the weight of historical and medical evidence indicates that Jesus was dead before the wound to his side was inflicted.. Accordingly, interpretations based on the assumption that Jesus did not die on the cross appear to be at odds with modern medical knowledge.”

Now, I’ve focused on the crucifixion because you can’t deny the historicity of the empty tomb without denying the historicity of the crucifixion and the burial story. The two are too closely intertwined to be separated.

Jesus’ burial in a tomb owned by a Joseph of Arimathea (a member of the Sanhedrin) has the ‘ring of truth’ to it. The details fit the day. Again, if this were fabricated it would be unlikely that early Christians would have devised a story with one of their enemies as the hero. And yet, no other

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burial tradition exists!

If Jesus wasn't buried by Joseph of Arimathea, we have no other burial story to go on. Nothing offered by the Jews, nothing that conflicts. Nothing at all. This is hard to explain unless the gospel account is the true account.

The earliest Jewish polemic (arguments against the resurrection) presupposes the empty tomb. This is HUGE. The early debates didn't focus on identifying whether or not the corpse belonged to Jesus but rather it focused on the fact that the tomb was empty. The Jewish authorities did not deny that the tomb was empty. Rather they charged that the disciples stole the body.

These authorities had to be present at the death to know he was buried. They had to know where the tomb was in order to bury him. And they had to know that the tomb was empty in order to dispute it.

Furthermore, Matthew, Mark and John actually list the names of the women who witnessed the execution and who followed Joseph to the burial location. There is no way this would have happened unless it was true, as these women could easily have been questioned about the truthfulness of the event.

It would have been impossible for Christianity to start in a city where Jesus' body lay. To prove Christianity was false, all the Jewish authorities had to do was exhume the body for all to see. Put him in a cart, parade him through the streets – end of story. No Christianity! Even if the disciples didn't check out the tomb, the Jewish authorities surely would have.

The empty tomb story didn't begin in some far off land but in the very city the execution and burial took place, the place where the most independent eyewitnesses could be interviewed.

The way I understand it there are only two explanations for the empty tomb: First - A human work. But which humans? Jesus' Enemies had no motive for this. And his friends had no power.

Second - A divine work The most reasonable explanation is that God in his limitless and infinite power, raised Jesus from the dead

1 Corinthians 15:3-8

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“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.”

1st Corinthians was written by Paul. We have here an authentic letter from a highly educated former chief persecutor of the Christian church who later became its most successful missionary, who was an eyewitness to, and also in contact with other eyewitnesses to, the risen Jesus who went on to write half of the New Testament and later died for his belief in Jesus. Talk about credibility! How can we explain this outside of the resurrection?

Paul first mentions the appearance to Peter. – Though we know John was there too. (Luke 24:33-34) Paul then mentions that Jesus appeared to the 12 disciples (Luke 24:36-43, John 20:19-20). Paul then mentions the appearance to 500 brethren at one time. Paul is personally acquainted with these people (as he mentions that some are alive and some are dead, available to be questioned if desired). No contemporary source exists of people contradicting the testimony of these people.

We have to somehow account for the changed behavior of the disciples. Here are men who abandoned and denied Jesus at his arrest and execution who suddenly turned bold and publicly proclaimed his resurrection until they were executed for it.

There are numerous Non-Biblical Sources specifically stating that the disciples died for their beliefs in the Resurrection. *Now this doesn't verify the truth of their statements, it just verifies their sincerity. No one dies for a lie.* Something happened, and people were willing to suffer and die in order to proclaim it. Their lives changed, their very personalities changed.

To believe that the resurrection was a myth would require us believing that people were not only willing to suffer and die for this belief, but to also accept that this new teaching of obedience to Jesus – a lifestyle which stressed personal righteousness, integrity, and holiness – would grow and continue in spite of their knowing that it was ultimately based on a lie. It makes no sense!

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Well, let's see if we can sum this up: there are a number of significant factors pointing to the reliability of our accounts of Jesus' Resurrection: Eyewitness Testimony, the Embarrassment principle, the accuracy of our Manuscripts (specifically, the accuracy of the Burial narratives and the empty tomb), Jesus' appearances to multiple people, and the changed lives of the disciples.

If the resurrection didn't happen, we have some serious questions to ask ourselves:

Such as: "Why did Sunday become the new holy day?"

Perhaps in the past you've asked yourself "What makes Jesus so different from any other historical figure?" Jesus is the only person in all of history who claimed to be God, and then backed up his claim by rising from the dead. I can't think of any stronger evidence one can show than by single handedly conquering death – and for that I believe in Jesus and in His message; that because of our sins, the only way to God is through belief in his Son Jesus.

Let me repeat once again what I said in the first week of this series: there will never be a proof beyond doubt of any matter that is ultimately faith based. We can't 'prove' the Resurrection through argument or logic. And honestly, these things that we've been talking about today are interesting to me, and they demonstrate that this leap of faith is not necessarily a 'leap into the dark'; but truly for me, the strongest evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ comes through the inner witness of the Holy Spirit in my heart.

Having believed, the Spirit testifies (as promised) with my spirit that I am a child of God. There's a great song by Nicholle C. Mullens, "I Know My Redeemer Lives", and at the end she sings, "I know my Redeemer lives... I KNOW... I know... I talked with him this morning!" The strongest evidence comes *after* a step of faith, as we experience the presence of the Living God in our hearts. She talked with him,

And so may you!

Peace