

*Evidence for the Resurrection*  
*by Josh McDowell*

For centuries many of the world's distinguished philosophers have assaulted Christianity as being irrational, superstitious and absurd. Many have chosen simply to ignore the central issue of the resurrection. Others have tried to explain it away through various theories. But the historical evidence just can't be discounted.

A student at the University of Uruguay said to me. "Professor McDowell, why can't you refute Christianity?"

"For a very simple reason," I answered. "I am not able to explain away an event in history - the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

How can we explain the empty tomb? Can it possibly be accounted for by any natural cause?

**A QUESTION OF HISTORY** - After more than 700 hours of studying this subject, I have come to the conclusion that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is either one of the most wicked, vicious, heartless hoaxes ever foisted on the minds of human beings - or it is the most remarkable fact of history.

Here are some of the facts relevant to the resurrection: Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish prophet who claimed to be the Christ prophesied in the Jewish Scriptures, was arrested, was judged a political criminal, and was crucified. Three days after His death and burial, some women who went to His tomb found the body gone. In subsequent weeks, His disciples claimed that God had raised Him from the dead and that He appeared to them various times before ascending into heaven.

From that foundation, Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire and has continued to exert great influence down through the centuries.

**LIVING WITNESSES** - The New Testament accounts of the resurrection were being circulated within the lifetimes of men and women alive at the time of the resurrection. Those people could certainly have confirmed or denied the accuracy of such accounts.

The writers of the four Gospels either had themselves been witnesses or else were relating the accounts of eyewitnesses of the actual events. In advocating their case for the gospel, a word that means "good news," the apostles appealed (even when confronting their most severe opponents) to common knowledge concerning the facts of the resurrection.

F. F. Bruce, Rylands professor of biblical criticism and exegesis at the University of Manchester, says concerning the value of the New Testament records as primary sources: "Had there been any tendency to depart from the facts in any material respect, the possible presence of hostile witnesses in the audience would have served as a further corrective."

**IS THE NEW TESTAMENT RELIABLE?** - Because the New Testament provides the primary historical source for information on the resurrection, many critics during the 19th century attacked the reliability of these biblical documents.

By the end of the 19th century, however, archaeological discoveries had confirmed the accuracy of the New Testament manuscripts. Discoveries of early papyri bridged the gap between the time of Christ and existing manuscripts from a later date.

Those findings increased scholarly confidence in the reliability of the Bible. William F. Albright, who in his day was the world's foremost biblical archaeologist, said: "We can already say emphatically that there is no longer any solid basis for dating any book of the New Testament after about A.D. 80, two full generations before the date between 130 and 150 given by the more radical New Testament critics of today."

Coinciding with the papyri discoveries, an abundance of other manuscripts came to light (over 24,000 copies of early New Testament manuscripts are known to be in existence today). The historian Luke wrote of "authentic evidence" concerning the resurrection. Sir William Ramsay, who spent 15 years attempting to undermine Luke credentials as a historian, and to refute the reliability of the New Testament, finally concluded: "Luke is a historian of the first rank . . . This author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians. "

---

I claim to be an historian. My approach to Classics is historical. And I tell you that the evidence for the life, the death, and the resurrection of Christ is better authenticated than most of the facts of ancient history . . .

E. M. Blaiklock  
*Professor of Classics*  
*Auckland University*

---

**BACKGROUND** - The New Testament witnesses were fully aware of the background against which the resurrection took place. The body of Jesus, in accordance with Jewish burial custom, was wrapped in a linen cloth. About 100 pounds of aromatic spices, mixed together to form a gummy substance, were applied to the wrappings of cloth about the body. After the body was placed in a solid rock tomb, an extremely large stone was rolled against the entrance of the tomb. Large stones weighing approximately two tons were normally rolled (by means of levers) against a tomb entrance.

A Roman guard of strictly disciplined fighting men was stationed to guard the tomb. This guard affixed on the tomb the Roman seal, which was meant to "prevent any attempt at vandalizing the sepulcher." Anyone trying to move the stone from the tomb's entrance would have broken the seal and thus incurred the wrath of Roman law.

But three days later the tomb was empty. The followers of Jesus said He had risen from the dead. They reported that He appeared to them during a period of 40 days, showing Himself to them by many "infallible proofs." Paul the apostle recounted that Jesus appeared to more than 500 of His followers at one time, the majority of whom were still alive and who could confirm what Paul wrote. So many security precautions were taken with the trial, crucifixion, burial, entombment, sealing, and guarding of Christ's tomb that it becomes very difficult for critics to defend their position that Christ did not rise from the dead. Consider these facts:

**FACT #1: BROKEN ROMAN SEAL** - As we have said, the first obvious fact was the breaking of the seal that stood for the power and authority of the Roman Empire. The consequences of breaking the seal were extremely severe. The FBI and CIA of the Roman Empire were called into action to find the man or men who were responsible. If they were apprehended, it meant automatic execution by crucifixion upside down. People feared the breaking of the seal. Jesus' disciples displayed signs of cowardice when they hid themselves. Peter, one of these disciples, went out and denied Christ three times.

**FACT #2: EMPTY TOMB** - As we have already discussed, another obvious fact after the resurrection was the empty tomb. The disciples of Christ did not go off to Athens or Rome to preach that Christ was raised from the dead. Rather, they went right back to the city of Jerusalem, where, if what they were teaching was false, the falsity would be evident. The empty tomb was "too notorious to be denied." Paul Althaus states that the resurrection "could have not been maintained in Jerusalem for a single day, for a single hour, if the emptiness of the tomb had not been established as a fact for all concerned."

Both Jewish and Roman sources and traditions admit an empty tomb. Those resources range from Josephus to a compilation of fifth-century Jewish writings called the "Toledoth Jeshu." Dr. Paul Maier calls this "positive evidence from a hostile source, which is the strongest kind of historical evidence. In essence, this means that if a source admits a fact decidedly not in its favor, then that fact is genuine."

Gamaliel, who was a member of the Jewish high court, the Sanhedrin, put forth the suggestion that the rise of the Christian movement was God's doing; he could not have done that if the tomb were still occupied, or if the Sanhedrin knew the whereabouts of Christ's body.

Paul Maier observes that ". . . if all the evidence is weighed carefully and fairly, it is indeed justifiable, according to the canons of historical research, to conclude that the sepulcher of Joseph of Arimathea, in which Jesus was buried, was actually empty on the morning of the first Easter. And no shred of evidence has yet been discovered in literary sources, epigraphy (the study and deciphering of ancient inscriptions) or archaeology that would disprove this statement."

**FACT #3: LARGE STONE MOVED** - On that Sunday morning the first thing that impressed the people who approached the tomb was the unusual position of the one and a half to two ton stone that had been lodged in front of the doorway. All the Gospel writers mention it.

---

There exists no document from the ancient world, witnessed by so excellent a set of textual and historical testimonies . . . Skepticism regarding the historical credentials of Christianity is based upon an irrational bias. Clark Pinnock *McMaster University*

---

Those who observed the stone after the resurrection describe its position as having been rolled up a slope away not just from the entrance of the tomb, but from the entire massive sepulcher. It was in such a position that it looked as if it had been picked up and carried away. Now, I ask you, if the disciples had wanted to come in, tiptoe around the sleeping guards, and then roll the stone over and steal Jesus' body, how could they have done that without the guards' awareness?

**FACT #4: ROMAN GUARD GOES AWOL** - The Roman guards fled. They left their place of responsibility. How can their desertion be explained, when Roman military discipline was so exceptional?

Justin, in Digest #49, mentions all the offenses that required the death penalty. The fear of their superiors' wrath and the possibility of death meant that they paid close attention to the minutest details of their jobs. One way a guard was put to death was by being stripped of his clothes and then burned alive in a fire started with his garments. If it was not apparent which soldier had failed in his duty, then lots were drawn to see which one would be punished with death for the guard unit's failure. Certainly the entire unit would not have fallen asleep with that kind of threat over their heads. Dr. George Currie, a student of Roman military discipline, wrote that fear of punishment "produced flawless attention to duty, especially in the night watches."

**FACT #5: GRAVECLOTHES TELL A TALE** - In a literal sense, against all statements to the contrary, the tomb was not totally empty - because of an amazing phenomenon. John, a disciple of Jesus, looked over to the place where the body of Jesus had lain, and there were the grave clothes, in the form of the body, slightly caved in and empty - like the empty chrysalis of a caterpillar's cocoon. That's enough to make a believer out of anybody. John never did get over it. The first thing that stuck in the minds of the disciples was not the empty tomb, but rather the empty grave clothes - undisturbed in form and position.

**FACT #6: JESUS' APPEARANCES CONFIRMED** - Christ appeared alive on several occasions after the cataclysmic events of that first Easter. When studying an event in history, it is important to know whether enough people who were participants or eyewitnesses to the event were alive when the facts about the event were published. To know this is obviously helpful in ascertaining the accuracy of the published report. If the number of eyewitnesses is substantial, the event can be regarded as fairly well established. For instance, if we all witness a murder, and a later police report turns out to be a fabrication of lies, we as eyewitnesses can refute it.

**OVER 500 WITNESSES** - Several very important factors are often overlooked when considering Christ's post-resurrection appearances to individuals. The first is the large number of witnesses of Christ after that resurrection morning. One of the earliest records of Christ's appearing after the resurrection is by Paul. The apostle appealed to his audience's knowledge of the fact that Christ had been seen by more than 500 people at one time. Paul reminded them that the majority of those people were still alive and could be questioned. Dr. Edwin M. Yamauchi, associate professor of history at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, emphasizes: "What gives a special authority to the list (of witnesses) as historical evidence is the reference to most of the five hundred brethren being still alive. St. Paul says in effect, 'If you do not believe me, you can ask them.' Such a statement in an admittedly genuine letter written within thirty years of the event is almost as strong evidence as one could hope to get for something that happened nearly two thousand years ago." Let's take the more than 500 witnesses who saw Jesus alive after His death and burial, and place them in a courtroom. Do you realize that if each of those 500 people were to testify for only six minutes, including cross-examination, you would have an amazing 50 hours of firsthand testimony? Add to this the testimony of many other eyewitnesses and you would well have the largest and most lopsided trial in history.

**HOSTILE WITNESSES** - Another factor crucial to interpreting Christ's appearances is that He also appeared to those who were hostile or unconvinced.

Over and over again, I have read or heard people comment that Jesus was seen alive after His death and burial only by His friends and followers. Using that argument, they attempt to water down the overwhelming impact of the multiple eyewitness accounts. But that line of reasoning is so pathetic it hardly deserves comment. No author or informed individual would regard Saul of Tarsus as being a follower of Christ. The facts show the exact opposite. Saul despised Christ and persecuted Christ's followers. It was a life-shattering experience when Christ appeared to him.

Although he was at the time not a disciple, he later became the apostle Paul, one of the greatest witnesses for the truth of the resurrection.

---

If the New Testament were a collection of secular writings, their authenticity would generally be regarded as beyond all doubt.

F. F. Bruce  
*Manchester University*

---

The argument that Christ's appearances were only to followers is an argument for the most part from silence, and arguments from silence can be dangerous. It is equally possible that all to whom Jesus appeared became followers. No one acquainted with the facts can accurately say that Jesus appeared to just "an insignificant few."

Christians believe that Jesus was bodily resurrected in time and space by the supernatural power of God. The difficulties of belief may be great, but the problems inherent in unbelief present even greater difficulties.

The theories advanced to explain the resurrection by "natural causes" are weak; they actually help to build confidence in the truth of the resurrection.

***THE WRONG TOMB?*** - A theory propounded by Kirsopp Lake assumes that the women who reported that the body was missing had mistakenly gone to the wrong tomb. If so, then the disciples who went to check up on the women's statement must have also gone to the wrong tomb. We may be certain, however, that Jewish authorities, who asked for a Roman guard to be stationed at the tomb to prevent Jesus' body from being stolen, would not have been mistaken about the location. Nor would the Roman guards, for they were there!

If the resurrection-claim was merely because of a geographical mistake, the Jewish authorities would have lost no time in producing the body from the proper tomb, thus effectively quenching for all time any rumor resurrection.

***HALLUCINATIONS?*** - Another attempted explanation claims that the appearances of Jesus after the resurrection were either illusions or hallucinations. Unsupported by the psychological principles governing the appearances of hallucinations, this theory also does not coincide with the historical situation. Again, where was the actual body, and why wasn't it produced?

***DID JESUS SWOON?*** - Another theory, popularized by Venturini several centuries ago, is often quoted today. This is the swoon theory, which says that Jesus didn't die; he merely fainted from exhaustion and loss of blood. Everyone thought Him dead, but later He resuscitated and the disciples thought it to be a resurrection. Skeptic David Friedrich Strauss--certainly no believer in the resurrection--gave the deathblow to any thought that Jesus revived from a swoon: "It is impossible that a being who had stolen half-dead out of the sepulchre, who crept about weak and ill, wanting medical treatment, who required bandaging, strengthening and indulgence, and who still at last yielded to His sufferings, could have given to the disciples the impression that He was a Conqueror over death and the grave, the Prince of Life, an impression which lay at the bottom of their future ministry. Such a resuscitation could only have weakened the impression which He had made upon them in life and in death, at the most could only have

given it a mournful voice, but could by no possibility have changed their sorrow into enthusiasm or have elevated their reverence into worship."

---

For the New Testament of Acts, the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming. Any attempt to reject its basic historicity, even in matters of detail, must now appear absurd. Roman historians have long taken it for granted.

A. N. Sherwin-White  
*Classical Roman Historian*

---

**THE BODY STOLEN?** - Then consider the theory that the body was stolen by the disciples while the guards slept. The depression and cowardice of the disciples provide a hard-hitting argument against their suddenly becoming so brave and daring as to face a detachment of soldiers at the tomb and steal the body. They were in no mood to attempt anything like that.

The theory that the Jewish or Roman authorities moved Christ's body is no more reasonable an explanation for the empty tomb than theft by the disciples. If the authorities had the body in their possession or knew where it was, why, when the disciples were preaching the resurrection in Jerusalem, didn't they explain: "Wait! We moved the body, see, He didn't rise from the grave"?

And if such a rebuttal failed, why didn't they explain exactly where Jesus' body lay? If this failed, why didn't they recover the corpse, put it on a cart, and wheel it through the center of Jerusalem? Such an action would have destroyed Christianity--not in the cradle, but in the womb!

**THE RESURRECTION IS A FACT** - Professor Thomas Arnold, for 14 years a headmaster of Rugby, author of the famous, *History of Rome*, and appointed to the chair of modern history at Oxford, was well acquainted with the value of evidence in determining historical facts. This great scholar said: "I have been used for many years to study the histories of other times, and to examine and weigh the evidence of those who have written about them, and I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better and 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." Brooke Foss Westcott, an English scholar, said: "raking all the evidence together, it is not too much to say that there is no historic incident better or more variously supported than the resurrection of Christ. Nothing but the predisposed assumption that it must be false could have suggested the idea of deficiency in the proof of it."

**REAL PROOF: THE DISCIPLES' LIVES** - But the most telling testimony of all must be the lives of those early Christians. We must ask ourselves: What caused them to go everywhere telling the message of the risen Christ?

Had there been any visible benefits accrued to them from their efforts - prestige, wealth, increased social status or material benefits - we might logically attempt to account for their actions, for their whole-hearted and total allegiance to this "risen Christ."

As a reward for their efforts, however, those early Christians were beaten, stoned to death, thrown to the lions, tortured and crucified. Every conceivable method was used to stop them from talking. Yet, they laid down their lives as the ultimate proof of their complete confidence in the truth of their message.

## **WHERE DO YOU STAND?**

How do you evaluate this overwhelming historical evidence? What is your decision about the fact of Christ's empty tomb? What do you think of Christ?

When I was confronted with the overwhelming evidence for Christ's resurrection, I had to ask the logical question: "What difference does all this evidence make to me? What difference does it make whether or not I believe Christ rose again and died on the cross for my sins!" The answer is put best by something Jesus said to a man who doubted - Thomas. Jesus told him: "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me*" (John 14:6).

On the basis of all the evidence for Christ's resurrection, and considering the fact that Jesus offers forgiveness of sin and an eternal relationship with God, who would be so foolhardy as to reject Him? Christ is alive! He is living today.

You can trust God right now by faith through prayer. Prayer is talking with God. God knows your heart and is not so concerned with your words as He is with the attitude of your heart. If you have never trusted Christ, you can do so right now.

The prayer I prayed is: "Lord Jesus, I need You. Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins. I open the door of my life and trust You as my Savior. Thank You for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. Make me the kind of person You want me to be. Thank You that I can trust You."

---

**Josh McDowell**, according to a recent survey, is one of the most popular speakers among university students today. He has spoken on more than 650 university and college campuses to more than seven million people in 74 countries during the last 21 years. ©1992 Josh McDowell Ministry

### ***If I Had Faked the Resurrection...***

***"And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins...If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men" 1 Corinthians 15:17,19.***

*by Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler*

I set out as a young man to debunk Christianity. I met a young Christian woman who challenged me to intellectually examine the evidence for Christianity, and I accepted her challenge. I aimed to show her and everyone - that Christianity was nonsense. I thought it would be easy. I thought a careful investigation of the facts would expose Christianity as a lie and its followers as dupes. But then a funny thing happened. As I began investigating the claims of Christianity, I kept running up against the evidence. Time after time, I was surprised to discover the factual basis for the seemingly outlandish things Christians believe. And one of the most convincing categories of evidence I confronted was this: The resurrection accounts found in the Gospels are not the stuff of fable, forgery or fabrication.

I had assumed that someone, or several 'someones', had invented the stories of Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead. But as I examined those accounts, I had to face the fact that any sensible mythmaker would do things much differently from the way *Matthew, Mark, Luke and John* did in recording the news of the resurrection. As much as I hated to, I had to admit that if I had been some first-century propagandist trying to fake the resurrection of Jesus Christ, I would have done a number of things differently:

***I would wait a prudent period after the events before "publishing" my account.***

Few historians dispute the fact that the disciples of Jesus began preaching the news of His resurrection soon after the event itself; in fact, Peter's Pentecost sermon (*Acts 2*) occurred within 50 days of the Resurrection. And textual research indicates that the written accounts of the Resurrection, especially the creedal statement of *1 Corinthians 15:3-8*, are astoundingly early in origin, possibly within two years of the event. Such early origins argue against any notion that the Resurrection accounts are legendary.

***I would publish my account far from the venue where it supposedly happened.***

Dr. William Lane Craig writes, "One of the most amazing facts about the early Christian belief in Jesus' resurrection was that it originated in the very city where Jesus was crucified. The Christian faith did not come to exist in some distant city, far from eyewitnesses who knew of Jesus' death and burial. No, it came into being in the very city where Jesus had been publicly crucified, under the very eyes of its enemies"

***I would select my "witnesses" very carefully.***

I would avoid, as much as possible, using any names at all in my account, and I would certainly avoid citing prominent personalities as witnesses. Yet at least 16 individuals are mentioned by name as witnesses in the various accounts, and the mention of Joseph of Arimathea as the man who buried Jesus would have been terribly dangerous if the gospel accounts had been faked or embellished. As a member of the Sanhedrin, a Jewish "Supreme Court," he would have been well-known. J. P. Moreland writes, "No one could have invented such a person who did not exist and say he was on the Sanhedrin if such were not the case" His involvement in the burial of Jesus could have been easily confirmed or refuted. Perhaps most important, I would avoid citing disreputable witnesses, which makes significant the record of Jesus' first appearances-to women-since in that time and culture women were considered invalid witnesses in a court of law. If the accounts were fabrications, the women would never have been included in the story, at least not as first witnesses.

***I would surround the event with impressive supernatural displays and omens.***

As Jewish scholar Pinchas Lapidé writes, "We do not read in the first testimonies [of the Resurrection] of an apocalyptic spectacle, exorbitant sensations, or of the transforming impact of a cosmic event. . . . According to all New Testament reports, no human eye saw the resurrection itself, no human being was present, and none of the disciples asserted to have apprehended, let alone understood, its manner and nature. How easy it would have been for them or their immediate successors to supplement this scandalous hole in the concatenation of events by fanciful embellishments! But precisely because none of the evangelists dared to 'improve upon' or embellish this unseen resurrection, the total picture of the gospels also gains in trustworthiness"

***I would painstakingly correlate my account with others I knew, embellishing the legend only where I could be confident of not being contradicted.***



Many critics have pointed out the befuddling differences and apparent contradictions in the Resurrection accounts. But these are actually convincing evidences of their authenticity; they display an ingenuous lack of collusion, agreeing and (apparently) diverging much as eyewitness accounts of any event do. I would portray myself and any co-conspirators sympathetically, even heroically. Yet the Gospel writers present strikingly unflattering portraits of Jesus' followers (such as Peter and Thomas) and their often skeptical reactions (*Mark 16:11, 13; Luke 24:11, 37; John 20:19, 25, 21:4*). Such portrayals are very unlike the popular myths and legends of that (or any) time.

***I would disguise the location of the tomb or spectacularly destroy it in my account.***

If I were creating a resurrection legend, I would keep the tomb's location a secret to prevent any chance that someone might discover Jesus' body, or I would record in my account that the angels sealed it or carried it off into heaven after the Resurrection. Or I might have taken the easiest course of all and simply made my fictional resurrection a "spiritual" one, which would have made it impossible to refute even if a body were eventually discovered. But, of course, the Gospel accounts describe the owner of the tomb (Joseph of Arimathea) and its location "*At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb*" *John 19:41*, and identify Jesus' resurrection as a bodily one. *John 20:27*.

***I would try to squelch inquiry or investigation.***

I might pronounce a curse on anyone attempting to substantiate my claims, or attach a stigma to anyone so shallow as to require evidence. Yet note the frequent appeal of Jesus' disciples, to the easily confirmed-or discredited-nature of the evidence, as though inviting investigation (*Acts 2:32, 3:15, 13:31; 1 Corinthians 15:3-6*). This was done within a few years of the events themselves; if the tomb were not empty or the Resurrection appearances were fiction, the early Christians' opponents could have conclusively debunked the new religion. As Dr. Edwin Yamauchi says of the citation of the resurrected Christ appearing to more than 500 people in *1 Corinthians 15*, "What gives special authority to the list [of witnesses] as historical evidence is the reference to most of the five hundred brethren being still alive. St. Paul says in effect, 'If you do not believe me, you can ask them'"

***I would not preach a message of repentance in light of the Resurrection.***

No one in his right mind would have chosen to create a fictional message that would invite opposition and persecution from both civil and religious authorities of those days. How much easier and wiser it would have been to preach a less controversial gospel - concentrating on Jesus' teachings about love, perhaps - thus saving myself and the adherents of my new religion a lot of trouble.

***I would stop short of dying for my lie.***

Lee Strobel has written, "People will die for their religious beliefs if they sincerely believe they're true, but people won't die for their religious beliefs if they know their beliefs are false. While most people can only have faith that their beliefs are true, the disciples were in a position to know without a doubt whether or not Jesus had risen from the dead. They claimed that they saw Him, talked with Him, and ate with Him. If they weren't absolutely certain, they wouldn't have allowed themselves to be tortured to death for proclaiming that the resurrection had happened"

These are not the only reasons I believe in the truth of the Bible and the reality of the Resurrection. But these were among the "*many convincing proofs*" (*Acts 1:3*) that I encountered in my attempts to prove Christianity wrong, which eventually led me to the conclusion that Jesus Christ was who He claimed to be

and that He really did rise from the dead. It didn't happen immediately, but eventually I gave in to the truth, and on Dec. 19, 1959, the Risen Christ radically changed my life. I've seen Him do the same for countless others, and I pray, if you haven't done so already, you will let Him do the same for you."

---

Josh McDowell is a speaker, author, and traveling representative for Campus Crusade for Christ. His books include *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, *More Than a Carpenter*, and *The New Tolerance*. He was assisted in writing this article by Bob Hostetler, an award-winning writer who lives in Hamilton, Ohio.

## ***The Resurrection: Fact or Fiction?***

***Pat Zukeran - Probe Ministries***

---

### ***Introduction***

The most significant event in history is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the strongest evidence that Jesus is the Son of God. This event gives men and women the sure hope of eternal life a hope that not only gives us joy as we look to the future but also provides us with powerful reasons to live today.

Throughout the centuries, however, there have been scholars who have attempted to deny the account of the Resurrection. Our schools are filled with history books which give alternative explanations for the Resurrection or in some cases, fail even to mention this unique event.

In this essay we will take a look at the evidence for the Resurrection and see if this event is historical fact or fiction. But, first, we must establish the fact that Jesus Christ was a historical figure and not a legend. There are several highly accurate historical documents that attest to Jesus. First, let's look at the four Gospels themselves. The authors *Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John* recorded very specific facts of the events surrounding the life of Jesus, and archaeology has verified the accuracy of the New Testament. Hundreds of facts such as the names of officials, geographical sites, financial currencies, and times of events have been confirmed. Sir William Ramsay, one of the greatest geographers of the 19th century, became firmly convinced of the accuracy of the New Testament as a result of the overwhelming evidence he discovered during his research. As a result, he completely reversed his antagonism against Christianity.

The textual evidence decisively shows that the Gospels were written and circulated during the lifetime of those who witnessed the events. Since there are so many specific names and places mentioned, eyewitnesses could have easily discredited the writings. The New Testament would have never survived had the facts been inaccurate. These facts indicate that the Gospels are historically reliable and show Jesus to be a historical figure. For more information on the accuracy of the Bible, see the essay from Probe entitled *Authority of the Bible*.

Another document that supports the historicity of Jesus is the work of Josephus, a potentially hostile Jewish historian. He recorded *Antiquities*, a history of the Jews, for the Romans during the lifetime of Jesus. He wrote, "Now there was about that time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man." Josephus goes on to relate other specific details about Jesus' life and death that correspond with the New Testament. Roman historians such as Suetonius, Tacitus, and Pliny the Younger also refer to Jesus as a historically real individual.

Skeptics often challenge Christians to prove the Resurrection scientifically. We must understand, the scientific method is based on showing that something is fact by repeated observations of the object or event. Therefore, the method is limited to repeatable events or observable objects. Historical events cannot be repeated. For example, can we repeatedly observe the creation of our solar system? The obvious answer is no, but that does not mean the creation of the solar system did not happen.

In proving a historical event like the Resurrection, we must look at the historical evidence. Thus far in our discussion we have shown that belief in the historical Jesus of the New Testament is certainly reasonable and that the scientific method cannot be applied to proving a historical event. For the remainder of this essay, we will examine the historical facts concerning the Resurrection and see what the evidence reveals.

### ***Examining the Evidence***

Three facts must be reckoned with when investigating the Resurrection: the empty tomb, the transformation of the Apostles, and the preaching of the Resurrection originating in Jerusalem.

Let us first examine the case of the empty tomb. Jesus was a well-known figure in Israel. His burial site was known by many people. In fact *Matthew* records the exact location of Jesus' tomb. He states, ***And Joseph of Arimathea took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb"*** (*Matt. 27:59*). Mark asserts that Joseph was ***"a prominent member of the Council"*** (*Mark 15:43*).

It would have been destructive for the writers to invent a man of such prominence, name him specifically, and designate the tomb site, since eyewitnesses would have easily discredited the author's fallacious claims.

Jewish and Roman sources both testify to an empty tomb. *Matthew 28:12-13* specifically states that the chief priests invented the story that the disciples stole the body. There would be no need for this fabrication if the tomb had not been empty. Opponents of the Resurrection must account for this. If the tomb had not been empty, the preaching of the Apostles would not have lasted one day. All the Jewish authorities needed to do to put an end to Christianity was to produce the body of Jesus.

Along with the empty tomb is the fact that the corpse of Jesus was never found. Not one historical record from the first or second century is written attacking the factuality of the empty tomb or claiming discovery of the corpse. Tom Anderson, former president of the California Trial Lawyers Association states; "Let's assume that the written accounts of His appearances to hundreds of people are false. I want to pose a question. With an event so well publicized, don't you think that it's reasonable that one historian, one eye witness, one antagonist would record for all time that he had seen Christ's body? . . . The silence of history is deafening when it comes to the testimony against the resurrection."

Second, we have the changed lives of the Apostles. It is recorded in the Gospels that while Jesus was on trial, the Apostles deserted Him in fear. Yet 10 out of the 11 Apostles died as martyrs believing Christ rose from the dead. What accounts for their transformation into men willing to die for their message? It must have been a very compelling event to account for this.

Third, the Apostles began preaching the Resurrection in Jerusalem. This is significant since this is the very city in which Jesus was crucified. This was the most hostile city in which to preach. Furthermore, all the evidence was there for everyone to investigate. Legends take root in foreign lands or centuries after the event. Discrediting such legends is difficult since the facts are hard to verify. However, in this case the preaching occurs in the city of the event immediately after it occurred. Every possible fact could have been investigated thoroughly.

Anyone studying the Resurrection must somehow explain these three facts.

### ***Five Common Explanations***

Over the years five explanations have been used to argue against the Resurrection. We will examine these explanations to see whether they are valid.

***The Wrong Tomb Theory*** - Proponents of this first argument state that according to the Gospel accounts, the women visited the grave early in the morning while it was dark. Due to their emotional condition and the darkness, they visited the wrong tomb. Overjoyed to see that it was empty, they rushed back to tell the disciples Jesus had risen. The disciples in turn ran into Jerusalem to proclaim the Resurrection.

There are several major flaws with this explanation. First, it is extremely doubtful that the Apostles would not have corrected the women's error. The Gospel of John gives a very detailed account of them doing just that. Second, the tomb site was known not only by the followers of Christ but also by their opponents. The Gospels make it clear the body was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish council. If the body still remained in the tomb while the Apostles began preaching, the authorities simply would have to go to the right tomb, produce the body, and march it down the streets. This would have ended the Christian faith once and for all. Remember, the preaching of the Resurrection began in Jerusalem, fifteen minutes away from the crucifixion site and the tomb. These factors make this theory extremely weak.

***The Hallucination Theory*** - This second theory holds that the Resurrection of Christ just occurred in the minds' of the disciples. Dr. William McNeil articulates this position in his book, *A World History*. He writes; "The Roman authorities in Jerusalem arrested and crucified Jesus. . . . But soon afterwards the dispirited Apostles gathered in an upstairs room' and suddenly felt again the heartwarming presence of their master. This seemed absolutely convincing evidence that Jesus' death on the cross had not been the end but the beginning. . . . The Apostles bubbled over with excitement and tried to explain to all who would listen all that had happened."

This position is unrealistic for several reasons. In order for hallucinations of this type to occur, psychiatrists agree that several conditions must exist. However, this situation was not conducive for hallucinations. Here are several reasons. Hallucinations generally occur to people who are imaginative and of a nervous make up. However, the appearances of Jesus occurred to a variety of people. Hallucinations are subjective and individual. No two people have the same experience. In this case, over five hundred people (*1Corinthians 15*) have the same account. Hallucinations occur only at particular times and places and are associated with the events. The Resurrection appearances occur in many different environments and at different times. Finally, hallucinations of this nature occur to those who intensely want to believe. However, several such as Thomas and James, the half-brother of Jesus were hostile to the news of the Resurrection.

If some continue to argue for this position, they still must account for the empty tomb. If the Apostles dreamed up the Resurrection at their preaching, all the authorities needed to do was produce the body and that would have ended the Apostles' dream. These facts make these two theories extremely unlikely.

***The Swoon Theory*** - A third theory espouses that Jesus never died on the cross but merely passed out and was mistakenly considered dead. After three days He revived, exited the tomb, and appeared to His disciples who believed He had risen from the dead. This theory was developed in the early nineteenth century, but today it has been completely given up for several reasons.

First, it is a physical impossibility that Jesus could have survived the tortures of the crucifixion. Second, the soldiers who crucified Jesus were experts in executing this type of death penalty. Furthermore, they took several precautions to make sure He was actually dead. They thrust a spear in His side. When blood and water come out separately, this indicates the blood cells had begun to separate from the plasma which will only happen when the blood stops circulating. Upon deciding to break the legs of the criminals (in order to speed up the process of dying), they carefully examined the body of Jesus and found that He was already dead.

After being taken down from the cross, Jesus was covered with eighty pounds of spices and embalmed. It is unreasonable to believe that after three days with no food or water, Jesus would revive. Even harder to believe is that Jesus could roll a two-ton stone up an incline, overpower the guards, and then walk several miles to Emmaus. Even if Jesus had done this, His appearing to the disciples, half-dead and desperately in need of medical attention, would not have prompted their worship of Him as God.

In the 19th century, David F. Strauss, an opponent of Christianity, put an end to any hope in this theory. Although he did not believe in the Resurrection, he concluded this to be a very outlandish theory. He stated; “It is impossible that a being who had stolen half-dead out of the sepulcher, who crept about weak and ill, wanting medical treatment, who required bandaging, strengthening, and indulgence, and who still at last yielded to his sufferings, could have given the disciples the impression that he was a Conqueror over death and the grave, the Prince of life, an impression that would lay at the bottom of their future ministry.”

***The Stolen Body Theory*** - This fourth argument holds that Jewish and Roman authorities stole the body or moved it for safekeeping. It is inconceivable to think this a possibility. If they had the body, why did they need to accuse the disciples of stealing it? (*Matt. 28:11, 15*). In *Acts 4*, the Jewish authorities were angered and did everything they could to prevent the spread of Christianity. Why would the disciples deceive their own people into believing in a false Messiah when they knew that this deception would mean the deaths of hundreds of their believing friends? If they really knew where the body was, they could have exposed it and ended the faith that caused them so much trouble and embarrassment. Throughout the preaching of the Apostles, the authorities never attempted to refute the Resurrection by producing a body. This theory has little merit.

***The Soldiers Fell Asleep Theory*** - Thus far we have been studying the evidence for the Resurrection. We examined four theories used in attempts to invalidate this miracle. Careful analysis revealed the theories were inadequate to refute the Resurrection. The fifth and most popular theory has existed since the day of the Resurrection and is still believed by many opponents of Christianity. *Matthew 28:12-13* articulates this position.

*“When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money telling them, ‘You are to say, His disciples came during the night and stole Him away while we were asleep.’”*

Many have wondered why *Matthew* records this and then does not refute it. Perhaps it is because this explanation was so preposterous, he did not see the need to do so.

This explanation remains an impossibility for several reasons. First, if the soldiers were sleeping, how did they know it was the disciples who stole the body? Second, it seems physically impossible for the disciples to sneak past the soldiers and then move a two-ton stone up an incline in absolute silence. Certainly the guards would have heard something.

Third, the tomb was secured with a Roman seal. Anyone who moved the stone would break the seal, an offense punishable by death. The depression and cowardice of the disciples makes it difficult to believe that they would suddenly become so brave as to face a detachment of soldiers, steal the body, and then lie about the Resurrection when they would ultimately face a life of suffering and death for their contrived message.

Fourth, Roman guards were not likely to fall asleep with such an important duty. There were penalties for doing so. The disciples would have needed to overpower them. A very unlikely scenario.

Finally, in the *Gospel of John* the grave clothes were found "*lying there as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself separate from the linen*" (20:6,7). There was not enough time for the disciples to sneak past the guards, roll away the stone, unwrap the body, rewrap it in their wrappings, and fold the head piece neatly next to the linen. In a robbery, the men would have flung the garments down in disorder and fled in fear of detection.

### ***Conclusion: Monumental Implications***

These five theories inadequately account for the empty tomb, the transformation of the Apostles, and the birth of Christianity in the city of the crucifixion. The conclusion we must seriously consider is that Jesus rose from the grave. The implications of this are monumental.

First, if Jesus rose from the dead, then what He said about Himself is true. He stated, "***I am the Resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies***" (John 11:25). He also stated, "***I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no man comes to the father, but through Me***" (John 14:6). Eternal life is found through Jesus Christ alone. Any religious belief that contradicts this must be false. Every religious leader has been buried in a grave. Their tombs have become places of worship. The location of Jesus' tomb is unknown because it was empty; His body is not there. There was no need to enshrine an empty tomb.

Second, Paul writes in *1 Corinthians 15:54*, "***Death has been swallowed up in victory.***" Physical death is not the end; eternal life with our Lord awaits all who trust in Him because Jesus has conquered death.

© 1997 Probe Ministries

---

#### About the Author

Patrick Zukeran is a research associate, and a national and international speaker for Probe Ministries. He graduated from Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego, California, and holds a Th.M. from Dallas Theological Seminary. He served in the pastorate for ten years before joining the staff of Probe Ministries. He is the author of the book *Unless I See... Reasons to Consider the Christian Faith*. He can be reached via e-mail at [pzukeran@probe.org](mailto:pzukeran@probe.org).

---

What is Probe? Probe Ministries is a non-profit corporation whose mission is to reclaim the primacy of Christian thought and values in Western culture through media, education, and literature. In seeking to accomplish this mission, Probe provides perspective on the integration of the academic disciplines and historic Christianity. In addition, Probe acts as a clearing house, communicating the results of its research to the church and society at large. Further information about Probe's materials and ministry may be obtained by writing to:

Probe Ministries 1900 Firman Drive, Suite 100 Richardson, TX 75081 (972) 480-0240  
FAX (972) 644-9664 [info@probe.org](mailto:info@probe.org) [www.probe.org](http://www.probe.org) Copyright (C) 1996-2008 Probe Ministries