

*Luke 23:50–24:8, 36–43 (NIV)*

<sup>50</sup>Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, <sup>51</sup>who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea, and he himself was waiting for the kingdom of God. <sup>52</sup>Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body. <sup>53</sup>Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid. <sup>54</sup>It was Preparation Day, and the Sabbath was about to begin.

<sup>55</sup>The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it. <sup>56</sup>Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment.

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. <sup>2</sup>They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, <sup>3</sup>but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. <sup>4</sup>While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. <sup>5</sup>In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? <sup>6</sup>He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: <sup>7</sup>"The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again."<sup>8</sup> Then they remembered his words.

<sup>36</sup>While they were still talking about this [the disciples talking about the day's events], Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."

<sup>37</sup>They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. <sup>38</sup>He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? <sup>39</sup>Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have."

<sup>40</sup>When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. <sup>41</sup>And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" <sup>42</sup>They gave him a piece of broiled fish, <sup>43</sup>and he took it and ate it in their presence.

*Coming to faith in Jesus Christ is not a blind leap. There are good rational, evidence-based reasons for believing as we do.*

This week, we return to Luke's telling of the resurrection story, which we briefly examined at Easter. Then, we talked about the hope and the challenge that Easter presents to us all. Today, we are going to consider this account and the resurrection stories as a whole with one question in mind:

*Why should we think this actually happened?*

The Easter claim is really quite fantastical. We declare that after his death and crucifixion, Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee was bodily resurrected, not merely "resuscitated" and returned to his former life, but raised to newly embodied life that death can never touch. Think about it for a second; it's a pretty far-out. If a friend asked why you believe such a thing, what would you say?

Many of us would resort to something like the last line of a favorite Easter hymn: "I know that Jesus lives because he lives in my heart." That is a great and good thing, but it isn't likely to make much difference to your friend. She knows, as we all do, that experience is a very tricky thing. Are there not many devout Jews or Muslims who would describe a similar experience? Profound religious experiences have never been limited to any particular religious expression.

No . . . your friend wants more. Is there any reason outside your own experience for believing that Jesus was actually resurrected? "The Bible says so," you might interject. But there too, your friend doesn't view the Bible as God's sacred witness to the risen Christ but simply a collection of ancient writings, among many. You can't simply invoke the Bible.

What else could you tell your friend? Indeed, we could ask whether our own faith is anchored by anything more substantial than our own experience. So, let's take a look at the evidence for the resurrection. What supports our Easter claim?

There are four features of the Easter claims that virtually all historians accept as being true:

1. *After his crucifixion, Jesus of Nazareth was buried in a tomb belonging to a prominent Jewish leader, Joseph of Arimathea.*

We have four accounts of the resurrection events, all of which were written before the end of the first century. Though the accounts differ in some of the details, they all agree that Joseph of Arimathea provided the tomb. Because he was a member of the Jewish high council, he was a public figure and his role in the burial of Jesus would probably have been well known and easy to refute if it were not true.

2. *It is women who discover the empty tomb.*

This is a striking feature of, again, all four resurrection accounts. It is women who go to the tomb early on Sunday morning, find it empty, and run to tell others. The remarkableness of this is lost on us, because we are 21<sup>st</sup>-century people. Women in our world can vote, testify in courts, lead the country, and the rest. None of this was true in Jesus' day. Women weren't educated or allowed to lead public lives. They could not testify in the Hebrew law courts because women were deemed unreliable witnesses.

If a first-century person were going to fabricate accounts of Jesus' resurrection, they would never have the empty tomb found by women. Thus, nearly all New Testament scholars, believers and not, accept that it was women who were the first "eye-witnesses."

3. *The tomb was actually empty.*

Here again, all four gospel accounts are clear that the tomb was empty. Indeed, the claim of an empty tomb underlies everything that happened after that Sunday. But here's the thing: an empty tomb, by itself, isn't evidence of resurrection. Could someone not have taken the body of Jesus away? Perhaps Jesus didn't actually die, and was revived in the tomb. Of course, the problem with that answer is that it requires us to believe the rather ridiculous idea that the Roman execution squad failed at its job. But still, an empty tomb alone isn't good evidence of resurrection.

4. *Jesus' followers experienced meeting the resurrected Jesus.*

This statement sounds a claim of actual resurrection, but only says that followers believed that they had met the risen Christ. Three of the four gospels provide various stories of the resurrected Jesus and his followers. These accounts don't really try to make sense of what the disciples experienced; they just relate what happened: Jesus appeared in a closed room, he still had the marks of his crucifixion, he ate fish, he cooked a breakfast on the seashore, and so on. Paul claimed to have met the resurrected Jesus when the apostle was traveling to Damascus to round up Jesus-followers. Further, twenty years later, in a letter to the Corinthian Christians, who denied the truth of resurrection, Paul said that more than five hundred men and women had seen the resurrected Jesus and that most of them were still alive. The Corinthians could go ask them if Jesus was truly resurrected.

Skeptics usually chalk up these claims to some sort of hallucination or mystical experience. Of course, the ancients had words for ghosts and spirits of various sorts. The gospel writers are clear that these words do not describe Jesus after his resurrection. But still, virtually all scholars acknowledge that the disciples had such experiences. So, if resurrection-denial is your aim, then hallucination is usually the path taken.

The linchpin in the historical truth of resurrection all this is that we have *both* claims of an empty tomb and claims of meeting the resurrected Jesus. Either without the other would

make a very weak case – but *together*, these two widely accepted claims make a very reasonable case for the truth of the resurrection. One could explain away the empty tomb if that is all we had. Likewise, there are several possible explanations for the experience of meeting Jesus after his death. But put the two together, the empty tomb and the experience of meeting Jesus – and the actual resurrection of Jesus becomes the most plausible explanation of what happened.

N. T. Wright takes a brief look at the explanations for both an empty tomb and the disciples' experiences. You'll see why they all must be discarded, leaving resurrection as the most plausible explanation of the historical facts, as we know them:

1. Jesus didn't really die; someone gave him a drug which made him look like dead, and he revived in the tomb. Answer: Roman soldiers knew how to kill people, and no disciple would have been fooled by a half-drugged, beat-up Jesus into thinking he'd defeated death and inaugurated the kingdom.
2. When the women went to the tomb they met someone else (perhaps James, Jesus' brother, who looked like him), and in the half-light they thought it was Jesus himself. Answer: they would have noticed soon enough.
3. Jesus only appeared to people who believed in him. Answer: the accounts make it clear that Thomas and Paul do not come into this category; and actually none of Jesus' followers believed, after his death, that he really was the Messiah, let alone that he was in any sense divine.
4. The accounts we have are biased. Answer: so is all history, all journalism. Every photo is taken by somebody from some angle.
5. They began by saying 'he will be raised', as people had done of the martyrs, and this quickly passed into saying 'he has been raised' which was functionally equivalent. Answer: no, it wasn't.
6. Lots of people have visions of someone they love who has just died; this was what happened to the disciples. Answer: they knew perfectly well about things like that, and they had language for it; they would say 'it's his angel' or 'it's his spirit' or 'his ghost'. They wouldn't say 'he's been raised from the dead'.
7. Perhaps the most popular: what actually happened was that they had some kind of rich 'spiritual' experience, which they interpreted through Jewish categories. Jesus after all really was alive, spiritually, and they were still in touch with him. Answer: that is simply a description of a noble death followed by a Platonic immortality. Resurrection was and is the defeat of death, not simply a nicer description of it; and it's something that happens some while after the moment of death, not immediately.<sup>1</sup>

There are at least two other crucial pieces of evidence that bolster the Christian claims of resurrection.

First, the disciples so firmly believed in the truth of their resurrection claims that many of them died for it. Who among us is ready to die for a lie? The disciples acted on what they believed to be the truth and all of them were in a position to know the truth; namely, that God had raised Jesus of Nazareth to new life thereby vindicating all that Jesus had said and done.

Second, why is there a Christian faith at all? That seems like an odd question, but consider this. Our faith is built on the truth of the resurrection. If Jesus was not resurrected, then he died a failed would-be Messiah. The disciples had no expectation of a crucified Messiah, much less a resurrected Messiah. And yet they claimed that this one man had been resurrected. If they wanted to make a false claim, where would they even get the idea to claim that God had resurrected one person?

The Jews, and all of the disciples were Jewish, believed that when the Day of the Lord arrived, *everyone* would be resurrected. If the disciples wanted to "fake it" where would they get the idea to suggest one person was resurrected? Seems pretty far-fetched to me. They proclaimed Jesus' resurrection because they met Jesus themselves, not because they made up some story.

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, T. (2007). *Surprised by Hope* (pp. 72–73). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

Whole libraries of books have been written on this, but I hope this study has helped you see that there are very good reasons to believe that Jesus was resurrected as a matter of history – that it actually happened. You don't have to think that you are taking a blind leap over a huge cliff to proclaim that Jesus was resurrected . . . that he lives. Alleluia!

### How important is it that we believe in our own resurrection?

Because the Corinthian Christians denied the genuine resurrection of Jesus, they denied their own resurrection as well. The apostle Paul rightly understood that belief in resurrection, Jesus and our own, was the Corinthians' fundamental problem – that which underlay all their other problems. Part of the flabbiness of American Christianity in our time can be attributed to a loss of confidence in the doctrine of resurrection.

In his *Interpretation* series commentary on 1 Corinthians 15, Richard Hays of Duke Seminary reflects on the Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead, i.e., that not only has Jesus been resurrected, but that we too shall be resurrected just as Jesus was. (A copy of his commentary on 1 Corinthians is in the St. Andrew library.)

*All Christian proclamation must be grounded in the resurrection.* The faith stands or falls with this, as Paul insists throughout the chapter [1 Corinthians 15]. This has several crucial implications.

First, it means above all else that the gospel is a word of radical grace, for resurrection is one thing that we can neither produce nor control nor manipulate: our hope is exclusively in God's hands.

Second, it means that the faith is based on a particular event in human history, to which a definite circle of people gave testimony; the resurrection is not simply a symbol for the flowers coming up every spring or for the hope that springs eternal in the human heart. The Christian faith is grounded in the rising from the grave of Jesus Christ, who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.

Third, the foundational character of the resurrection means that eschatology is at the heart of the gospel. Because Christ is the first fruits, his resurrection points to the resurrection of all those who belong to him. That remains inescapably a future event. Thus, the effect of the resurrection of Christ is to turn our eyes to God's coming future.

Fourth, if we deny the resurrection, we will find ourselves turning inward and focusing on our own religious experience as the matter of central interest. That is what some of the Corinthians were doing, and it has also been the besetting temptation of Protestant theology since Schleiermacher. This inward turn can take the form of pietistic religion interested only in soul-saving, or it can take the form of "New Age" religion interested only in cultivating personal "spirituality." Either way it comes to much the same thing. The gospel of the resurrection of the dead, by contrast, forces us to take seriously that God is committed to the creation and that God has acted and will act in ways beyond our experience and external to our subjectivity.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Christians profess and proclaim that Jesus was resurrected on that weekend almost two thousand years ago. But, I wonder how many of us have ever stopped to think about why we believe that this actually happened? When, if ever, have you really considered *why* you are a Christian? How important to you was it that you believed the Christian claims about Jesus' resurrection are actually true? Did you believe because someone told you it was true? Did you believe because it was in the Bible? Did you ever think about it in the same way you thought about other events in history – Julius Caesar's assassination or George Washington's election as the first president of the USA?
2. What do you make of the evidence I presented in this study? Do you find it persuasive? Try putting in your own words the importance of the two claims – empty tomb and resurrection appearances – in substantiating the Christian claims. What do you find to be the most persuasive argument by skeptics who deny the resurrection of Jesus?

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, Matthew 27:57-66</b> Joseph of Arimathea asks for Jesus' body and helps to place it in his own tomb; a guard is placed outside the tomb.</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, Matthew 28:1-15</b> Matthew's account of the resurrection; the priests plant a lie about the theft of Jesus' body</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, John 20:1-18</b> John's resurrection account, including Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene</p>	<p><b>Thursday, John 21:1-14</b> Jesus cooks breakfast on the seashore for some of the disciples.</p>
<p><b>Friday, Acts 9:1-19</b> Paul is met by Jesus on the road to Damascus. This happens about three years after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.</p>	<p><b>Prayer List</b></p>

