

Was Jesus' Resurrection Real?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

5th in a six-part series

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Luke 24:36–43 (Common English Bible)

³⁶ While they were saying these things, Jesus himself stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” ³⁷ They were terrified and afraid. They thought they were seeing a ghost.

³⁸ He said to them, “Why are you startled? Why are doubts arising in your hearts? ³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet. It’s really me! Touch me and see, for a ghost doesn’t have flesh and bones like you see I have.” ⁴⁰ As he said this, he showed them his hands and feet. ⁴¹ Because they were wondering and questioning in the midst of their happiness, he said to them, “Do you have anything to eat?” ⁴² They gave him a piece of baked fish. ⁴³ Taking it, he ate it in front of them.

1 Corinthians 15:1–8, 17–20 (CEB)

Brothers and sisters, I want to call your attention to the good news that I preached to you, which you also received and in which you stand. ² You are being saved through it if you hold on to the message I preached to you, unless somehow you believed it for nothing. ³ I passed on to you as most important what I also received: Christ died for our sins in line with the scriptures, ⁴ he was buried, and he rose on the third day in line with the scriptures. ⁵ He appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the Twelve, ⁶ and then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at once—most of them are still alive to this day, though some have died. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me, as if I were born at the wrong time.

¹⁷ If Christ hasn’t been raised, then your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins, ¹⁸ and what’s more, those who have died in Christ are gone forever. ¹⁹ If we have a hope in Christ only in this life, then we deserve to be pitied more than anyone else.

²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead. He’s the first crop of the harvest of those who have died.

This is the question that precedes all others, for if Jesus was not resurrected then we are all wasting our time. But he was. Hallelujah!

Here it is plain and simple: The truth claims of Christianity stand or fall on our claim that Jesus of Nazareth was resurrected after his crucifixion. If it happened, then the world needs to hear and heed the Good News of Jesus Christ. If Jesus was not resurrected, then we Christians should be ignored. Indeed, if there was no resurrection then we need to close up shop and find something else to do.

Ok . . . but really . . . that important? Jesus was a wonderful, even unique, example to us all, showing us the way of love, peace, and justice. Isn’t it enough that we strive to be like him, to do what we think Jesus would do? Surely, his path of self-sacrifice is a powerful lesson to us all. Wouldn’t Christianity be fine if we let go of the oft-embarrassing claim that Jesus rose from his tomb and later ate some fish with his disciples? Do such claims have any place in our modern, science-driven world?

Yes . . . it really is that simple. The whole of the Christian faith rests on this claim of resurrection. And what a claim it is. Not merely that Jesus enjoys some sort of life after death, but that he was bodily raised from the dead to walk again, to eat again, to cook breakfast on a beach (John 21:1–14). It is a remarkable, wondrous, seemingly mad thing to claim. After all, we know, as all humans have known, that the dead stay dead. Right? It is just common sense. But sometimes common sense, logic, and our senses let us down. Just a read a bit about quantum reality and you’ll see what I mean.

It may surprise you to learn that such questions were on the table among the first believers in the decades after Jesus. In the mid-50's AD, the Apostle Paul sat down to write a pastoral letter to the believers in the port city of Corinth, Greece. The Corinthian Christians would probably say they were on fire for Jesus, but Paul knew that their enthusiasm was a mile wide and an inch deep. They prized certain spiritual gifts, such as speaking in tongues, above all else. They had mistakenly concluded that this new religion was all about the spirit, and that what they did with their bodies didn't matter. Their physical bodies would be left behind soon enough when their souls flew home to be with God. Sadly, in their fervid embrace of the "spiritual" they had come to an over-spiritualized sense of themselves and of the gospel. Sounds pretty much like the American landscape in the early 21st century.

But most astoundingly to Paul, they had even come to deny that, one day, all people would be resurrected just as Jesus had been resurrected. Paul knew that their denial of bodily resurrection¹ – and there is no kind of resurrection that isn't bodily; it is what the Greek word meant – underlay all the other mistakes they had made. Thus, all of Paul's lengthy letter to them, which we know as 1 Corinthians, builds to the climactic argument for Jesus' resurrection and our own in chapter 15.

So, we have this absolutely essential claim of Jesus' resurrection on which the whole of Christianity rests. What do we do with it? What do we really even mean? How do we make sense of it? Is there anything in the way of actual evidence to support the claim or does it require some sort of blind leap?

Resurrection?

What did Paul and the others mean by resurrection? The answer is straightforward. Resurrection was the passing through death to newly *embodied* life on the other side of death. Not becoming a ghost or one of Homer's shades or a spirit or anything else that lacks materiality. The Greeks had a word for resurrection, *anastasis*, though they knew that it didn't actually happen. The ghost of Achilles might show up but not Achilles in the flesh.

However, Jesus and many of his fellow Jews believed that when the long-awaited Day of the Lord arrived, the kingdom of God would be ushered in and all the dead would be resurrected – in the flesh. Not the same sort of flesh, but still material. Incorruptible, but still solid. A body that can touch and be touched. Saying "bodily resurrection" is redundant, for bodily is what resurrection means.

It is easy to get confused here, because this can sound a lot like what we call "resuscitation." Thus, sometimes, people mistakenly think of Jesus' resurrection as some sort of resuscitation. When Jesus brought Lazarus back to life (John 11), it was a "resuscitation," much like someone being brought back to life after dying on an operating table. Lazarus was brought back to life as he had known it and he went on to age and die just like everyone else. The same was true of all the others *brought back* to life in the Bible. They returned to their families and, hopefully, lived out a full and godly life. But Jesus was not *brought back* to life. Instead, he was *taken forward* to newly-embodied life, i.e., to resurrection.

To put it differently, Jesus was not restored to the life and to the body he had known. Rather, Jesus passed through death to new life. Jesus no longer had a "soulish" body (*soma psychikon* in the original Greek) but a "spiritish body" (*soma pneumatikon*), as Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 15:44. Bear in mind that Paul is not contrasting "material" and "non-material." What sort of body could even be called "non-material?"

¹The "big" book on the resurrection is N.T. Wright's, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. It is a massive volume with which anyone who wishes to deny the resurrection (or deny that it means bodily!) will have to contend for years to come. Another of Wright's books also deals with these subjects and is much more accessible to laypeople: *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*. I recommend it.

Jesus' resurrection appearances

In their stories about the risen Christ, the Gospel writers don't try to explain the nature of Jesus' resurrection; they simply relate what happened. Jesus was recognizable, though his appearance was slightly altered. He ate, but seemed to be able to pass through doors. His body was not the same sort of body he had before death; it was transformed into a new sort of body. But it was still a body, still material, still capable of eating broiled fish (Luke 24:26-43). Here's a list of the resurrection appearances recounted by the gospel writers and Paul:

- Jesus comes to two on the way to Emmaus (Mark & Luke)
- On the evening of his resurrection, Jesus comes to his own disciples (without Thomas) (Luke & John)
- A week later, Jesus meets with the disciples and Thomas (John)
- Jesus comes to the eleven at a table (Mark)
- Jesus meets with the eleven on a mountaintop (Matthew)
- Jesus cooks breakfast for his disciples on a seashore (John)
- Paul says that those who saw the resurrected Jesus include James, Peter, the rest of the twelve, 500 others, and Paul himself. (1 Corinthians 15)

The evidence

The place to begin is with the women who arrive and find Jesus' tomb empty on that Sunday morning in Jerusalem. Alarmed. Terrified. Amazed. Afraid. Those are the words that Mark uses to describe the reaction of the women to the empty tomb. Terror? You can be sure. I'm sure that each woman would have had trouble putting her frightful surprise into words. Some surprises are clearly occasions for joy, others for sadness. But sometimes, like the women's surprise on that Sunday morning, there is only confusion and anxiety and fear.

At first glance, none of this makes sense to us. We think to ourselves, it's Easter morning! Christ is risen! Alleluia! How could alarm and terror characterize the women's experience?

To understand their fear, there are a few things we need to keep in mind:

- Among first-century Jews, there was no expectation of a suffering, much less crucified, Messiah. The Messiah was to arrive in power and might and wonder and glory to cleanse the temple, expel the pagans, and usher in God's kingdom. The fact that Jesus ends up dead on a cross could only mean that he wasn't the Messiah. Wonderful and beloved rabbi, yes. Prophet, yes. But the Messiah could never meet such an end . . . or so everyone believed.
- And if there was no expectation of a dead Messiah, there couldn't be any expectation of a resurrected Messiah, or for that matter the resurrection of any single person until all were resurrected on the Day of the Lord. The ancients knew what we know; namely, until such a day comes, the dead stay dead.
- Thus, when the three women arrive and find the stone rolled away, their only thought would be that someone had beaten them to the tomb, either to take Jesus' body or to desecrate it.

Yet, despite all this, the disciples proclaimed to the world that Jesus of Nazareth, this crucified Nazarene, had been resurrected and, thus, was not the failure and disappointment that he had seemed on that Friday at Golgotha. Instead, he was what he claimed – God's Messiah and, indeed, the Lord God incarnate.

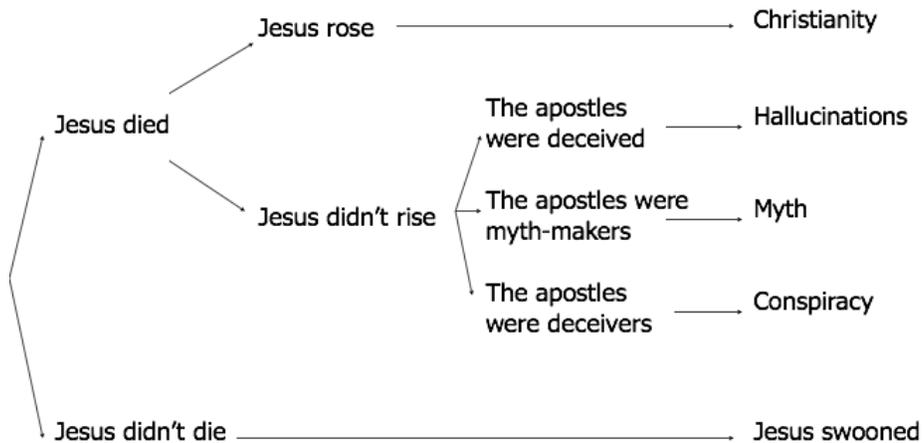
There are four facts that the vast majority (90% or so) of NT scholars and historians accept, though they do not all reach the same conclusion as to what they mean.

- *Jesus was buried in a tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea, as attested in all four gospels.* The burial story is part of the old material used by Mark, the first

gospel written and as a member of the Jewish court that condemned Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea is unlikely to be an invention of the Gospel writers. There is no other burial story. To think that Jesus didn't actually die is to assume that a Roman execution squad didn't know how to do its job. Fat chance. They stuck a spear in Jesus' just to be doubly sure he was dead.

- *Women discovered the empty tomb, as reported in all four gospels.* This story is also part of Mark's very old source material. If you were going to make this story up, you would *never* use women as witnesses. Women were not accepted as credible witnesses in first century Palestine and could not even be witnesses in a Hebrew Law Court.
- *On different occasions, at multiple times, people experienced appearances of Jesus alive from the dead.* Paul's claim in his first letter to the church in Corinth about there being 500 witnesses virtually guarantees that people experienced the risen Christ. There are multiple, differing stories of Jesus' various resurrection appearances. Virtually no NT scholar disputes that a number of people believed that they had seen the risen Christ. Thus, virtually all NT scholars who deny the historical truth of the resurrection end up relying on some version of mass hallucination to explain these experiences.
- *The original disciples believed that Jesus had risen from the dead – despite having every reason not to.* Their leader was dead – and there was NO first-century Jewish belief in a dying and rising Messiah. For Jews, the resurrection was about the restoration of all Israel, not the resurrection of any single person. Most importantly, why are there any Christians at all?? Unless Jesus' resurrection happened, this is a much harder question to answer than you might think. Where would have any of these Jews have come up with the idea of such a thing? And why would so many have died for it?

The following chart illustrates that there really aren't that many choices when it comes to what actually happened. Those who deny the claims of the early Christians have some explaining to do also.



from Kreeft & Tacelli, Handbook of Christian Apologetics, InterVarsity Press, 1994

Paul tells us the great truth that we can never forget – if Jesus was not resurrected, then we've believed a lie and are to be pitied for it. For if Jesus was not resurrected, there is no Christian gospel to be proclaimed. And we, alongside all humanity, still lie dead in our sin. Paul knows full well that without the resurrection, Jesus was just another failed would-be messiah executed by the Romans, no one's savior.

But God did raise Jesus! Yes, it is so. Truly. Hallelujah!!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Because the Christian claim that Jesus was bodily resurrected is so astounding and so counter to our own life experiences, many people are tempted to find a way around it. They want to build a Christian faith on a foundation of Jesus' "spiritual" resurrection and the disciples' "experiences" (read visions) of a risen Christ. Discuss why Jesus' bodily resurrection is so fundamental to our faith. Do you believe in Jesus' bodily resurrection? If so, why? What do we lose if we try to construct a Christianity without Jesus' bodily resurrection? Are we expected to accept the claims of Jesus' bodily resurrection in blind faith? The disciple "whom Jesus loved" looked in at the empty tomb and believed (John's gospel). What do we see when we look at the empty tomb?

2. The problem for many Christians isn't that they disbelieve in the resurrection of the body, but they simply don't know the Christian proclamation. They don't know that when we stand to say the Apostles' Creed each Sunday at St. Andrew, affirming our belief in the "resurrection of the body," that we are talking about our own bodies, not Jesus'. (The affirmation of Jesus' resurrection happens earlier in the creed). Why do you think that this has never been explained to so many Christians? Why would this claim about our resurrection have been so important to Paul? What are some reasons why the Corinthian Christians would have denied it? Is it just too fantastical? Is it because it is at odds with the idea that when we die our souls go off to heaven and that is the end of the story? How can we grow more comfortable with this Good News as it has been proclaimed for 2,000 years?

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>Monday, Ezekiel 37:1-14 The vision of the dry bones being knit back together – the restoration of Israel.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Daniel 12 Verse 3 is a promise of resurrection.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Mark 12:18-27 Sadducees challenge Jesus on the resurrection.</p>	<p>Thursday, Acts 17:16-34 Notice the proof Paul gives for his claims – that God raised Jesus from the dead.</p>
<p>Friday, 1 Corinthians 15 All of Paul's majestic chapter on resurrection. Give it some time over the weekend. Be careful with v. 44. Translators have had a difficult with the contrast. Just remember that Paul is not contrasting "material" and "non-material." It would be closer to hear "embodied soul" v. "embodied spirit."</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

