

The Certainty of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ

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The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead was the greatest of all miracles, and is, in itself, sufficient reason for believing in the existence of God. Furthermore, although the Kingdom of God is the theme of the whole Bible and is the hope of all Christians, it is the resurrection of Jesus Christ that is the foundation of that hope. Without the fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ there is no basis for the Christian's hope that they will be resurrected in the future (1 Cor. 15:16, 17).

It seems that the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is primarily in the form of three independently established facts:

1. The empty tomb
2. The appearances of Jesus three days after he had been entombed
3. The origin of Christianity

THE RELIABILITY OF THE WITNESSES

These three established facts are based on the certainty of the reliability of the witnesses; the third being also a matter of secular history. This reliability of witnesses factor is evident from the fact that Christians preach matters of a high moral nature which must be underpinned by their living up to those high standards. Therefore, they could not be party to the theft of Jesus' body from the tomb, or to creating some kind of hoax, which is tantamount to a performed lie.

1. The Empty Tomb

EVIDENCE THAT THE TOMB WAS ACTUALLY EMPTY

This evidence comes from the details that:

- a. Jesus' burial was well known to the public, and had a respected member of the Sanhedrin (the High Council), namely, Joseph of Arimathea actually laying the body in the tomb.
- b. If the account of the empty tomb was simply a hoax, then it is strange that male disciples were not the first witnesses to announce it. Instead, it is those whose testimony was treated as worthless, i.e. the women, who make the announcement.
- c. The disciples could not have believed in the resurrection if the body was still in the tomb.
- d. The disciples would not have preached about the resurrection in Jerusalem if it wasn't publically recognized by Jesus' enemies that the tomb was found to be empty.
- e. Jewish propaganda promoted the story that the disciples had stolen the body, and this story travelled far and wide (Matt. 28:11-15). This must mean an empty tomb, but Matthew is here refuting this false story.

FACTORS TO BE CONSIDERED CONCERNING JESUS' ENTOMBMENT

1. The Jewish Sanhedrin (High Council) feared that Jesus' disciples would **steal his body** and claim that he was resurrected. Because of this the Sanhedrin asked Governor Pilate for Roman soldiers to guard the tomb (Matt. 27:62-66). They were told that they must use their own guards, yet it is unknown whether these were Roman or Jewish temple guards.
2. Whether the soldiers were Roman or Jewish temple guards, they were very **well trained** and highly disciplined.
3. If the guards were Roman then the guarding procedure was for each man to defend 6 feet of ground, so there were probably **sixteen guards** assigned to Jesus' tomb, four in front of the entrance to the tomb and six to each side of it. So, twelve of the guards would sleep, while the four in front would keep watch. Every hour there was a rotation of the guards so that the four in front of the entrance were replaced and could then sleep. If they were Jewish temple guards they no doubt would have some procedure similar to that of the Romans.
4. If the guards were Roman then they were subject to Roman law, which required that if a prisoner escaped, then the **penalty** for the guard was death (Acts 12:18, 19).
5. Jewish tombs of that time had an entrance of 4.5 to 5ft high, so by calculation the estimated **weight of the stone would have been about 1.5 to 2 tons**. The stones were placed on a slight incline and held in place by a

6. wedge. When the wedge was removed the stone rolled slightly forward and covered the tomb and then it was sealed with the governor's seal. The **penalty for breaking the governor's seal** was death by upside down crucifixion – a more extremely painful and terrifying death than by normal crucifixion.

THE SCENE AT THE TOMB

With these factors in mind we now look at the resurrection account which also speaks of the Sanhedrin's concern that the disciples might claim that Jesus was resurrected, and the Sanhedrin's attempt to deal with this issue:

- ❖ “Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And behold, there was a **great earthquake**, for an **angel** of the Lord descended from heaven and came and **rolled back the stone** and sat on it. His appearance was **like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men.** But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for **he has risen**, as he said. Come, **see the place where he lay**. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you.” So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. And behold, **Jesus met them** and said, “Greetings!” And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there **they will see me.**”
¹¹While they were going, behold, **some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place.** And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers and said, “**Tell people, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’** And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and **keep you out of trouble.**” So they took the money and did as they were directed. **And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day”**
(Matt 28:2-15).

THE DISCIPLES COULD NOT HAVE STOLEN THE BODY

In bringing all the above details together we can see just how terribly flawed this Sanhedrin plan really was. Other authorities and people in general would immediately question this scenario with the following thoughts:

1. Why would the disciples even be interested in taking Jesus' body? They themselves were sceptical (Note: Thomas in particular). They had little faith in Jesus' prediction of his resurrection.
2. How could the disciples have got past the four watches of guards who would be determined to remain alert, prompted by their awareness of their incurring, if they were Roman, the death penalty in the event of a prisoner escape? If they were Jewish guards they still would receive a strong reprimand from their leaders. This would be a strong incentive to be watchful.
3. No disciple would purposely break the governor's seal and risk inverted crucifixion just to create a hoax.
4. If, by absolute fluke, these four guards did all fall asleep, how could the disciples move a 1.5 to 2 ton stone without waking them?
5. To use the excuse that all the guards had fallen asleep leads to the question of how the guards could possibly know that it was the disciples who took the body?
6. Simply, if even one guard was awakened he would have awoken the rest of the soldiers.

ONLY THE RESURRECTION CAN ACCOUNT FOR THE EMPTY TOMB

- The Bible record of this event is straight forward and completely unembellished, so indicating that the writers believed what they wrote about the empty tomb and Jesus' resurrection.
- Because the character of the witnesses is unimpeachable there is no chance that they would have considered creating any kind of hoax.
- The disciples were in a state of disappointment because they did not expect a Messiah who would die. So they seem to have lacked faith in Jesus' statements that he would be resurrected on the third day, and so giving them no motive to create a hoax.

- After Jesus had died the disciples would only think in terms of his resurrection as being “*on the last day*” in the future, as was the common Jewish belief. This again gave them no motive to create a hoax. They were certainly skeptical and didn’t expect the resurrection, as seen by the verbal expressions from the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, as well as Thomas who was totally skeptical.
- Because it is impossible that the disciples stole Jesus’ body or created a hoax, then to deny the resurrection of Jesus leaves an inexplicable mystery.

The Appearances of Jesus from Three Days after He Was Entombed

Jesus did not just appear to only one or two persons or on only a few rare occasions. He appeared to many hundreds of disciples and on numerous occasions. Paul encapsulates for us the magnitude of the witness to the resurrection of Jesus:

- ❖ “Now I handed on to you, among the first things [of the good news], what I also accepted: that Christ died with reference to our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he was seen by **Cephas**, then by **the twelve**. Afterward he was seen by **more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time**, of whom the majority are still alive, though some have fallen asleep [in death]. Then he was seen by **James**, then by **all the apostles**. Last of all he was seen also by **me**, as though to one born prematurely, but stillborn” (*1 Cor. 15:3-8*).

Cephas (Peter)

These appearances to Peter are only related by Paul who spent several weeks in Peter’s company (Gal. 1:18). Prior to Peter’s being convinced of Jesus’ resurrection Peter had been spiritually weak, yet from the time of his conviction he became energized as a major voice in the Christian movement. This could only be the case if his conviction about Jesus’ resurrection was genuine.

More than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time

For Paul to state this shows that he had contact with many of these because he stated that “*the majority are still alive*.” This is far too large a number of witnesses for them to be engaged in a hoax that would not soon be discovered.

James

Neither James nor his brothers originally believed in Jesus as the Messiah. Yet suddenly James appears in the record as a leader of Christians, in fact being one of the three “pillars” of the church in Jerusalem. So the appearance of Jesus to James must have made such an incredible impact on him, so that he realized that Jesus had been resurrected. This appearance to James whilst he was an unbeliever is a very strong proof of the reality of Jesus’ resurrection.

All the apostles

Because “the twelve” are already mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:5, this phrase “all the apostles” must be referring to the apostles in the broadest, but secondary sense. This may have been a very large body of people and so giving a powerful witness to the fact of the resurrection.

Paul

As Saul, Paul had been the greatest persecutor of the disciples, yet suddenly he believes that Jesus was resurrected and is the Messiah. This makes no sense unless the resurrection was a fact. From his conversion Paul makes drastic changes in his life so that he now becomes one who is persecuted and threatened with death.

So for the resurrection to have been mere legend would require many more generations before it was set in writing so that even two generations is too short a time span to allow legendary tendencies to wipe out the hard core of historic facts, according to professional historian Sherwin-White regarding the resurrection of Jesus.

2. The Origin of Christianity

It is clear that Christianity took shape in the 1st century and exists in its various forms today. So what could possibly have triggered this amazing phenomenon that increased its number of members at such a tremendous rate that it alarmed the authorities of the time? The only answer is that of the claim of the reality that Jesus was the Messiah who had died and had been resurrected from among the dead.

However, the Jews had no concept of a dying Messiah, and certainly not of one who would rise from the dead at a time before the general resurrection. Indeed, in spite of its Jewish background, Christianity is unique because of its history of a dying and rising again Messiah, and these views were not because of any influence from Jewish authorities. In fact, in early times the Christians were looked upon extremely negatively by both the Jews and the Roman authorities, often leading to their persecution. So it was not an easy thing for one to become or to remain a Christian, that is, one who proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus. It is therefore impossible that such suffering disciples would remain on such a life-course if it was all a hoax or some legend.

In the book of Acts we find the record of the persecutions that Paul suffered. Furthermore his own writings give a glimpse of his sufferings as he continued throughout his life to preach Jesus' resurrection in spite of this intense persecution, and often at the risk of his life. Why would he do this unless he was convinced of the reality of that resurrection?

Summary

On the Sunday morning three days after Jesus had been executed by the Roman authorities and later placed in a tomb by the High council member, Joseph of Arimathia, the tomb was empty—the massive stone had been rolled back. The possibly 16 guards commissioned to watch over it were shocked because it seemed impossible for anyone to have removed that stone, both because of their watchful eye under pain of death and because of the sheer weight of such a stone.

Nevertheless, the record shows that after a severe earthquake an angel had rolled the stone away from the tomb entrance (Matt. 28:2). When these guards reported to the Jewish high officials all that had happened, including the fact that that Jesus' body was not in the tomb, these officials began a cover-up with a concocted story that the disciples had stolen Jesus' body. Such a story was impossible because of the many reasons that the disciples were not, at that time, motivated to proclaim a resurrected Messiah. Neither were the disciples physically capable of getting past the guards, even if there were just a couple of such disciples. Furthermore, just a couple of them would not be able to easily roll away the stone.

The now resurrected Jesus appeared to his disciples over a period of almost 6 weeks and on various occasions to many hundreds of people, changing their lives forever, so that they were willing to be persecuted and even die for their conviction the Jesus had been resurrected. Both James and Paul were unbelievers prior to them being confronted by the resurrected Jesus. Clearly only the fact of the resurrection would have moved them to do the things they did after such a confrontation.

Additionally, the very existence of Christianity today and the fact of its origin in the first century also provide evidence for the truth that Jesus, the Messiah was resurrected.

SUGGESTED READING

The Historical Jesus ... James H. Charlesworth

Apologetics—An Introduction ... William Lane Craig

www.biblicaltruthseekers.co.uk

