

EVIDENCE FOR THE RESURRECTION

I CORINTHIANS 15:14-17

And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up - if in fact the dead do not rise. For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!

Pretend you picked up this morning's paper, and found the following report, "DATELINE JERUSALEM.

In the aftermath of the annual celebration of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, this city was shocked by the announcement that a decomposed body identified as that of Jesus, was found in a long-neglected tomb. Rumors circulated last week that a very important discovery was about to be announced.

Initial reaction of Christians here and around the world has been one of astonishment and bewilderment. We will have to wait and see just what effect this discovery will have on the 2,000-year-old religion. But it appears that Christianity can no longer claim that, unlike other religions, the tomb of its founder is empty. A 2,000-year-old lie has come to an end."

Obviously, this is a fictitious story. Jesus is alive and well. Jesus of Nazareth has risen from the dead!

We sensed His presence here this morning!

But what if this report did prove reliable? Paul tells what would happen - instantly our *faith* would become *futile*. All we've staked our life on would collapse.

Without the resurrection, there'd be no Christianity.

Our faith would crumble like a house of cards!

Christianity is an *empty religion* without the *empty tomb!* It's the resurrection of Jesus that makes Christianity worthy of belief - that marks it as the *only option for the objective mind*. It's His resurrection that's drawn people through the centuries to embrace Christ.

The resurrection of Jesus sets Christianity apart from all other religions. No one has ever duplicated His feat.

Jesus rose from the dead never to die again - an unparalleled event in the history of human affairs.

In John 2:18, the Jews asked Jesus, "What sign do you show to us...?" Jesus answered..."Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

Then the Jews said, "It has taken forty-five years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?" But He was speaking of the temple of His own body. Therefore, when He had risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that he had said this to them..."

Jesus had predicted His resurrection in advance.

More than once in the Gospels, Jesus told His disciples He was going to Jerusalem to be killed, but on the third day, He would rise again. By saying so, He hinged His identity and credibility to His resurrection!

Realize, Jesus was more than a clever philosopher or a moral teacher. He was Lord over time and space.

And He offered His resurrection as ultimate proof!

Jesus claimed to be the Son of God - to hold the keys to life and death. On a spring morning, 1,987 years ago, at a tomb outside Jerusalem, He proved it!

Over the centuries, countless religious leaders have promised their disciples eternal life. *Buddha taught the way to Nirvana... Mohammed promised a place of wine, women, and merriment... Scores of philosophers have provided ethical teachings to their followers...*

In addition, religions galore evoke subjective experiences for their adherents. Transcendental goosebumps are as common as sliced bread.

Jesus also *promises eternal life, provides moral guidance, and provokes spiritual experiences*. But here's the difference - Jesus went significantly, decisively, and uniquely farther than anyone else has gone. He didn't just expect us to take Him at His word. He dared to base His claims on historically, verifiable facts.

Christianity is what the historian calls **falsifiable** - it can be proven or refuted. It's subject to the scrutiny of inquiring minds. Jesus tied everything He taught and claimed to a historical event - **His resurrection**.

Philosophies and metaphysics can hide behind subjective criteria. *Who can argue with an experience?*

Say you worship azalea bushes... You pray to the Great Azalea in your front yard. You say, "*Life is more colorful since*

I trusted in the Great Azalea.” I think you're a *blooming idiot*, but it's my word against yours.

Yet, Christianity doesn't hinge itself to metaphysical boasts. If Jesus' resurrection was a *lie* or just *the ruminations of ecstatic followers*, or even a *carefully crafted ruse*...it would've easily been refuted. Just produce the body of Jesus and Christianity disappears.

If death and the grave had held Jesus in its clutches, His whole life and ministry would've become suspect.

If Jesus had gone the way of other men, He would've been branded a liar - drifted into obscurity - become just another Israeli imposter and false messiah.

I'm a follower of Jesus not because He makes me feel good, *though He does!* Nor because He's given me love and peace, *though He has!* Not even because Jesus has forgiven me of my sin and promised me eternal life, *though I'm trusting in that promise!*

No, the *bottom line of my belief* is that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead! I'm too stubborn a guy to turn my life over to someone for anything less, *but how can you deny a man who has conquered death and the grave?*

Such a person can only be *God!* The resurrection substantiated forever that Jesus Christ is Lord. His words are true and His promises are forever certain!

Two decades after the resurrection, *Paul stood in a theater at Caesarea before the Roman Governor, Festus, and Jewish King, Agrippa, to testify of Jesus.*

He told them the Hebrew Prophets had foretold Messiah would die and live again. But when Governor Festus heard the term “**resurrection**”, he accused Paul of insanity. *Paul wasn't playing with a full deck.*

Ancient paganism said you had to be mad to make such a claim. The Romans believed in the afterlife but never in the literal resurrection of a physical body.

By the way, have you noticed every Easter the pseudo-History Channel airs some program that claims the doctrine of the resurrection was borrowed from pagan mythology? *They suggest the resurrection of Jesus was the invention of an overzealous Church...*

That's just not true!

Festus was a Roman steeped in ancient paganism and he considered the notion of a resurrection as silly.

The message of the resurrection gave the Church zero advantage in the ancient world. Rather than endear them to contemporary thought, it set them at odds... The only reason a person of antiquity would believe in the notion of a resurrection **is if it were true.**

Governor Festus was fresh off the boat from Rome, but the Jewish King Agrippa had been in Jerusalem when the story broke. He was privy to the evidence.

In Acts 26, Paul calls him out, “**For the king knows these things; for I am convinced that none of these things escape his attention since this thing was not done in a corner.**” Agrippa would have to be living under a rock not to have heard about the resurrection of Jesus. The Lord staged His

greatest miracle in plain view. The news was all over town. *The tomb was empty.*

And no reasonable explanation had surfaced for this event *other than Jesus was alive.* In fact, for forty days, Jesus-sightings had become common occurrences.

Paul challenged King Agrippa and the crowd that day in Caesarea to examine the evidence. Investigate! And his challenge has echoed through the ages...

Dr. Frank Morrison, a rationalist lawyer, accepted that challenge and set out to prove that Christianity was a hoax - that the resurrection of Jesus had never really occurred. He wrote a book, *"Who Moved The Stoned."*

But the title of the first chapter of Morrison's book read, *"The Book That Refused To Be Written."*

In his quest to refute the resurrection, Morrison came to an unexpected conclusion. After closely considering the evidence, he realized the resurrection of Jesus Christ was true - and he converted to Christianity.

Dr. Simon Greenleaf, a renown professor of Law at Harvard University, was an expert in laws of evidence.

He too examined the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus and found more legitimate legal evidence for the resurrection than for any other event in history!

Today, I want **us** to take on Paul's challenge and examine the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus.

Is there a convincing, compelling case for the claim that Jesus is alive - *or is His resurrection from the dead just a*

cruel hoax? Could the case for the resurrection stand up in a courtroom - under the pressure of cross-examination - and the scrutiny of skeptical minds?

I'm convinced it can! The evidence is overwhelming.

This morning, I want to offer two pieces of principle evidence - then I'll support the *principle evidence* with numerous examples of *circumstantial evidence*.

The principal evidence is... **Exhibit A: the empty tomb**, and **Exhibit B: the numerous eyewitnesses**.

EXHIBIT A: The empty tomb.

In Luke 24:1-3 we're told, "On the first day of the week, very early in the morning...certain...women, came to the tomb bringing...spices which they had prepared. But they found the stone rolled away from the tomb. Then they went in and did not find the body of the Lord Jesus." There are many famous burial sites in the world that attract thousands of visitors: *the Pyramids of Giza, the Taj Mahal, Westminster Abbey, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the Tomb of Cyrus*.

But each of these cemeteries is famous for what they contain. *The most renowned tomb in the world, visited by the most people*, is famous for what it doesn't contain. The Garden Tomb in Jerusalem is the most famous tomb because it is an empty tomb.

And yet people ask, "*How do we know the empty tomb proves Jesus is risen? Perhaps there's another explanation?*" Throughout the years, skeptics have offered a whole smorgasbord of fanciful, fictitious theories as to what

happened to the body of Jesus. The problem though is that none of them fits the facts.

For example, there's the **Wrong Tomb Theory...**

The women just went to the wrong tomb - saw a shroud, but no body - and assumed Jesus had risen.

A number of years ago Kathy and I traveled to Ft. Lauderdale, FL where she grew up. Kathy wanted to visit her father's grave. He died when she was ten years old. We drove to a large, open graveyard where there were *no tombstones, just ground-level markers.*

Though it'd been 20 years since she'd been there, Kath knew the exact spot where her dad was buried!

To me, it's demeaning and preposterous to suggest that these faithful women, who dearly loved Jesus; had in just three days, forgotten His body's whereabouts...

Besides, the grave was the property of a wealthy Jew, Joseph of Arimathea. It was well known real estate in Jerusalem. *Had he forgotten his own grave?*

The Jews and Romans posted guards at the grave. *Could they not recall where they'd been dispatched?*

Surely, if the disciples went to the wrong grave when they started preaching the resurrection, their enemies would've uncovered their mistake by just presenting the body. They didn't, because Jesus was alive!

But there's another theory - the **Swoon Theory...**

Some skeptics say Jesus didn't really die. He just fainted, fell unconscious. The disciples *thought* He was dead. When they took Him off the cross, they put Him in a cool, damp tomb where the chilly air revived Him...

The religion of Islam was an early perpetrator of this myth. The Koran suggests Jesus just pretended to be dead. He feigned death... Similar theories suggest that Jesus was drugged and appeared dead - yet wasn't.

Again, all these ideas fly in the face of the facts.

Nobody debates Jesus was *crucified* - and realize the point of crucifixion was always execution.

Professionals oversaw this operation. **Killing was their job. The spear they thrust through Jesus' ribcage was to make His death certain. *Out came blood and water.* A spear through a lung and the heart ensures one's death.** There's no back-up for a perforated heart.

And nobody drugged the Savior - though they tried.

The Bible says the executioners offered a narcotic to deaden His pain - which Jesus refused. He bore the full brunt of sin's punishment. The Savior was sober.

Recall too that Jewish burial required dressing the corpse with as much as a hundred pounds of spices, then wrapping it in tightly wound strips of cloth.

So you tell me, how does a man suffer severe blood loss, the trauma of torture, a ruptured heart, and the suffocation of burial - only to awake three days later, free himself from the shroud and spices, walk on impaled feet, pop His shoulders back into joint, tack up His internal organs - and with heavily

damaged hands move a two-ton stone, fight trained Roman troops; then be in a such condition as to impress His disciples?

Believe that, and I've got some swampland I would like to sell you! It takes more faith to believe Jesus didn't die and rise than to believe that He did!

A third explanation for the empty tomb is the **Hallucination Theory**... That the resurrection of Jesus was just the result of the disciples' wishful thinking.

His followers simply saw what they wanted to see...

But have you read the Gospels? For a hallucination to occur, there has to be some prior anticipation. These disciples had no expectation of a resurrection. They even doubted the first reports that He was alive...

When the women came with the news, **Peter and John ran to the tomb to see for themselves and left still with their doubts. Thomas refused to believe until He saw the scars in Jesus' hands and in His side.**

Again, hallucination requires an expectation to plant the suggestion. The disciples had no such anticipation.

In addition, Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15 that 500 eyewitnesses saw Jesus alive at the very same time.

Understand, hallucination is a private phenomenon.

A group the size of 500 people don't all freak out simultaneously and entertain the same illusion.

A fourth theory is the **Legend Theory**...

This is the idea that the resurrection of Jesus was a legend that developed over time. Stories about Jesus passed from mouth to mouth - and as they did they were embellished until they became mythological.

Of course, if this were true, it would mean the New Testament had been written years after the fact - in the third or fourth century AD perhaps - late enough so that no one who had lived at the time of Jesus would be around to refute the author's exaggerated assertions.

But the truth is, all the New Testament could've been written within 30 years of what it reports. We have New Testament fragments dating back to 120 AD and quotations from even earlier. The New Testament was written at a time when the eyewitnesses were alive and could have either refuted or validated its claims.

Trust me, they could've even been cross-examined. If an event like the resurrection were not true, the New Testament would've been quickly shot down as false.

And the granddaddy of all cover-ups was the **Stolen Body Theory**...*the first false explanation for the empty tomb*. It was posed just hours after Jesus' resurrection.

Matthew 28:11 tells us, "Some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened. When they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a large sum of money (hush money) to the soldiers saying, 'Tell them, His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.'" What a preposterous statement!

It's contradictory. *If the soldiers slept, how did they know it was the disciples who stole the body?* What lawyer wouldn't love to cross-examine that testimony?

Besides, these soldiers would never have slept on duty. A legionnaire would lose his life for botching an assignment. And tell me, which of the disciples was brave enough to risk his life to slip behind a Roman battalion - sixteen soldiers strong - move a two ton stone - and then walk off with the body? *The night before, these men had already proven their cowardice.*

They had bailed on Jesus when He needed them most. When Jesus rose from the dead, the disciples were behind closed doors afraid they would be next.

And if the men who followed Jesus had lied about the resurrection what would've been their motive?

Because they believed in Jesus' resurrection, they lived the rest of their lives in poverty and obscurity.

They were persecuted to the point of death... **Peter** was crucified upside down in Rome. **Andrew** was crucified on an X-shaped cross. **James** was beheaded. **Thomas** preached in India and was impaled on a spear. **Bartholomew** was skinned alive in Armenia.

All the disciples, but John, died a martyr's death for the Gospel... Here's my point, a person might lie for money, or fame, or status - *if they became a millionaire as a result of their belief in the resurrection, then there would be a motive* - but no one submits to torture and ultimately death for what they know to be a hoax.

Chuck Colson, the former hatchet-man for President Richard Nixon, remembers the Watergate Scandal and how quickly the president's chief allies distanced themselves from Nixon to save their own skin...

Colson compares Nixon's aides to the disciples, "The most powerful men around the American president couldn't keep a lie for three weeks. And you'd have me believe the apostles - powerless, persecuted, exiled, many martyred, their leader Peter crucified upside down - common men, gave their lives for a lie, without even breathing a word to the contrary? Impossible."

The only explanation for the empty tomb - **that fits the facts** - is the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the grave. Only one person could've moved the stone and that was Jesus Himself! *But let's also look at Exhibit B.*

Exhibit B: The numerous eyewitnesses.

Not only does Jesus' empty tomb prove His resurrection, even more impressive was the multitude of eyewitnesses that testified of seeing the risen Christ.

The Gospels speak of the women at the tomb, Mary Magdalene, Peter, two men on the Road to Emmaus, the eleven disciples minus Thomas, later the disciples plus Thomas, then seven disciples who ate breakfast with Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee...

The book of Acts tells us that for forty days after His resurrection Jesus "presented Himself alive...by many infallible proofs." For six weeks, He kept dropping in on His disciples. Jesus was alive and never out of touch.

Paul adds to the list of eyewitnesses here in 1 Corinthians 15:6, "He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present..." In other words, most of them are still alive and kicking. Essentially, he's saying, "If you don't believe me here are some addresses - look them up!"

Realize, if you brought a group of 500 people into a courtroom and each person spent just 10 minutes on the witness-stand their collective testimony would take 83 hours. Just two or three corroborating witnesses will send a person to jail. The resurrection's day in court would've proven to be the most lopsided trial in history!

Notice too, that none of the eyewitness reports were staged or scripted. In fact, the first person Jesus appeared too was Mary, a woman. This would never have happened if the disciples were fabricating a hoax.

Women in Jewish culture were considered unreliable witnesses. They were thought to be too emotional. Even the disciples didn't believe Mary at first.

Nothing about any of the eyewitness reports even hints of a conspiracy. In fact, the testimonies were so diverse and random it would be impossible for the most skilled attorney to discredit their conclusion.

There are several ways though that an attorney will try to discredit an eyewitness... First, he tries to prove he or she has a motive to lie. We've already noted this wasn't the case with the followers of Jesus. They were *persecuted* for what they preached - *not rewarded*.

The second way you cast doubt on an eyewitness' testimony is to prove what they saw was an illusion or a hallucination... a figment of their imagination.

And the resurrected Christ was careful to leave behind evidence that He was more than an apparition...

He invited Thomas to touch His scars... The women grabbed hold of His feet and worshipped Him... Jesus even ate and digested fish by the seashore... It was obvious to the disciples that the Jesus Who appeared to them was not a ghost or a vision. He had a real body.

Psychologists also tell us there are certain conditions under which a hallucination is prone to occur - *none of which were true of Jesus' post-resurrection sightings.*

First, a person who hallucinates is usually prone to a vivid imagination and is emotionally excitable. Of the eyewitnesses of the resurrection, you might say that of the women, but not *hard-headed fishermen!* Or a *pragmatic tax-collector.* Or a *militaristic zealot.* Yet, these were the disciples who died for their testimony.

Second, a hallucination is a subjective experience. It's highly personal. It's unlikely two people would have the same hallucination at the same time. Yet Paul tells us 500 people saw the risen Christ simultaneously.

Third, environmental factors often contribute to a hallucination - *dim lighting, a relaxed mood, muted colors and sounds...* But Jesus appeared in a variety of settings - *to women in the morning - to men on the road in the afternoon - to the disciples at night - both indoors and outdoors - by a road, by a lake, in a house.*

Fourthly, a person who hallucinates usually repeats it at some other time in their life. Yet the disciples' sightings of Jesus lasted for forty days, then ceased.

Fifth, and we mentioned this earlier, for a hallucination to occur there needs to be some kind of anticipation. A mother sits on her porch and waits for her son to come home as he's done so in the past, even though her son died several months previously. This is the type of person who hallucinates.

But the folks who saw the risen Jesus were shocked. There was no expectation. The women were coming to the tomb to anoint His corpse. The disciples thought they'd seen a ghost. Thomas was so skeptical when told the news Jesus had risen, he refused to believe it until he'd seen for himself and touched His scars.

Paul too was a hostile witness. When he saw Jesus, he was on his way to kill Christians. He certainly didn't expect to meet the person he was persecuting. All the eyewitness sightings of the risen Christ were legit.

In fact, if you were on trial and the prosecution put this kind of case together against you, you would want to plea bargain - *you'd know you wouldn't have a chance!*

And not only does the Bible testify of the resurrection of Jesus, there are also secular sources that do the same.

Roman citizens named **Tacitus**, **Pliny the Younger**, the historian **Suetonius** - even the **Jewish Talmud** make reference to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

Josephus, a Jewish historian, on the Roman payroll, wrote this, “Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man; for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and Gentiles.

He was Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us, condemned him to the cross, those that loved him did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day... and the tribe of Christians, named from him, are not extinct at this day.” This was from the pen of a non-Christian.

And yet, along with the empty tomb and eyewitness testimonies, there’s additional, circumstantial evidence we could consider. For starters, what explains **the transformation that occurred among the disciples?**

Overnight, they went from *wimps to bold witnesses*.

They challenged the very men who crucified Jesus - the priestly hierarchy. *And what was their message?* Their rallying cry was the resurrection of Jesus Christ!

Think too of **the birth of the Church.**

What provoked the first Jewish believers to leave their Jewish moorings - forsake the Mosaic Law - *and trust in Jesus as the way to God?* Nothing less than His bodily resurrection could've uprooted their tradition.

And what about **the New Testament.**

It was based on the reality of the resurrection. Do you think it's possible the world's all-time bestseller was based on an event that never actually happened?

And why **do we worship on Sunday?**

This is no small matter. For 1400 years, God's people were Saturday worshippers. Why suddenly change to Sunday? What could provoke this dramatic change? It's because Jesus rose from the dead on a Sunday.

And last, but certainly not least, look at **the millions of changed lives down through the centuries...**

No one in the history of mankind has come close to influencing more people than Jesus of Nazareth. His work is not the effort of a dead man. Obviously, based on His unceasing activity, Jesus is alive and well!

Thomas Arnold, a professor of History at Oxford University, summed it up, **"No one fact in the history of mankind... is proved by better and fuller evidence...than the fact *"Christ died and rose from the dead."***

In the early 1920s, on the heels of the Bolshevik Revolution, a communist proponent was sent from Moscow to Kiev to lead an anti-God rally. For an hour, he abused the Christian faith. He mocked and ridiculed every truth Christ died for and that Christians cherish.

When he was done, he opened it up for questions.

One Orthodox priest asked to speak. He turned to the crowd, and in his best liturgical speech, he shouted the

ancient Easter greeting, "Christ is Risen." Everyone rose to their feet, and responded, "He is risen indeed!"

One fact stood in the way of the atheistic propaganda that day and that was the resurrection of Jesus. It's been said, "The resurrection of Jesus stands fast as a fact, unaffected by the waves of skepticism that ceaselessly through the ages beat against it."

The evidence is in and the verdict is certain - "Jesus is risen!" God, the author of Christianity, made a daring move. He placed all His eggs in one basket. *He played the devil winner take all.* God staked everything on one miraculous event... If Jesus had failed to rise again, He could be ignored and ridiculed. But if He succeeded, He wins the right to rule our hearts forever!

The resurrection of Jesus is the most decisive event in human history. *It made Judaism obsolete and defeated paganism...it transformed and energized defeated disciples... it eventually conquered the Roman Empire...and changed the scope of history since...and it will continue to alter lives for ages to come...*

If Jesus' physical body decomposed in Jerusalem dirt or was eaten by wild dogs, *Christianity is a crock...*

Yet, if the **resurrection** is true, then the risen Lord Jesus will decide your eternal destiny! *I hope you'll believe!* You don't want to trifle with the Master of the universe who holds the keys to life and death.

Saint Augustine wrote of the risen Christ, "He rose from the grave and departed from our sight that we might return to our

heart and there find Him. For He departed, and behold, He is here.” Jesus the Christ came out of the *empty tomb* to inhabit our *empty heart*.

To spurn this truth is to deny Him His rightful place!

It's to deny Jesus the spoils of His victory. *Is it any wonder the punishment for unbelief is so severe?*

If God was going to visit us, can you think of a more convincing way for Him to reveal His identity than to overcome death? **Don't miss the obvious!** Jesus has risen from the dead. Don't keep Him on the outside of your life looking in! Open your heart to Him today!