

RISEN, REIGNING, AND RETURNING

1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-8

Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you - unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all He was seen by me also...

When I coached Little League baseball, there were times when we all got caught up in the excitement and took it too seriously. I always felt that as the coach, part of my job was to try and keep the right perspective.

In those moments I'd say, "Boys, it's just a game. This isn't brain surgery. Baseball isn't life and death." ...*Unless of course the Braves are playing the Mets...*

Yet Christianity IS life and death! In our text Paul sums up what the Bible refers to as "the Gospel": "Christ died for our sins... was buried... rose again the third day... and was seen..." Jesus died by crucifixion. He was buried in an identifiable tomb. Then the exact same body, marked by the scars of His crucifixion, came back to life three days later... Christianity isn't a game, or a mere religion, **it is life and death.**

Christianity is what the historians call **falsifiable**. It's a belief open to objective scrutiny and investigation.

Mere philosophies and metaphysical beliefs can hide behind subjective criteria. *Who can argue with an experience?* Say you worship azalea bushes. You pray to the Great Azalea in your 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 on metaphysical boasts. If Jesus' resurrection was an outright lie, or the imaginations of ecstatic followers, or even a carefully crafted ruse... it would've easily been refuted. Just produce the body of Jesus and Christianity disappears.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:17, "If Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!" The OT predicted, and Jesus foretold, that He would suffer; then die;

then rise the third day. He said to the mourners at Lazarus' grave, "I am the resurrection and the life." Jesus claimed power over life and death!

If the grave had held Jesus He would not be *Savior and Lord*, but *sinner and liar*. Jesus tied all His claims to historically verifiable events occurring in real time.

Christianity isn't a mystery religion that revolves around secret societies, or clandestine meetings, or cryptic codes, *Oh no...* Christianity was born on the evening news. It came to life on Jerusalem streets.

Two decades after the resurrection, Paul stood in a theater at Caesarea before the Roman Governor and the Jewish King Agrippa to testify of Jesus. He said the Prophets foretold Messiah would die and live again.

But when the new governor, Festus, heard Paul say, "resurrection," he accused him of insanity. "Paul, you're not playing with a full deck!" Ancient paganism held that only a madman would make such a claim. Roman religion believed in a vague version of the afterlife, but not in a literal resurrection of a physical body.

By the way, have you noticed how every Easter the pseudo-History Channel airs a program that claims the doctrine of the resurrection was borrowed from pagan mythology? They usually suggest the resurrection was an invention of an overzealous Church. **But that's just not true!** Festus was a Roman steeped in ancient mythology and he considered the idea of resurrection as silly. The message of the resurrection gave the early Church *zero advantage* in its culture. Rather than endear them to the world, it put them at odds. The only reason for faith in the resurrection is that it was true.

Festus was fresh off the boat from Rome, but the Jewish King Agrippa had been in town 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 had been living under a rock if he hadn't heard of Jesus' resurrection. His greatest miracle was staged in plain view. News was all over town. The tomb was empty. And no *reasonable* explanation has ever been offered other than a miracle. In fact, for the next forty days, Jesus-sightings were common occurrences.

The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth was an event of gigantic proportion. It *shook the Jews, energized the disciples, conquered an Empire, changed a world, and altered ages to come*. If Jesus' physical body decomposed in Jerusalem dirt or was eaten by wild dogs, Christianity is a crock... But if the **resurrection** is true; then Jesus will decide *everyone's* eternal destiny. *Everything rides on the resurrection of Jesus!*

Of course, over the centuries enemies of Christianity have mustered alternative theories to explain away the empty tomb. Here're a few of those theories...

First, is the **Wrong Tomb Theory**... The women just went to the wrong tomb. They saw a shroud, but there was no body; thus they assumed Jesus had risen.

A few years ago, Kathy and I traveled to Ft. Lauderdale where she had grown up. My wife wanted to visit her father's grave. We drove to a large graveyard which had no tombstones, just markers. Though it had been decades since Kathy had been there, **she knew exactly where her dad was buried!**

It's demeaning and preposterous to suggest these women, who dearly loved Jesus, and were involved in his burial, forgot His body's whereabouts in just three days. Besides, the grave was the property of a wealthy Jew named Joseph. It was well-known real estate.

And recall, the Jewish leaders knew exactly where the grave of Jesus was located. The priests had Pilate dispatch a squadron of soldiers to stand guard. When the disciples started preaching the resurrection if they had gone to the wrong grave their enemies would've easily uncovered the mistake by just presenting the body. They didn't, and couldn't, because He was alive!

Then there's the **Swoon Theory**... Jesus didn't really die, He just fainted. The disciples merely thought He was dead. When they took Jesus off the cross, and put Him in that cold damp tomb, the chilly air suddenly revived Him, and awakened Him from His swoon.

Islam was an early perpetrator of this myth. The Koran suggests Jesus just pretended to be dead. He staged or feigned his death... Other folks suggest Jesus was drugged and appeared dead, but actually wasn't. Yet again, *this flies in the face of the facts...*

Remember Jesus was *crucified*, and the point of Roman crucifixion was a **demonstrative death**. Professional executioners oversaw this operation. Killing was their job... A spear was thrust under Jesus' ribcage. Out came blood and water. You don't have to be a doctor to know a spear through a lung and heart insures death. No back-up exists for a perforated heart.

Recall too that Jewish burial required dressing the corpse with as much as a hundred pounds of spices, then wrapping the body 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 wake up three days later, free himself from a 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 off a trained Roman sentry; then be in such condition as to impress His disciples?

Believe that, and I've got some swampland I'd like to sell you! It takes more faith to believe Jesus **didn't** die and rise again, than it does to accept the truth!

Well, another alternative for the empty tomb is the **Hallucination Theory**... That the resurrection was the result of wishful thinking. The disciples saw what they wanted to see... *but have you read the Gospels?*

For hallucination to occur there has to be prior anticipation. The disciples had NO expectation of a resurrection. They doubted the first reports that He was alive. When the women came with the news, Peter and John didn't believe them and ran to the tomb to see for themselves. Recall Thomas refused to believe until He had seen the actual scars in Jesus' hands and side.

On top of that, Paul tells us that 500 eyewitnesses saw Jesus alive at the exact same time. Hallucination is a private phenomenon. Five-hundred people don't freak out simultaneously and see the same illusion.

And recognize the impact of these eyewitnesses. 1 Corinthians was one of the earliest of the NT letters. In 15:6 Paul points out many of the 500 eyewitnesses who saw the resurrected Christ were still accessible. Paul's implication is that if you don't believe, check it out for yourself. Paul can give you their names and addresses. Do your own investigation. Once again, the claims of Christianity can withstand empirical scrutiny.

And the granddaddy of all alternatives was the **Stolen Body Theory**... This was the first false theory posed just hours after the resurrection. Matthew 28:11 tells us what occurred, "**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 to the soldiers saying, 'Tell them, His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept.'**"

But that was preposterous! It doesn't even make sense! *If the soldiers were asleep at the time, how did they know it was the disciples who stole the body?* Any lawyer would love to undertake that cross-examination!

Besides, these soldiers would've never fallen asleep. A legionnaire could lose his life for neglecting his duty and botching an assignment. And please tell me, which of the disciples was brave enough to man-up - risk his life to slip past a Roman sentry, probably 16 soldiers, move a two ton stone, and walk away with the body?

To the contrary, the disciples proved cowards. They had bailed on their Lord Jesus

when He needed them most. When Jesus rose from the dead these disciples were behind closed doors afraid they would be next.

And if the disciples lied about the resurrection what was their motive? They ended up living their lives in obscurity - poor and persecuted. Peter was crucified upside down. Andrew on an X-shaped cross. James was beheaded. Formerly doubting Thomas preached the resurrection 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... and John survived an attempt on his life when the Emperor tried to cook him in boiling oil.

Here's my point, a person might lie for money, or fame, or ease and comfort, but no one submits to **torture and death** for what they know to be a hoax.

Chuck Colson, hatchet-man for then President Nixon, recalled the Watergate Scandal and how quickly the president's chief allies distanced themselves to save their own skin. He said, "The most powerful men around the president of the United States could not keep a lie for three weeks. And you would 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 ever breathing a word to the contrary? Impossible."

In Acts 6:7 we learn some of the Jewish priests, who a few days earlier had cried out for Jesus to be crucified, suddenly bowed to Him as Lord. Nothing short of resurrection could prompt such a *turn around*.

The only explanation for the empty tomb *that fits all the facts* - is that Jesus was buried, conquered sin and death, and then rose triumphantly from the grave.

And not only does the Bible testify of the resurrection of Jesus, in light of the evidence, secular sources do the same. Roman historians, Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, Suetonius, even the Jewish Talmud make historical references to His crucifixion and resurrection.

Josephus was a Jew on the Roman payroll - a state historian. He wrote, "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." Thomas Arnold, historian at Oxford University, summed it up, "No one fact in all history... is proved by better and

fuller evidence... than the fact, *“Christ died and rose from the dead.”*

In the three days after Jesus' crucifixion it appeared Rome had won. The leader of the uprising had been crucified. His key men had fled in the night, denying their faith like scared little girls. The night before, they had trembled behind closed doors in an upper room. *Forget about them, they'll never be heard from again.*

Yet roughly 300 years later it was Rome who bowed to Jesus... For three centuries Christians were ordered to renounce Jesus as Lord, or be thrown to the lions. Yet one by one, men and women gave themselves as martyrs until their faith could no longer be ignored.

Christians had no fear of death. *And what made them so courageous?* Obviously, the resurrection of Jesus Christ had changed their attitude toward death...

Once, a missionary visited a tribe deep in the jungle. There he found the whole community suffering from a dreaded disease. Yet he recognized the illness as an infection easily treated with the proper antibiotic. And there were doctors nearby who could administer the life-saving drug... *but the tribesmen refused to travel...*

The problem was the river. Superstition said it was home to demons, and death, and evil spirits. The tribesmen saw the river as their enemy. They feared this river. No villager had ever crossed successfully to the other side. The witchdoctors said it was futile to try. These desperate people were trapped by the river.

And that's why the missionary knew exactly what he had to do to save the village from their disease... He led the tribe to the river's edge; then waded into the water. The villagers begged their new friend not to risk his life. They were sure the river would swallow him up. They held their breath when he vanished under the water... Imagine though their elation when he resurfaced on the other shore, *alive and well!* He proved the river was harmless. Victory had been won.

Jesus was a missionary sent from heaven to our village. We belong to a tribe called humanity that suffers a contagious and lethal disease. Sin and death holds us in its grip. Jesus promised us forgiveness for sin, and life over death, but no one was really sure He could deliver until he braved the icy waters of the grave and three days later reappeared on the living shore. Today, death is no longer something that we fear. The resurrection of Jesus means that death is no longer a *tombstone*, it's now a *stepping stone* to new life.

And this is not the end of the story! The book of Acts tells us, Jesus *“presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days...”* After His resurrection Jesus spent six weeks randomly dropping in on His

disciples, conditioning them to always be on the lookout for His appearances. Jesus was and would still be with them.

Jesus appeared to the women who came to the empty tomb... He showed Himself to the disciples in the Upper Room... and challenged a doubting Thomas to touch the scars in His hands and side... Paul tells us He made a private appearance to Peter... Jesus cooked breakfast for seven of His men on the shores of the Sea of Galilee... He joined two disciples and walked with them on the Road to Emmaus... On one occasion 500 eyewitnesses saw Him at a single time.

And it all culminated on the day when Jesus took His disciples just east of Jerusalem to the Mount of Olives. We're told, "While they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight." Then two angels appeared and said to them, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go to heaven."

Christians call this event the **Ascension** of Jesus. He was exalted back to heaven from where He came. And this was an extremely important event. *Today, we know where Jesus is, and exactly what He's doing.* He isn't MIA. He hasn't fallen off the grid. Jesus is in heaven, ruling from God's throne, preparing to return!

Today is Easter Sunday - yet sadly, churches are full of folks with the wrong idea. They view the resurrection like the final scene of an old Western... *The cavalry comes at Calvary.* Jesus rides in on the cross to save us from our sins... And because heroes live forever, He rises on Sunday morning, and all day Easter we admire what He's accomplished... Then at the end of the day Jesus rides off into the sunset for the rest of the year. And we repeat the festivities 364 days later.

I hope that's not how you treat Easter... Jesus didn't just wrap up His work on earth to skip town. When Jesus *ascended* to heaven He rose to a vital post! Today, He occupies God's throne. Heaven is now His headquarters - the seat of His Kingdom on earth.

Revelation 4 raises the veil between the physical and spiritual realms. John gives us a glimpse of heaven, and what dominates is God's throne. It's emerald green and a rainbow arcs above its seat. And apparently, it's plugged in - *electrically charged* - for lightning, thunder, and voices spark from this throne. Its seven lamps are all on fire. A crystal sea stretches out before it - strange beasts hover over it - mighty men fall prostrate and cast their crowns to Him who sits on this throne.

And who does John see on this heavenly throne? Listen to His own words, "I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst

of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes..."

John sees Jesus, the Lamb of God, the crucified Christ, but no longer as an innocent, sacrificial lamb tied to the altar. He's a lamb, but there're now horns on His head. Jesus is ram tough! His seven horns depict *perfect strength* - His seven eyes, *perfect judgment*.

And John isn't through... He sees angels, leaders, and innumerable multitudes shouting loudly, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing!" All heaven bows to Jesus on His throne.

Even a risen Jesus - who leaves abruptly to ride off into the sunset - **still yields a deficient faith**. How do you *worship*, or *pray to*, or *trust in*, or *fight for* a Savior whose now missing in action? *But Jesus didn't just vanish into thin air, never to be heard from again.*

Today, we know exactly where we can find Jesus! He is in heaven - sovereign over all things. *He prays for us and answers our prayers. He's our anchor in the storms of life. He works through His Holy Spirit to give gifts and empower His Church. He is at work in the world holding back a tide of evil... prompting people's repentance... and transforming hearts and minds.*

Oh, we know the whereabouts of the risen Christ! Right now, a man sits in God's seat on God's throne. Jesus is the ultimate champion. And God has put all creation under His feet. Jesus has absolute authority in heaven and on earth... Think of Jesus' socks, *yes He wears socks*, they read "The enemy is under My feet." Jesus rules over all things! Revelation 19:16 goes as far as to call Jesus, "King of kings and Lord of lords."

I don't care if you're Hindu, or Muslim, or Mormon, or Republican, or Lesbian, or Baptist, or Liberal, or Hells' Angel, or Phi Beta Kappa, or MAGA - or CEO, or MVP, or MD, or AARP, or BLM, or BYOB - or Manager, or Senator, or Mayor, or Ayatollah, or Obama, or Trump. One day, your knee will bow to the risen Lord Jesus!

Through the **incarnation** God became a man, a servant, and entered our world... Through the **crucifixion** God paid in full the penalty for our sin... Through the **resurrection** He won victory over death...

Now though, through His **ascension** to heaven Jesus is over all nations, tribes, and tongues... all rulers, races, and religions... all choices, cultures, and customs... all ideas, ideologies, and identities... all places, populations, and perspectives... all methods, men, and money... all fads, families, and fancies... all time, talent, and

eternity! **Jesus** is lord over all things!

And here's good news... If you believe in the risen Jesus you're seated with Him in heavenly places. You share in His authority over sin, and death, and Satan.

We are now dead to sin and alive to God...

The nature of Jesus, God's love, is planted in us...

The Holy Spirit gives us power and spiritual gifts...

The devil and demons can no longer bully us...

Strongholds of sin can be broken and torn down...

We have victory over fear and lust and worry...

We can endure mountain-size trials, and ocean-size obstacles through Christ who strengthens us...

Usually, when people think of Jesus, 99% of the time they imagine Him as He use to be, in His incarnation: *healing the sick, or forgiving sin, or calming the storm, or teaching little children, or washing the disciples' feet.*

For sure, the incarnate Jesus is our example... We too should live our lives humbly, non-entitled to special treatment, with the heart of a servant... But we also should see Jesus as He is today, *right now*, in glory! Model the *Incarnate Jesus*. Worship the *Exalted Jesus*.

You should fear His coming judgment, and yield to His sweeping authority. Emulate Jesus who came the first time. But bow to the Christ Who's coming again.

And this is the line in the sand, is it not? There is no controversy whatsoever if I say "**Jesus is my Savior**" or "**Jesus is the God of all Christians**" or "**Our church worships Jesus**" or "**Jesus is my Lord and my King.**"

Few people argue with those assertions... But that's not the message God has called us to preach. We proclaim **Jesus is Lord** over every person, and every persuasion, and every population. **There is nowhere and no one outside of Jesus' jurisdiction.**

And this is exactly what our 21st century, post-modern mindset rejects. Our world today renounces any form of authority. No one is over or above the circle of life. We're all just part of that circle - swimming together in a vast sea. Thus, there's no objective pinnacle from which history, or people, or culture or morals can be judged. Right and wrong, true and false (if they exist at all) can never be known, because no one is in a position to judge. Much of today's despair and confusion is the direct result of such thinking.

But just before the risen Jesus ascended to heaven He said to the people who would take His message to the world, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.” *All authority* belongs to Jesus! That means everyone of us is accountable to the living Lord Jesus for *what we believe* and *how we behave*...

Then Jesus told His disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...” In essence, there are nations who bow to different kings - people who serve other gods - individuals with diverse preferences and alternative lifestyles... **And we’re not to be intimidated. Tell the world about Jesus.** No one is his own authority. Jesus has done what no one else can do. He’s risen! All authority now belongs to our *living* Lord!

Of course, this is the message over which the blood of the martyrs has been spilt, and what sets Christians at odds with the world. Yet this is the truth that changes lives, and determines destinies, and lasts forever... **Jesus is risen! Jesus is reigning! Jesus is returning!**