

Why I'm a Christian Week 2: Jesus | Lexington

Normally I pride myself on being very thorough. I'm a car salesman's worst nightmare. A real estate agent's worst nightmare. If you need someone to read over a 25 page contract to find the fine print you need to look out for, I'm your guy. With that said, there is one giant blind spot in my general knack for thoroughness, and that would be finding stuff at my house.

I can't tell you the number of times this has played out in my marriage. I will need something, I don't know...say a soap refill, or any other household item really. I can't say how many times I've looked for the soap (or whatever), in all the places that made sense to me, and throw up my hands and say "Babe!" She knows what it means. It means I can't find something. In my defense I will say that Kristi's idea of fun is rearranging closets, and I'm half-convinced she moves things around on me for kicks and giggles. So when I say "Babe!" I assume she inwardly thinks, "Hahahaha, I got him again!"

And then, typically, she will walk over, step in front of me while rolling her eyes, and move something I didn't move and there, right behind it, will be the soap. With its very presence accusing me of negligence. Or, she'll be like, "No, it's over there...where we moved it...a year ago." As a grown adult, 34 year old man, I can't even confidently assert the non-existence of soap in my house.

I tell you that to bring up an important concept for today, that of falsifiability. Some things in life are falsifiable. "Babe, we're out of soap!" is a claim that Kristi quickly and easily falsifies most of the time. She produces evidence to disprove that. This concept of falsifiability sets our faith apart from every other religion.

Joseph Smith claim to be a prophet from God came from saying he had an encounter with an angel. I'm not sure how one could go about disproving that. Mohammed claimed to have a vision from God. Same thing. There is no way to disprove something like that. You either take them at their word, or you don't.

Not so with Christianity. A good friend of mine who recently became a Christian here asked me a couple years ago while we were in a book club together--he said "What's your smoking gun? What would make you renounce Christianity and quit your job?" Without thinking I said "Easy, the resurrection." It's the same thing Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15.

"And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith." (1 Corinthians 15:14)

Christianity makes a claim that an event happened in space and time: Jesus Christ died and then was raised from the dead. And it says, if this didn't happen, you should dismiss the entire religion. Pull the plug. Eat drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die. Assuming you wanted to start a religion, the worst possible thing you could do would be to invent something easily falsifiable. At least, if you want it to succeed.

Because the resurrection is based on a historical event that is falsifiable, you can't start by asking if it's helpful or if you like it. That is how you would rightly approach other religions. Do I like Buddha's teachings? Or am I more of a Joseph Smith kind of guy?

But that's not how you approach Jesus. You don't start with "Do I like his teachings?" You are forced to start with "Did He rise from the dead?" And if the answer is yes → well then, what you like or don't like is not a pressing concern because you have suddenly become busy bowing down to him.

Turn to 1 Corinthians 15:3-8. We're gonna look at Paul's argument for the resurrection. This is the evidence he gives before he makes the claim that if this wasn't true, our faith would be totally in vain.

1 Corinthians 15:3-8

3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, **4** that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, **5** and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. **6** Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. **7** Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. **8** Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

Paul's summarized argument for the resurrection is that the tomb was empty, he appeared to hundreds and hundreds of people after he resurrected, leaving courtrooms and courtrooms full of eyewitnesses all saying the same thing, and all of those eyewitnesses lived the rest of their lives believing that was true.

The way I'd like to frame the discussion today is borrowed from a Christian philosopher named William Lane Craig. Some of his resources are linked and available on our website, **WhyImaChristian.com**.

"If, for the sake of argument, we approach the documents of the New Testament not as inspired, holy books but rather simply as a collection of documents written in the Greek language, handed down out of the 1st century, telling this remarkable story about this man Jesus of Nazareth without any assumption whatsoever as to their reliability – the same way we would approach other ancient documents for history. You might be surprised to learn that when ancient historians approach the New Testament documents with this attitude, that the majority of scholars today accept the central facts undergirding the inference to the resurrection of Jesus. And I want to emphasize that I am not talking here about conservative scholars or evangelical scholars; rather, I am talking about the broad mainstream of critical, historical New Testament scholarship today – the work that is done by professors who teach at secular universities and non-evangelical theological colleges. Amazing as it may seem, most of them have come to agree with the historicity of the central facts undergirding the resurrection of Jesus." - William Lane Craig

He's not saying all of these scholars believe Jesus is the resurrected Messiah, of course. But that there are 3 facts that almost no one disputes.

What I'd like to do is explain some of the historical facts surrounding the story of Jesus's resurrection and explain why they are broadly accepted as historical facts, from christian and non christian scholars.

3 facts that require explanation:

- 1) The empty tomb**
- 2) The appearances of Jesus alive after his death**
- 3) The disciples belief that Jesus rose from the dead.**

His point is, if you don't believe Jesus raised from the dead, you need to find an alternative story to account for all 3 of these accepted historical facts. And that's more difficult to do than you might think.

Let me explain why most scholars accept these as fact.

Fact 1) - The empty tomb.

1 Corinthians 15:3-8

3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, **4** that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,

Jesus was buried in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. Land ownership was legal then just like now, with documents that indicate who owned what. On Sunday morning, when some of Jesus's female followers attempt to put burial spices on him in his tomb, they know exactly where to go. The location of the tomb was publicly known.

On the Sunday morning following his crucifixion, Jesus' tomb was found empty by a group of his women followers.

1 - 6 independent sources state that the tomb was found empty. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, 1 Corinthians all attest to the tomb being empty. When an event is recorded by two unconnected sources, our confidence goes up that an event actually happened. The earlier those sources are dated, the higher our confidence.

2 - This is very simple, but as people began to claim that Jesus had risen from the dead, the easiest way to shut the whole thing down would have been for someone to show Jesus's body in the tomb. He obviously didn't resurrect if his body was still in the tomb.

In fact, Matthew reports to us that the Jewish leaders quickly levelled the accusation that Jesus's body had been stolen by his disciples. That claim is mentioned even years later in writings of Justin Martyr and Tertullian. This shows that the body was in fact missing from the tomb.

3 - There is no record of early Christians making Jesus's tomb a place of devotion and pilgrimage, which was normal for religious observance at that time. Why is there not a shrine to Jesus at his tomb? Because his body wasn't there. There was no reason for Peter to go to his tomb to remember him because Peter had breakfast with him.

4 - This might be surprising, but for historians, one of the most powerful evidences for the empty tomb is the claim that it was women who first discovered the body. Mary Magdalene is named as the first eyewitness of the risen Christ, and other women are mentioned as the earliest eyewitnesses in the other gospels, too. This was a time in which the testimony of women was not admissible evidence in courts because of their low social status. The early pagan critics of Christianity latched onto this and dismissed the Resurrection because of it. One example is from a 2nd Century man named Celsus who ridiculed Christianity as the word of "hysterical females." If this were legend, or if this were being fabricated or altered in any way then the writers would've claimed that men were the first to find the empty tomb. To top it off, from Luke 8 we learn Mary was formerly demonized. Jesus casts 7 demons from her. She would have been a marginalized, social outcast. The worst person you could pick to be your first witness if you were making this up.

So it is broadly accepted as historical fact that the tomb of Jesus was empty. Jacob Kremer, Professor of NT studies, university of Vienna says this: *"Most scholars, by far, hold firmly to the reliability of the biblical statements about the empty tomb."*

Now, that's just one fact. It doesn't prove anything. There are all sorts of plausible theories as to how the tomb could've been empty. But any theory you come up with has to also account for more facts.

Fact 2) - Appearances of Jesus alive after his death.

1 Corinthians 15

4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, **5** and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. **6** Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. **7** Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. **8** Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

This is one of the first accounts of eye-witness encounters with Jesus after his death. This letter was written 15 to 20 years after the death of Jesus. Notice that Paul lists the eye witnesses, says it was individuals and also groups, and that many of these eye witnesses are still alive and can corroborate. This is a letter to a church in a city, which was to be read aloud as a public document. This is eye witness testimony, written in the lifetime of other eye witnesses.

And check out some of the people that Paul lists as eye witnesses.

-Peter - went from coward hiding from people asking him questions to boldly preaching about a resurrected Jesus.

-500 people at once - not simply wishful thinking. Not visions or hallucinations.

-James - Jesus brother. What would it take for you to believe your sibling was God?

-Paul - went from trying to kill Christians to recruiting for them.

Paul says, "He appeared also to me." This is again a conversion as remarkable as James. Saul was a Jewish Pharisee, he was a persecutor of the church, he hated the Christian heresy, and he was determined to do everything in his power to stamp it out. He was actually responsible for the deaths of Christian men and women simply because of their faith in Jesus Christ. He was out to disprove Christianity.

Then it all turned around for this man because on the road to Damascus he saw this appearance of Jesus. And he said, "I saw Jesus our Lord" and this is what caused Saul the Pharisee to be transformed into Paul the Apostle and missionary of early Christianity. This is undeniably attested in his own letters in the first hand.

You can look at Paul's turn around naturalistically and say that we don't know what actually happened but any number of things could've caused this about change in his life. People change their lives all the time. But this was a pretty big change. The people he was killing because he thought they were so wrong and dangerous, he becomes a leader and recruiter for? Whatever did happen to him would have had to have been significant.

We have in Paul's information very good grounds for believing that various individuals and groups of people under various circumstances saw appearances of Jesus alive from the dead. Not to mention that the 4 gospels and book of Acts all also have sources who claim to have seen Jesus alive from the dead.

Fact 3) - Disciples belief that Jesus rose from the dead.

This needs a little bit of background. We could get into a graduate level course on the complexity of all this, but to summarize briefly: obviously the disciples were Jewish. They became what we now call Christians when they became convinced Jesus was the risen Messiah. So did many, many, many more as the church started, but not all Jewish people. So the question is, why?

The answer is that Jesus' fulfillment of Jewish, OT messianic prophecies is a complete and full fulfillment, but also a plot twist. He is the promised Messiah, but he was different than what they expected. Like watching a movie where you see everything tied together, but also still surprising. So the disciples of Jesus were not banking on or expecting Jesus to rise from the dead. He told them it was going to happen, and like many things they didn't get what he was saying.

What they expected was a very earthly Messiah who would come, pick up a sword, and free them from Roman occupation. And then lead the nation of Israel to peace and prosperity ruling over them. Their only concept of resurrection was a universal event on Judgement Day at the end of the world. It was a resurrection where all of the curse would be lifted. So if there was still sickness and dying on the earth then the resurrection hadn't happened yet.

They had no concept of a messiah who would be executed by the state. That meant that, like others before him, he was by definition a failed messiah. So they didn't have a concept of what good it would do for a failed messiah to come back to life. It would have struck them as implausible that God resurrected one person but didn't remove sickness and death that plagues us all.

Under Old Testament law, anyone who was executed by hanging was under the curse of God. Jewish people applied this to crucifixion also. So as the events of the crucifixion unfolded, they weren't gaining confidence that everything was going as planned. This was devastating, humiliating.

So what the crucifixion of Jesus revealed was that the Pharisees were right after all; that for these three years, these disciples had been following a man under the curse of God, a man who was a heretic, yet another failed messiah. The crucifixion was literally a catastrophe for them, the worst thing that could have possibly happened.

They were not scheming at this point--they were hiding in fear. Worried they were going to get thrown in jail or killed by association with this failed messiah they trusted in. They were mourning and hiding. In no way shape or form were they plotting, like they were part of the Weekend at Bernie's movie from the 90s where you try to pretend your friend isn't dead.

And they went from not even on their radar, not what they expected, not what their hope was even in the first place to "OH MY GOSH HE'S ALIVE HE'S ALIVE HE'S ALIVE WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?" The disciples came to believe that God had risen Jesus from the dead and even under threat of death never recanted. In fact, we know from history that almost all of the apostles were eventually killed because they kept claiming that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Let me share how His followers, were martyred for their faith:

Bartholomew - Most agree that he was martyred, though there are various beliefs about how he died.

Many believe that he died in Asia Minor, being flayed to death by a whip.

James (The Greater) - is believed to have been beheaded with a sword

James (The Lesser) - is believed to have been stoned and clubbed to death

Philip - is believed to have been crucified or hanged

Andrew - crucified on an x - shaped cross

Thomas - was believed to have been impaled with a spear

Matthias - believed to be stoned and beheaded

Thaddaeus - believed to either be clubbed to death or killed with arrows

John - Survived being burned in oil. He was fortunate

Peter - said to have been crucified upside down

Through all of this, NOT A SINGLE ONE OF THEM RECANTED. Not a single one of them turned and denied their testimony. Not one of them... facing unspeakable pain, and not one of them changed their story.

Those are the 3 facts. Agreed upon by the majority of NT scholars.

Empty tomb.

Attestation of post mortem encounters with the risen Jesus.

Disciples believed he was truly risen.

The question is: what is the best explanation of these three facts? This is where the disagreement arises. Scholars are fairly united on the historicity of these facts; the disagreement comes with how you best explain them. So when you hear arguments that try to explain how Jesus didn't really rise from the dead, they have to be run through these facts.

Let's look at a few of those arguments and run them through this filter.

Plausible alternatives:

- 1) **Legend theory**

This all happened a long time ago and is a legend story. In my experience, this is the most compelling alternative explanation to a lot of modern people. It has the benefit of time. I don't think it's plausible though. And I want to really try to prove that to you if I can.

1 - The timeline doesn't work. The simple answer to this objection is that there was not nearly enough time elapsed between Jesus' resurrection and the birth of the church for a legend to develop.

People were worshipping Jesus as God immediately after his resurrection and we have documentation of hymns that could not have possibly been legendary. The hymn about Christ as God in Phil 2 is generally believed to have been written just a few years after Jesus' death. Paul quotes it in his letter. That shows that the earliest Christians worshipped Jesus immediately after his death.

Speaking about our main passage for today, scholar William Lane Craig makes this point clear: *"Paul uses here not only the technical rabbinical terms for 'received' and 'delivered' with regard to the information that he is passing on to the Corinthians, but verses 3-5 are a highly stylized four-line formula which is replete with non-Pauline characteristics. This has convinced all scholars that Paul is, just as he says, quoting from an old tradition which he himself received and then in turn passed on to his converts in Corinth. This tradition probably goes back to at least to Paul's fact-finding journey to Jerusalem around AD 36, when he spent two weeks with Peter and with James in Jerusalem. Now when you recall that Jesus was crucified around AD 30, that means that this information goes back to within the first 5 years after Jesus' crucifixion. So short a time span, and such personal contact in this case, make it idle to talk of legend with regard to the information in this formula."* William Lane Craig

All 4 of the gospels are written inside the lifetime of eyewitnesses. Scholarly consensus is that the gospel of Mark was written about thirty years after Jesus's death, in approximately AD 65. Matthew and Luke were written around a decade or so later, with the gospel of John about a decade after that.

Not enough time had passed for legends to have arisen. In other words, these accounts weren't written down after centuries of transmission but within the lifetimes of people who had been eye witnesses to the events.

2 - The style is historical reportage. Richard Bauckham - "all scholars agree that Gospel traditions must originally have been formulated by disciples of Jesus and others who encountered him, witnessed the events, and remembered his teaching."

In his book *Jesus and the Eye Witnesses* he says that good ancient historians ordinarily interviewed eye witnesses and documented it by naming them in their work. That was their version of a "works cited" page on a report. Footnotes and endnotes weren't a thing back in their day. What ancient historians would do was not footnotes or endnotes, but instead they would mention the names of the people they had interviewed inside of their work.

For example, in Mark 15:21 he mentions Simon the Cyrene, the man compelled to carry Jesus' cross, and gives his sons names, Alexander and Rufus, so he could be tracked down. When John is telling the story about Jesus in the garden, the night of his arrest, he includes the name of Malchus, the soldier whose ear Peter chopped off and Jesus put back on. He would be a good guy to track down, would love to hear him tell that story.

There are a lot of places in the accounts of Jesus's life where individuals' names seem randomly mentioned in the stories...those are footnotes. These people were eye witnesses being named, potentially because they had been interviewed or questions, bare minimum as reference points for hearers to know they could go follow up with them if they had questions. This was the historiographical custom of the time. The authors are listing their sources.

3 - Legendary accounts don't sound like this from antiquity. The documents that were written much later, Gospel of Thomas, gospel of Peter, did in fact have fantastic elements that people threw a flag on. False gospels have things like Jesus coming out of the tomb being 60 feet tall and his cross floating behind him. One has Jesus as a kid throwing a bully kid onto a roof. They were written about 300 years later and they did in fact become very legendary and they were in fact rejected, exactly as you would want and expect.

C.S. Lewis explains this:

"I have been reading poems, romances, vision-literature, legends, myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know that not one of them is like this. Of this text there are only two possible views. Either this is reportage ... Or else, some unknown writer in the second century, without known predecessors, or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern, novelistic, realistic narrative ... The reader who doesn't see this has simply not learned to read."

4 - The documents could not have been changed later. Some people ask, what if these stories were changed later on? What if Constantine made changes to spread his use of Christianity to control his empire?...well, copies of New Testament letters quickly began to spread. In multiple languages. Even without manuscripts, church fathers quotations recreate over 95% of NT. For Constantine to make changes, in the 300s after all this spreading has happened, he would have to find every copy, in every language, and change every written sermon from early church fathers.

In other words they were recorded too early to have been falsified then, and they spread so quickly they could not have been falsified later on.

5 - If the resurrection was somehow added in later, how did the church get started then?

Remember, the disciples were utterly destroyed by the crucifixion. Many of them, for some reason, experience profound life change and the church starts....but if the argument is that the early church didn't actually say Jesus resurrected and that was added later on...then why did the early church form in the first place? What were they forming around? Certainly not embarrassed, shamed, false messiah.

6- Why did the jewish early Christians change their day of worship from Saturday (jewish sabbath for thousands of years) to Sunday? Is it your experience that religious people like to change things?

2) Conspiracy theory.

They stole the body and made the whole thing up. This one sounds like a plausible theory on first glance. The disciples stole the body. That seems plausible. But unfortunately it goes against historical fact number 2. The disciples believed that Jesus had in fact risen from the dead.

These same disciples died for their claim that they personally witnessed Jesus alive, risen from the dead. This is why it's accepted as a historical fact. People don't die for a lie. You lie because you think things will go better for you. They could have lied to save their lives, and they didn't. Because they couldn't.

Chuck Colson brings this idea home:

"I know the resurrection is a fact, and Watergate proved it to me. How? Because 12 men testified they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years, never once denying it. Every one was beaten, tortured, stoned and put in prison. They would not have endured that if it weren't true. Watergate embroiled 12 of the most powerful men in the world--and they couldn't keep a lie for three weeks. You're telling me 12 apostles could keep a lie for 40 years? Absolutely impossible." - Chuck Colson

If we reject the resurrection version of events, then we must come up with a more plausible alternative explanation for why thousands of Jews would overnight come to believe that a human being was the risen Son of God and then go out and die for their faith.

Pascal - "I believe those witnesses that get their throats cut." Once again, if it were made up, it's a horrible lie. It's not a productive lie. It doesn't sound plausible to it's audience. Tim Keller, in a recommended resource for this series, says this:

"The claim that Jesus was Yahweh God who should receive worship, the notion of a crucified messiah, concept of individual resurrection, dullness of the disciples, the unsavory crowd that Jesus attracted -- these were highly embarrassing aspects of the Jesus story for early Christians. These went against the grain of both Greek and Hebrew worldviews and subjected early Christians to ridicule at best and abuse at worst. Christians had every incentive to play down or eliminate these issues from the gospel accounts, but instead they are prominent." Tim Keller

3) Apparent death theory

These last ones we'll do quick. Jesus didn't really die. He revived in the tomb and then was able to convince his followers he had resurrected.

This one just doesn't bear historical scrutiny. Saying a Roman soldier didn't actually kill a person they were tasked to kill is untenable. They were experts at torture and killing. They knew when a person was dead. So did the people who took care of his dead body, wrapped him, buried him. When a powerful government sees someone as a threat and wants them dead, they are going to be dead. There won't be a mishap.

He was tortured so extensively, but you're saying he crawled out of the tomb, half dead and in need of medical attention and still convinced his followers he was gloriously raised from the dead? Nah.

4) Displaced body theory

Someone came and moved the body and didn't tell anyone. But it doesn't explain his disciples claiming to have seen Jesus post resurrection. You have to account for all the evidence, all the facts, when trying to discredit this.

5) Hallucination theory

People didn't really see the resurrected Jesus, they just hallucinated and thought they did. Maybe they had a bad trip or something. This requires a whole lot of leaps.

Not just once but many times.
Not just in one place but many places.
Not just one person but many persons.
Not just individuals but groups.
Not just believers but unbelievers as well.

Also, in the ancient world, visions of dead people didn't mean a person was alive. It confirmed that person was dead and had passed on to the afterlife. So scratch that one.

Conclusion

At some point it becomes important to simply ask why we won't accept the answer given by the people who were actually there as to what happened? Take our question from last week: what is the best explanation given the evidence we have?

We have a naturalist worldview by default, but if last week we at least cracked the door open on the possibility that God exists, it is at least possible that He intervened in human history and raised Jesus from the dead.

"And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith." (1 Corinthians 15:14)

What Paul says here is true. If this is false, what are we doing here? If it's not true, I'm going to Momma Rabbits for brunch. That German pancake couldn't soothe my existential godless pain, but I would try. But the good news is, as I've argued today, that Christ has indeed been raised, our preaching is NOT useless, and neither is your faith. Because our faith is in the one who defeated death.

And just as a quick, parting application for us all--the question we just answered changes the rubric through which we think about literally everything.

If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then live how you wish, eat drink and be merry, find what untestable religious ideology floats your boat if that's your thing, who cares anyway because when we burn up in the sun, none of this will matter.

But if he did rise from the dead? Then, he's God. Then He gets to set reality, not us. Whatever he said about whatever he talked about is true and right, whether I like it or not.

-You don't like the Bible's sexual ethics? Neither does anyone else in our culture. If He rose from the dead, then we have to consider that guy who proved he was God is right, and that maybe we who can't raise ourselves from the dead is wrong.

-You don't like what Jesus says about money? Not many people do. But if he rose from the dead then we have to listen to him. Doesn't matter if you like it. .

-“But I don't like that the church is full of hypocrites!” You're right. But the good news is we're not full--we have room for you too. And if he rose from the dead that means he is able to forgive our hypocrisy and yours too.

-“But church history is full of injustice!” Yes it is. And the resurrection of Jesus is a foretaste of the day when sin, suffering and injustice will be no more.

-If you think this is embarrassing because miracles don't just happen, and people might look at you funny. Yep. They might. If Jesus went in a grave and came out, so what if your coworker snickers at you? Countless numbers have died for their faith in Jesus, so I feel confident we can handle a little social derision.

- “Yeah but I don't like the ideas of wrath and hell....” I struggle with that too sometimes. If he rose from the dead and says there's a hell, what am I gonna say? Yeah but I don't like that idea so it isn't true?

- “Dead people don't just rise from the dead.” I know, right?! That's what this whole thing is about. One did.

Of course all of these things matter and need to be thoughtfully worked through, which we do all the time. But the point is, if Jesus rose from the dead, the extent to which these questions or doubts matter just absolutely plummet. It hits the floor.

If He is alive, then okay--I'll sit down, and I'll listen to you. May that be the heart posture for all of us.

Pray. Communion.

