

Do You Believe This? 1 Corinthians 15:12-19

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. **ESV**

Introduction — In Stockbridge, Massachusetts there's a small cemetery attached to a Polish Catholic monastery. It's where the fathers and brothers are buried when they die. The tombstones are identical white crosses, without any sense of who was superior to whom—all equal in death. But in the center is one large cross that towers over the others. On it is carved John 11:25 from the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. In that story, Martha criticizes Christ as they walk to the tomb, accusing him of allowing her brother to die. Jesus challenges her with these words: "I am the Resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, though I die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. *Do you believe this?*"

Christianity is a resurrection-based religion. But increasingly, there are more and more Christians who struggle with the sort of belief the New Testament calls for. That *belief* has nothing to do with wishful thinking, keeping a religious tradition, or emotional gratification. Instead, it involves a commitment to someone or something based on sufficient evidence; that the object of one's faith is real and did something that actually happened. It's the very opposite of a mindless leap into the darkness of ignorance.

According to Paul and the other New Testament writers, Christian faith rests on Jesus' resurrection. But is it a true event of human history, or is it simply a fable some people choose to believe in order to feel good—especially about death?

I. Importance — But before we get into the evidence for Christ's resurrection, we need to understand just how important it is to everything we believe, do, and are as Christians. In short, if the Resurrection did not actually happen, neither Jesus nor anything related to him has any value. Paul clearly says this in **1 Corinthians 15:12-19**. To summarize, he says that if Christ was not raised (1) Christian proclamation is nonsense; (2) Christian faith is without a valid object, (3) Christians are false witnesses since our message is false, (4) Christians are unforgiven and left in their sins, (5) Christians who have already died are lost, and (6) those who hope in Christ deserve pity, since we have no hope and our lives will end with death. In short, Christianity is a sick belief system without a real Easter!

This means that it's absolutely necessary for each of us to learn everything we can about the Resurrection so that our faith in Christ is properly supported. In addition, if Jesus did rise from the dead never to die again, we must be able to explain and defend it to our non-believing friends, neighbors, and relatives.

II. Evidence — And so, what evidence is there for the Resurrection? While I can't be exhaustive in this presentation, I will hit the major high points. It must also be stressed that no single point by itself is absolute proof that Jesus rose from the dead. Instead the evidence is *cumulative* (each adds to the weight of the whole) and *integrative* (the various facts fit together in a meaningful whole).

* **New Testament Integrity** — The logical place to begin is with the *integrity* of the New Testament: our primary source material for believing in Easter. If those documents, particularly the four Gospels, can't be trusted, then a commitment to Jesus' resurrection will be shaky at best. The integrity issue can be broken down into two major categories: *reliability* and *historicity*.

Reliability has to do with whether the New Testament you and I currently possess reflects what its authors originally wrote. Unfortunately, many today believe that we have little or no reason for confidence in this. That perspective was once expressed by Shirley MacLaine when she appeared on Larry King's show. A Christian caller contested her mystical claims by appealing to the New Testament. MacLaine brushed him off with the objection that since the Bible has been changed and translated so many times over the last 2,000 years,

it's impossible to have any confidence in its accuracy. King was quick to endorse her. "Everyone knows that," he grunted.

However, such so-called "knowledge" is totally at odds with the facts. The truth is that the New Testament has been authenticated by better manuscript support than any other ancient document. *Authentication* has to do with both the number and date of early manuscripts, as well as how those manuscripts correspond to each other.

By last count, there were some 5,366 early Greek texts of the New Testament represented by fragments, uncial codices (manuscripts in capital letters bound together in book form), and minuscules (small Greek letters in cursive style). In addition, there are thousands of "patristic quotations"—New Testament citations by the early church fathers in letters, lessons, and worship materials written in a variety of languages. All these sources are carefully cross-checked by scholars in a process called "lower criticism" in order to produce the most accurate rendering of Scripture.

The result of such scholarship is a modern translation of the New Testament that is considered to be 99.5% textually pure. This means that of 20,000 lines, only 40 (about 400 words) are in doubt, and none of them affects any significant doctrine. Scholar D.A. Carson puts it this way: "The purity of text is of such a substantial nature that nothing we believe to be true, and nothing we are commanded to do, is in any way jeopardized by the variants."

Historicity is concerned with whether the New Testament accurately reflects first-century life, culture, and history. Again there is also no reason for doubt. It is to our advantage that both Testaments make repeated references to nations, kings, battles, cities, geography, treaties, customs, economics, politics, dates, and so on. Since these references are so specific, they are open to archaeological investigation. This has been of tremendous benefit to Christians since biblical archaeology has provided external confirmation of hundreds of scriptural statements. Hence, noted archaeologists such as W.F. Albright, Nelson Glueck, and G. Ernest Wright developed a great respect for the historical accuracy of the Scriptures as the result of their work.

The bottom-line is that the New Testament you and I read and study is virtually identical to the one originally produced by its authors and

read by the early church. It also accurately reflects first-century life, culture, and history, as well as eyewitness reports of events such as Jesus' resurrection.

*** Jesus' Existence and Death** — The next issue to consider is whether Jesus really lived and, in his early 30s, was executed by Roman crucifixion. Of course, there are many websites and blogs which make the entirely unjustified claim that Jesus never existed. However, biblical scholars and historians who have investigated the issue in detail are virtually unanimous in rejecting this view, regardless of their theological or ideological perspectives.

A dozen or more references to Christ appear in non-Christian Jewish, Greek, and Roman sources from the early centuries A.D. These statements are from such diverse authors as Josephus (a 1st century Jewish historian), the Talmud (a collection of rabbinic traditions), the Greek writers Lucian of Samosata and Mara bar Serapion, and Roman historians Thallus, Tacitus, Pliny, and Seutonius. Of course, the New Testament itself bears primary witness to the historical reality of Jesus, as well as the significance of his incarnation for both believers and non-believers alike.

Regarding Jesus' death, it is also a well-established historical fact that he was executed by crucifixion in the early 30s AD. New Testament scholars of all persuasions find absolutely no reason to doubt that it took place just as the Gospels say it did.

*** A Crucified Messiah** — The next line of evidence for the Resurrection has to do with the scandal of a crucified Messiah. At first glance, it would seem that a natural foundation had been laid for the emerging of the early Christian church by two related factors: First, many first-century Jews were expecting the long-awaited Messiah to finally arrive. Second, Jesus seemed to fulfill that expectation by both his teaching and acts. Therefore, it was only natural that the first Christians were almost all Jews. But there's a huge problem with this assumption: The common messianic hope was for a political Deliverer who would take the world by storm, not a suffering Savior who would be executed as a common criminal between two thieves.

In short, absolutely no one would have come up with a crucified man as the Messiah and King of the world. This means that something

dramatic and real must have happened for Jewish people to accept such an idea—something like an actual resurrection from the dead.

* **Joseph's Tomb** — Then there's the issue of where Jesus' was buried. Two factors stand out. First, all four Gospels agree that Christ's body was buried in a rock tomb owned by Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin (Jewish high council). This in itself has a strong ring of truth. That's because the Sanhedrin was largely responsible for Jesus' execution—and who would ever declare that one of them buried Jesus unless it was true. Second, since Joseph's tomb was specifically identified, anyone could have gone there to determine whether or not there had been a resurrection. And if Jesus was still in that tomb, it would have likely been venerated as the grave of a great man by those still loyal to him. In fact, Jerusalem contained at least fifty such venerated tombs in those days (**Lk. 11:47-48**).

* **Women Witnesses** — Next, all four Gospels all agree that the first persons to find the tomb empty were women, including Mary Magdalene. It's highly unlikely that anyone would have invented such a story for two reasons. First, the testimony of women was devalued as compared to men's. Second, Mary Magdalene was known as a former demoniac. If the empty tomb was fiction, one would expect that Joseph of Arimathea, the tomb's owner and a respected male leader, would have been credited with the discovery.

* **The Empty Tomb** — With the empty tomb itself, there are a number of important factors supporting a belief in Jesus resurrection. First, Jesus' gravesite was heavily guarded by a contingent of Roman soldiers, who were highly-trained, vicious killers. Such men would have never allowed themselves to be bribed by a ragtag bunch of religious fanatics, most of whom were lowly former fishermen—especially since dereliction of duty was punishable by death.

Second, after the body had been prepared (in 40-74 lbs of plaster then wrapped in cloth), the tomb was secured by a large boulder rolled down an incline, then sealed shut. It simply was not possible for Jesus' followers to have broken through and spirited his body away, especially given the Roman guard.

Third, a stolen body would have required a large number of conspirators: Jesus' followers, military personnel, Jewish politician

Joseph of Armathea, and someone to provide an alternate place for the body. Another problem with such that scenario is that conspiracies eventually unravel, and the larger they are the sooner they collapse. This point was once made by Charles Colson in an op ed column for *Newsweek Magazine*. Someone had asked him what was the biggest lesson he had learned from Watergate. Colson's answer was that the failed plot taught him that *Jesus' resurrection really happened!* He went on to explain that, almost as soon as the burglary was discovered, the Watergate conspirators began to turn on each other in order to save their own skins. With the Resurrection, however, Jesus' disciples unanimously affirmed that the miracle really did happen, even though it led (with the exception of John) to their martyrdom. Peter Kreeft says it well:

"The 'cruncher' in this argument is the historical fact that no one, weak or strong, saint or sinner, Christian or heretic, ever confessed, freely or under pressure, bribe, or even torture, that the whole story of the resurrection was a fake, a lie, a deliberate deception. Even when people broke under torture, denied Christ or worshiped Caesar, they never let *that* cat out of the bag, never revealed that the resurrection was their conspiracy. For that cat was never *in* that bag. No Christians believed the resurrection was a conspiracy; if they had, they wouldn't have become Christians."

*** Post-Resurrection Appearances** — Next is the record of post-resurrection appearances. That is, on multiple occasions and under a variety of circumstances, various individuals and groups of people encountered Jesus alive and well following his execution. The New Testament reports twelve separate appearances over a forty-day period:

1. Mary Magdalene (**Jn. 20:10-18**)
2. Mary and the other women (**Matt. 28:1-10**)
3. Peter (**Lk. 24:34; 1 Cor. 15:5**)
4. Two disciples in the road to Emmaus (**Lk. 24:13-35**)
5. Ten apostles (**Lk. 24:36-49**)
6. Eleven apostles (**Jn. 20:24-31**)
7. Seven apostles (**Jn. 21**)
8. All of the apostles (**Matt. 28:16-20**)
9. Five hundred disciples (**1 Cor. 15:6**)
10. James (**1 Cor. 15:7**)
11. All of the apostles (**Acts 1:4-8**)

12. The apostle Paul (**Acts 9:1-9; 1 For. 15:8; 9:1**)

The nature of these appearances is important. First, all the accounts speak of visitations of an embodied person, not a disembodied spirit. That is, Jesus returned from the dead as a living man who takes up space, can be seen, heard and touched. He walks with his disciples, teaches them, and even dines with them. In short, the resurrection accounts are not ghost stories.

Second, in Jesus' day and throughout history, there have been reports of living people seeing or otherwise experiencing those who are dead. But such claims are made about those who are dead and disposed of. They should not be confused with reports of a *resurrected* Jesus—one who was no longer either dead or in a grave.

Third, the number and variety of Resurrection sightings render the idea of a mass hallucination based on wishful thinking totally absurd—especially since those who became convinced included former skeptics such as Thomas and Paul.

*** The Birthplace of Christianity** — A further piece of evidence concerns place and time of Christianity's beginning. That is, it occurred precisely where the Resurrection happened and shortly after it took place. Why is that significant? Because if Easter is fiction, it could have been easily and immediately debunked right there in Jerusalem. Potential converts could have either been escorted to the still-sealed tomb or shown Jesus' corpse if it had been put on display. But neither of those things happened simply because Jesus really had risen from the dead and no longer occupied the tomb.

If Easter was, indeed, a hoax, it's conceivable that the fiction might have gained some traction somewhere else and decades after the fact. But, again, that's not what happened. Resurrection-based Christianity took hold right where that miracle-of-all-miracles took place and almost as soon as the news got around. The sequence of Christianity's growth is accurately reflected by the words of **Acts 1:8**, "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

*** The Disciples' Transformation** — A further line of evidence has to do with the amazing transformation of Jesus' disciples—who were continually threatened to disavow the whole thing. But, instead, they went from a bunch of dejected, dispirited, and grieving followers

of a crucified rabbi to dynamic Apostles: those who had beheld the risen Christ and who, then, proclaimed him as the Lord of life and Judge of history.

You and I are so used to seeing those first Christian leaders as heroes that it's easy to forget what they faced following Jesus' execution.

1. Their leader was dead and their hopes were dashed. No one expected a Messiah who, instead of conquering Israel's enemies, would be shamefully executed as a criminal by those same enemies.
2. According to Old Testament law, Jesus' execution defined him as a heretic who was cursed by God.
3. Jewish beliefs about the afterlife precluded anyone's rising from death to glory and immortality *until* the general resurrection of the dead at the end of the world.

Nonetheless, the original disciples suddenly came to so strongly believe that God raised Jesus from the dead that they were willing to die for that belief.

*** Early Christian Worship** — The final piece of evidence for the Resurrection is its impact on Christian worship, from the early church down to us. In particular are the three core worship components: baptism, the Lord's Supper, and congregational assembly for worship on Sunday. Each directly relates to the Resurrection and each stems from Christianity's very beginning.

The symbol of baptism is based on the analogy that just as Jesus died and was raised to life, so the believer dies to sinful ways and is raised to a new life in Christ (see **Rom. 6:3-4; 2 Cor. 5:17**). The Lord's Supper and its elements depict Jesus' life sacrificed for all humanity (**1 Cor. 11:23-26**). Both practices would have been viewed as ridiculous and would have never lasted had the earliest Christians not believed that Jesus really had risen from the dead. The same is true for weekly Sunday worship, commemorating the day Jesus rose (**Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:1-2**). This change of practice went totally against the grain of Jewish religious observance which honored Saturday, the seventh day, as the sabbath ordained by God (**Gen. 2:1-3; Exod. 20:8**). But the resurrected Christ was seen as both the Lord of creation and the church. Hence, his breaking of death's hold is celebrated by the vast majority of Christians, not just on Easter Sunday, but every Sunday.

Conclusion — Sir Lionel Luckhoo (1914-1997) is remembered as one of the greatest trial attorneys who ever lived. He is in the Guinness Book of World Records for his unprecedented record of 245 murder trial acquittals. He was a man who devoted his life to examining evidence and rendering verdicts on the basis of the evidence. Here is what he had to say regarding the evidence for Jesus' resurrection:

"I have spent more than 42 years as a defense trial lawyer appearing in many parts of the world and I am still in active practice. I have been fortunate to secure a number of successes in jury trials and I say unequivocally the evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is so overwhelming that it compels acceptance by proof which leaves absolutely no room for doubt."

Do you believe this? If you do, it should make a huge difference in how you live and serve Christ. Hank Hanegraaff puts it this way in the latest issue of *Christian Research Journal*:

"Of one thing I am certain: if twenty-first century Christians would fully apprehend the reality of the greatest feat in history, they—like their first-century counterparts—would turn the world upside down."

Recommended Resources for Further Study:

Blomberg, Craig L.; *The Historical Reliability of the New Testament: Countering the Challenges to Evangelical Christian Beliefs*; 2016; B&H Academic

Craig, William Lane; *Son Rises: The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus*; 2000; Wipf & Stock

Habermas, Gary R. & Michael R. Licona; *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*; 2004; Kregel

Licona, Michael R. *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historical Approach*; Inter-Varsity Press; 2010

Wright, N.T.; *The Resurrection of the Son of God*; 2003; Fortress Press