

# SUNDAY ARTICLE

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## The Ultimate Proof: The Resurrection of Jesus

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Easter is a good time to remember that death is dead, Christ has won, love has conquered. (Although I happen to think that we should celebrate every Sunday as the Day of the Risen Lord.)

At the Edinburgh book festival in 2010 Christopher Hitchens debated John Lennox. In concluding his speech, John Lennox mentioned the fact of the resurrection of Jesus. The moderator, John Humphreys, asked Christopher Hitchens to respond, indicating that he had five minutes. Hitchens barked: "I won't need five minutes to respond to someone who believes in the resurrection."

This is a standard tactic – equate people who believe in the resurrection with people who believe in a flat earth, Santa Claus, and Scotland winning the World Cup, and you then don't need to even think about, never mind examine, the evidence.

The main objection to the resurrection is simple. Resurrections just don't happen. But you need to stop there. We agree. Totally! That is the point. Resurrections don't happen. If they did, then the resurrection of Jesus would be no big deal. It would be a bit like me saying, Jesus is the Son of God because he recovered from illness.

Getting better is common. Getting resurrected is not. It is the ultimate extraordinary event. So instead of dismissing it, we need to ask, "What happened?" and "What proof is there?" before then going on to consider the implications.

### What Happened?

**Jesus died.** This is important for those who want to argue the swoon theory. This has been suggested at various points in history and is still favoured by some Muslims and others desperate to avoid the evidence for the resurrection. The myth is that Jesus didn't die but nobody noticed. He was flogged, nailed to a cross for hours, stabbed in the side, covered in spices, wrapped

in a shroud. But he revived, neatly folded up the grave clothes, rolled the stone away, overcame the Roman guards and walked away. Not really likely, is it?

One of the details in the Gospels is that the Roman soldiers did not break his legs because they saw he was already dead. These were men who had witnessed many executions and deaths and were fully aware of when someone had died. Is it likely that Jesus fooled them by going into some kind of comatose state and then revived himself?

**He was buried.** After his death on the cross a rich man called Joseph of Arimathea intervened and, aided by the Pharisee Nicodemus, took the body of Jesus to his own cave tomb. They left the body there after sealing the tomb with a massive rock. The women who followed Jesus were watching from a distance because they wanted to follow the Jewish practice of dressing the body. But they did not do so immediately because night fell and it was the Sabbath. They determined to return on the Sunday to do the job. Meanwhile the Jewish Sanhedrin asked the Roman governor Pilate to put a guard on the tomb, which was then sealed.

On the Sunday, the first day of the week, the women (including Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James) took the spices and went to the tomb, only to find that the stone had been rolled away, and the body gone. They were told by "men in clothes that gleamed like lightning" that Jesus was not there and that he had risen as he had said. They told the 11 disciples, who did

not believe them, although Peter went to the tomb and saw the evidence of the grave clothes with no body in them. In the differing accounts we read that Mary spoke to Jesus, that Jesus turned up in a room with the disciples and that there were then various other resurrection appearances.

From that point on it was an essential part of the early Christian Church. It consisted of those who believed that Jesus had really risen from the dead. That is the assertion. That is what we believe today. We do not worship a dead Lord. We do not revere an honourable teacher from the past. We do not seek to keep "the spirit" of a great leader alive in our midst. We worship Jesus Christ as a living being.

When I wrote *Magnificent Obsession* I was visited by an atheist friend who stated, "I am completely amazed, that you, an intelligent man, believe that Jesus is still alive... if that were true, it changes everything." Indeed it does.

But how do we prove it? The evidence for the resurrection has been well documented many times, from Morrison's *Who Moved the Stone?* to Lee Strobel's *The Case for Easter*. If you are really serious about investigating this subject, then NT Wright's magnum

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opus *The Resurrection of the Son of God* is the recommended book for this week. The evidence we have consists of the following:

**1. Eyewitness accounts:** The Gospel accounts are not written as mythical accounts. They are written as historical accounts that were dependent on witnesses and must be judged as such.

**2. The Empty Tomb:** You can try all manner of theories to explain the empty tomb but none of them work except the most obvious. Christ is risen.

**3. The Resurrection appearances:** These are carefully listed. Christ appeared to the disciples by the Sea of Galilee, to more than 500 at one time, to James, at a meal before Pentecost and the Ascension. They were varied, physical, undramatic, and unprecedented. It was the same Jesus but different. These were not collective hallucinations or mass visions. That would be psychologically very difficult and still runs up against the problem of the empty tomb. They were not ghost appearances.

I love the details for example in Luke 24:42-43: *"They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence."* Ghosts don't eat broiled fish. It was far more than a symbol. A symbol does not eat broiled fish.

**4. The Apostles' testimony:** Another key question for me is, "Were the apostles liars?" Does it make sense? The human heart is fickle, changes, and is open to bribery. Only one of them would have to have gone against it (threatened as they were with imprisonment, torture and death) and all would have been lost. But they didn't. The beginning point for the apostles is the resurrection. They were prepared to, and did, die for that belief. Not because they were fanatics or deluded, but because it was true, and being true, it changed everything including their deaths. If Christ had not risen from the dead, and they knew it, then the whole game is completely changed. 1 Corinthians 15:17-19 says: *"And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men."*

#### So what?

Tim Keller at the Gospel Coalition conference in 2013 made an intriguing statement. Resurrection makes Christianity the most irritating religion on earth. Why is that? Because you can argue about ethics, doctrines, rituals until you are blue in the face – people are free to believe what they want, what does it matter? But the resurrection means everything is changed. If Christ is not raised, Christians are to be pitied for wasting our lives. But if Christ is raised, then it would be insane to ignore him and his claims.

Stand on the hillside at the grave of a young man in the Scottish Highlands. The scenery is dramatic; the weather is bleak, cold, and windswept. You have just buried that young man. The way the world works is: that is it. His body is in the grave and will rot. But the Christian has a different hope. I stood at my father-in-

law's grave on the Island of Lewis with other mourners when I heard the minister say in casual conversation: "There is going to be some party here on the day of the resurrection!" I was astonished to hear such a traditional minister describe the resurrection in such terms, but he was right. In the words of the singer/songwriter Garth Hewitt: "May you live to dance on your own grave, May you live to boogie all night long."

Another time I took the heartbroken parents of a 27-year-old friend who had died suddenly to the mortuary to identify his body. It was both distressing and incredible. His body was there, but he was not there. In the materialist worldview: that is it. But everything in our soul screams out, "No – that is not right."

Ecclesiastes 3:11 says: "He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end." Like Job we declare: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the

earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him – with my own eyes – I and not another. How my heart yearns within me" (Job 19:25-27).

The resurrection gives us a future and hope. It's personal, certain and unimaginably wonderful. That is why Calvin declared: *"Let us, however, consider this settled; that no one has made progress in the school of Christ who does not joyfully await the day of death and final resurrection"* (Institutes, 3:10:5). And he urged us to reflect continually upon the resurrection: *"Accordingly, he alone has fully profited in the gospel who has accustomed himself to continual meditation upon the blessed resurrection"* (Institutes, 3:25:1).

My atheist friend, quoted earlier, said that in order for him to believe, it would have to be miraculous on a level that challenges everything that he thinks he knows or understands. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is just that. *"The resurrection, therefore, is the place to begin if you are looking for a satisfying faith on which to base your life. Do not waste a lot of time investigating every religion under the sun from animism to Hinduism. Examine the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus instead. If he is risen, you need look no further"* (Michael Green).

It also means that Jesus is who he says he is. It is the greatest evidence for Christ. He is Risen! May you come to know the Risen Christ. Happy Easter.



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*May you live to dance on your own grave...*