

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

Luke 24:1-12

In May of 2004, *The Christian Science Monitor* reported that there are over 100 books in print whose titles include the phrase “That Changed the World.” They include:

- *El Nino: The Weather Phenomenon That Changed the World*
- *Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World*
- *The Twist: The Story of the Song and Dance That Changed the World*
- *Mauve: How One Man Invented a Color That Changed the World*

Most of these books considerably overstate the importance of their subject, but one of these alleged world-changers could live up to the hype; *The Weekend That Changed the World: The Mystery of Jerusalem's Empty Tomb*. Of course, even that weekend had a troublesome beginning.

How can a Savior save when He dies? How can sin be destroyed when the Warrior is crucified? Jesus died, and His disciples had scattered like a covey of quail at the sound of a gun. Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate if he might give Jesus a proper burial. He provided his brand-new family tomb. It was mid-afternoon on Friday. A special Passover Sabbath would begin at sunset, so the disciples hastily prepared Jesus' body and placed it in the tomb before dusk.

If this was a typical tomb, a small trench ran across the opening. To the side of the opening, the trench was slightly higher. A massive stone was held in place with a wedge. When the wedge was removed, the stone rolled down into the trench and sealed the tomb. As the disciples trudged back to their lodging places in Jerusalem for the Passover, it must have been a doleful journey. That Sabbath day must have been the bleakest Sabbath any of them could remember. Of course, that is because none of them could have possibly imagined what was in store the following day.

I. The Miracle of the Resurrection of Jesus

The Sabbath had lasted from what we would reckon as sundown Friday through sundown Saturday. Jews did not embalm. They simply wrapped a body in shrouds with many spices. The disciples had buried Jesus with the spices on hand. According to Mark, the women secured more spices when the Sabbath had ended. Some shops reopened on Saturday evening and stayed open late into the night to capture whatever commerce was lost to the Sabbath observance. Then, the women went back to their place of lodging where they remained until early Sunday morning.

It was still dark when the women began to walk to the tomb. It was frustrating to have had to bury Jesus so hastily. They were anxious to do the job properly, but it was so early. They asked each other, “Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?” (Mark 16:3). What hearty group of men might be available and willing to help at such an early hour?

The women must have been pleasantly surprised as the tomb came into view. There were other early birds in Jerusalem. The stone was already rolled back. This family tomb was, after all, brand new. Perhaps, workmen were carving another shelf for another body as the tomb now had a guest occupant for whom Joseph had not planned. However, the next surprise was not so pleasant. When the women entered the tomb, they found that Jesus' body was gone.

What they did find terrified them. Luke speaks of “two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning” (24:4). By the time they recounted the story later, they had concluded that the men were, in fact, angels. The fear invoked by these two beings caused these women to crumble, with their faces to the ground. One asked, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!” (Luke 24:5). They seemed rather matter-of-fact in regard to the missing body of Jesus. It is almost as if they were saying, “He told you so. What did you expect to find?”

Jesus once said: “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.” (Luke 9:22). Jesus had suffered many things. He had been rejected by the powers that be. If all His words were to have any integrity, ultimately, He would also have to be raised from the dead.

If, when two people are conversing, one is preoccupied with his or her own agenda, he or she may hear what the other person is saying, but not really. Jesus’ disciples were looking for a *messiah*, someone of David’s royal line. Jesus was offering Himself as just such a character. They were hoping for the restoration of Israel. Jesus was talking about that too. But when Jesus spoke of dying and being raised to life, they didn’t get it. “That must be one of those cryptic weird things that He says every once in a while,” they figured, “sort of like His parables.”

But, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is no parable, my friend. It is not spiritual rhetoric with some symbolic meaning. When this group of believers speaks of the Resurrection, we mean that Jesus died and was buried. On the third day, He bodily came back to life. Some churches that wear the name Christian either spiritualize the Resurrection or treat it as something believers are free to believe or not. We believe that all of Christianity stands or falls on the reality of the literal bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. In a few moments, I will clarify what I mean by that statement.

The women returned from the tomb and reported what they had seen to the Apostles. Jesus’ predictions of His resurrection had also failed to register with them. They thought these women were talking “nonsense”. Ancient physicians used this word to describe the incoherent babbling of persons suffering from delirium. Enthusiasm was simply not enough to convince the Apostles.

John’s account of the story tells us that he ran to the tomb with Peter. John ran faster, but he did not enter the tomb until Peter arrived. Upon seeing the burial garments of Christ set aside as a man puts away his pajamas, John immediately believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Peter, on the other hand, stepped up to what was probably a shelf with an arch over it and studied the place where the body of Jesus had been laid to rest. The strips of linen were a silent but eloquent testimony to possible resurrection, but Peter could not be sure. “He went away, wondering to himself what had happened.” These words imply neither belief nor disbelief.

The women had seen angels. Mere strips of linen convinced John. What could God do for the cautious, plodding faith of Peter? At some point that same day, between Peter’s dazed walk away from the tomb and Jesus’ appearance to two disciples on the road to Emmaus, Jesus came to Peter and put all of his fears to rest. Peter had denied Jesus publicly, but for whatever reason, the Holy Spirit maintained the privacy of the moment when the Resurrected Jesus appeared to him.

Jesus had foretold His resurrection, but belief came hard even for those who had heard Him. It was necessary that He make Himself known. Later, Paul would catalog Jesus’ various appearances:

³For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. ⁶After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. – 1 Corinthians 15:3-8

Apart from the listing of the various post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, take special note of what Paul says in verse 3. These matters surrounding the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus are “of first importance.” These are central to the Gospel. Apart from them, there is no Gospel.

II. The Meaning of the Resurrection of Jesus

I promised to clarify the statement: We believe that all of Christianity stands or falls on the reality of the literal bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. Why are these matters “of first importance”?

1) Jesus’ Resurrection Proved His Deity. In Romans 1:3, Paul described the gospel ... “regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.” That is exactly what God wanted us to understand from the Resurrection – just **Who** this is we have been dealing with. The Jews crucified Jesus because He claimed to be the Son of God, in other words, like God or equal to Him. The resurrection of Jesus proved that He was **Who** He said He was.

2) Jesus’ Resurrection Secured our Justification. The cross demonstrated the love of Jesus. It demonstrated His willingness to die in the place of sinners. But a willingness to save is not the same thing as the power to save. “Christ died for our sins and he was raised for our justification” (Romans 4:25). It is the Resurrection that serves as the indispensable proof that all that Jesus endured really accomplished something. By all appearances, Jesus could die and we could say, “Behold, the Lamb of God.” But, only by His Resurrection could we have hope and assurance that in fact, He did “take away the sins of the world” rather than simply die as martyr.

3) Our Eternal Salvation Depends on Our Faith in the Resurrection of Jesus. The forgiveness of everybody’s sins is not simply a done deal just because Jesus died. The Bible insists that the individual believer must respond in faith. Paul tells us that “if you confess with your mouth ‘Jesus is Lord’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9). Any professed Christian group that does not treat the Resurrection as an essential does not preach the gospel. To them, the term “Christianity” may describe a certain ethical morality or worldview, but it does not reflect a saving faith. Paul wrote:

... ¹⁷And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. ¹⁹If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. – 1 Corinthians 15:17-19

4) Jesus' Resurrection Gives Credibility to Everything Else He Ever Said. He said that He would rise from the dead. Whether He did or did not colors everything else He taught. Jesus is absolutely trustworthy if He was raised. The value of everything He ever said is open to debate if He was not raised. He claimed to be the only way to God. He said, "Everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:40). Jesus' teachings concerning His identity, His atoning work and His teachings regarding heaven, hell, judgment and eternal life are all trustworthy only if He was raised from the dead. And, if He was raised from the dead, you owe him your undivided attention in these matters.

5) Jesus' Resurrection Demonstrates God's Power and Secures It for Believers. Speaking of God's "incomparably great power" available to believers, Paul wrote: "That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead ..." (Ephesians 1:19, 20). In Romans 6:4 he writes: "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." There is a power basis for living differently than we lived before we knew Christ. The power of God that raised Jesus from the dead is the same power in which believers can walk - strong, but only in Jesus, to say "No" to temptation.

6) Jesus' Resurrection Guarantees the Promise of our own Resurrections. In 1 Corinthians 15, the resurrection of Jesus is presented as a "first fruits" of the resurrection of all believers. In other words, it proves that God has the power to keep His promise to us of new life and new bodies at the end of the age. We believe that we will be raised, because we know that God's done it before. Elsewhere, Paul wrote: "We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him." (1 Thessalonians 4:14).

7) Jesus' Resurrection Demonstrates that He is God's Appointed Judge of the world. In John 5:22, Jesus said that His Father had "entrusted all judgment to the Son." Paul told the Athenians, "For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:31). Jesus' resurrection proves that there will be an accounting for our lives at the end of the age as well as a Judge to Whom we must give an account.

Is the Resurrection viable? I could defend it many ways but one fascinating defense comes from Charles Colson, convicted for his role in the Watergate scandal of the Nixon presidency, writes:

When I am challenged on the resurrection, my answer is always that the disciples and 500 others gave eyewitness accounts of seeing Jesus risen from the tomb. But then I'm asked, "How do you know they were telling the truth? Maybe they were perpetrating a hoax." My answer to that comes from an unlikely source: Watergate.

Watergate involved a conspiracy perpetuated by the closest aides to the president of the United States—the most powerful men in America, who were intensely loyal to their president. But one of them, John Dean, turned state's evidence, that is, testified against Nixon, as he put it, "to save his own skin"—and he did so only two weeks after informing the president about what was really going on—two weeks! The cover-up, the lie, could only be held together for two weeks, and then everybody else jumped ship in order to save themselves. Now, the fact is that all those around the president were facing was embarrassment, maybe prison. Nobody's life was at stake.

But what about the disciples? Twelve powerless men, peasants really, were facing not just embarrassment or political disgrace, but beatings, stonings, execution. Every single one of the disciples insisted, to their dying breaths, that they had physically seen Jesus bodily raised from the dead. Don't you think that one of those apostles would have cracked before being beheaded or stoned? That one of them would have made a deal with the authorities? None did. Men will give their lives for something they believe to be true; they will never give their lives for something they know to be false.

The Watergate cover-up reveals the true nature of humanity. Even political zealots at the pinnacle of power will, in the crunch, save their own necks, even at the expense of the ones they profess to serve so loyally. But the apostles could not deny Jesus, because they had seen him face to face, and they knew he had risen from the dead.

No, you can take it from an expert in cover-ups—I've lived through Watergate—that nothing less than a resurrected Christ could have caused those men to maintain to their dying whispers that Jesus is alive and is Lord. Two thousand years later, nothing less than the power of the risen Christ could inspire Christians around the world to remain faithful—despite prison, torture, and death. Jesus is Lord: That's the thrilling message of Easter. It's a historic fact, one convincingly established by the evidence—and one you can bet your life upon.

There is no salvation, no eternal hope and no power for living here and now apart from the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is why we stand unashamedly with Paul in declaring:

¹Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ²By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

³For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures ... - 1 Corinthians 15:1-4

We might think possums are dumb since we usually only see them dead on the side of the road. One old joke goes, "Why did the chicken cross the road?" "To prove to the possum that it could be done!" But possums are smart. They won't enter a hole if there's just one set of tracks going into it. They know there's something in there. But, if there are two sets of tracks, the possum will enter and not be afraid. The message of Easter is that we can enter the grave without fear because Jesus left a set of tracks leading out of the tomb. Paul preached the proclamation of Easter:

⁵⁵"Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?"

⁵⁶The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. - 1 Corinthians 15:55-57

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