

2005 Resurrection Sunday

The Evidence for Jesus' Resurrection

1 Corinthians 15:1-8, 14-15a, 17

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Scripture

How do you know that Jesus is alive?

Christians claim that Jesus is alive. Today, I would like to show you the evidence for Jesus' resurrection. Let's read 1 Corinthians 15:1-8, 14-15a, 17:

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

³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After 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. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. . . . ¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ¹⁵ More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses. . . . ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. (1 Corinthians 15:1-8, 14-15a, 17)

Introduction

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is either the supreme fact of history or else a gigantic hoax.

This seems to have been realized in the days of the first-century Church. On the one side, there was a little company of men and women who turned the whole world upside down by their passionate proclamation of the resurrection which had transformed

their lives. On the other side, there were those who vehemently denounced the whole story as outright blasphemy.

We find it hard to see the issue so clear-cut, for we live in an age that is tolerant and suspicious of all fanaticism. Most people have no desire to attack the Easter message. And yet they only half believe it. To many it is a beautiful story, full of spiritual meaning. Why worry, then, whether or not it is a literal fact of history?

But that is missing the point. Either the resurrection of Jesus Christ is infinitely more than a beautiful story, or else it is infinitely less.

If it is true, then it is *the* supreme fact of history; and to fail to adjust one's life to its implications means eternal loss.

But if it is not true, if Christ has not risen, then the whole of Christianity is a fraud, foisted on the world by a company of consummate liars, or, at best, deluded simpletons.

Even the Apostle Paul realized this when he wrote, in 1 Corinthians 15:14-15a, **“And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses.”**

Lesson

So that is the issue, and it is vital for us to come to a decision about it one way or the other. Today, I want to examine the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I. The Empty Tomb

The first evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the empty tomb.

A. *False Theories for the Empty Tomb*

Ever since the disciples began to proclaim that Jesus had risen from the dead, some have denied the historical resurrection

and have tried to come up with ways of explaining the evidence through alternative theories. Let me briefly list some of these alternative theories and show why they are false.

1. Unknown Tomb Theory

One of the earliest false theories presented to explain everything away is that the tomb of Jesus was unknown.

In Arlington National Cemetery near Washington, DC, we have the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. With Jesus, the opponents claim that it is the case of the Unknown Tomb.

One possible reason for this theory is that for years it was believed that those who were crucified were tossed into a common pit. However, the discovery in June, 1968 of the remains of Yohanan Ben Ha'galgal in a family tomb outside Jerusalem struck at the very heart of this theory, because Yohanan had been crucified. Yet, he had been buried in the family tomb at his burial.

The weakness of this theory is that it totally disregards the straightforward historical narrative about the events surrounding the burial of Jesus and the post-resurrection scene. The Bible says that Joseph of Arimathea, having received permission from Pilate, took the body to his own private tomb (Matthew 27:57-60), and not to a common pit for those who were crucified.

If, for some reason, the disciples did not know the location of the tomb where Jesus was, certainly Joseph of Arimathea did. It was his own private tomb. Furthermore, the Romans knew where the tomb was because they stationed a guard at the tomb.

2. Wrong Tomb Theory

The second false theory is known as the wrong tomb theory.

This theory is similar to the first theory. It advocates that when the women went to the tomb on Sunday morning, they went to the wrong tomb.

Kirsopp Lake, one of the initiators of this theory, suggested that the women simply picked out the wrong tomb on Sunday morning. The neighborhood of Jerusalem was full of rock tombs, and it would not be easy to distinguish one tomb from another without careful note. Says Lake:

The women came in the early morning to a tomb, which they thought was the one in which they had seen the Lord buried. They expected to find a closed tomb, but they found an open one; and a young man . . . [who] guesses their errand, tried to tell them that they had made a mistake in the place. "He is not here," said he, "see the place where they laid him," and probably pointed to the next tomb.

The first weakness of this theory is that the Bible is very clear in Luke 23:55-56 that the women noted precisely where Jesus was laid because they intended to return Sunday morning to visit the grave. It is unlikely that they went to the wrong tomb.

The second weakness is that Lake glosses over evidence that does not support his theory. For example, he says that the young man at the tomb said, "He is not here. See the place where they laid him." In actual fact, all three Gospel writers have the young man adding, "He is risen!" Lake completely skips over this statement because it does not fit his theory.

3. Legend Theory

A third false theory is the legend theory.

Some argue that the resurrection accounts are merely legends, cropping up years after the time of Jesus Christ.

In reality, this would have been improbable. Resurrection accounts were circulating and written down by the original eyewitnesses. Paul wrote his letter to the Corinthians about 25 years after the death of Christ. He said that most of the 500 to whom Jesus appeared after the resurrection were still alive. Legends usually do not come into circulation so quickly after the event.

There are many problems with the legend theory, but the main problem, as J. N. D. Anderson correctly concludes, is that it is “almost meaningless to talk about legends when you’re dealing with the eyewitnesses themselves.”

4. Spiritual Resurrection Theory

A fourth false theory is the spiritual resurrection theory.

This theory states that Christ’s body decayed in the grave and that his real resurrection was merely spiritual.

Jesus himself completely demolished the spiritual resurrection theory. When his disciples, startled by seeing him, thought they were seeing a spirit, Jesus admonished them in Luke 24:39, “Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.” Later, Christ ate fish with his disciples, further demonstrating his flesh and bones.

Matthew records that when the disciples met Jesus after the resurrection they took hold of his feet and worshipped him. You don’t grab the legs of a spirit!

This theory also ignores the testimony of the Roman guard and of the Jewish High Priest who bribed the soldiers and concocted the story that the disciples stole the body from the tomb. It also ultimately disregards the empty tomb.

5. Hallucination Theory

A fifth false theory is the hallucination theory.

This is one of the more popular theories for explaining away the resurrection of Jesus. This theory says that the people only thought that they had seen Jesus. In reality, they were hallucinating. In this way, all the post-resurrection appearances can be dismissed.

The word “hallucination” is an Anglicized form of the Latin term *alucination*, which means “a wandering of the mind, idle talk,

prating.” The *Psychiatric Dictionary* defines it as “an apparent perception of an external object when no such object is present.”

The hallucination theory is weak for many reasons, but let me cite just one. A hallucination is very personal. It is unlikely that two people will have the same hallucination. And it is certainly impossible that large numbers of people will have the same hallucination. The apostle Paul said that “[Christ] was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also” (15:3-8).

It is impossible for so many people and on so many different occasions to have the same hallucination. The hallucination theory is really just a shallow attempt to deny an historic reality.

6. Stolen by Disciples Theory

A sixth false theory is that the disciples stole the body of Jesus.

This theory suggests that the disciples stole the body and then fabricated the resurrection account.

This theory was actually even recorded in Matthew's Gospel account. After the resurrection, the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests and elders what had happened. The chief priests and elders then bribed the soldiers with a large sum of money and told them to say, “His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep” (Matthew 28:13).

But this theory has several weaknesses. First, if the Roman guard had fallen asleep, how could they have known that it was the disciples who had stolen the body? Any lawyer for the defense would have loved to put the captain of the guard on the stand for cross-examination. This defense simply would not stand up in court.

Second, getting past the Roman guard unit would have raised eyebrows. You see, a Roman guard unit was a 16-man security force. Normally what they did was this: four men were placed immediately in front of what they were to protect. The other 12 were asleep in a semi-circle in front of them with their heads pointing in. To steal what these guards were protecting, thieves would first have to walk over those who were asleep. Every four hours, another unit of four was awakened, and those who had been awake went to sleep.

Third, the position of an extremely large stone—moved up and away from the entrance to the tomb—makes it rather difficult to defend the idea that the entire guard unit slept through it all. The soldiers would have had to be deaf not to have heard the rolling stone.

Fourth, this theory does not take into account the character of the disciples. They were to a man men of integrity and high moral character. Proponents of this theory allege that the disciples not only foisted a lie upon the people, but that they lived out the rest of their lives proclaiming a lie about the “risen Christ.” Yet, in actual fact, the disciples were willing to face arrest, imprisonment, beating, and horrible deaths, and not one of them ever denied the Lord and recanted that Christ had risen from the dead!

And finally, if the disciples had stolen the body of Christ, how could the many post-resurrection appearances of Christ have been explained away—especially since they were made to over 500 people at one time?

7. Stolen by Authorities Theory

A seventh false theory is that the authorities stole the body of Jesus.

This theory proposes that the Roman or Jewish authorities took the body of Jesus and put it in safekeeping so that there could be no deception by anyone alleging a resurrection from the dead.

The disciples went back to Jerusalem and began to preach, "Jesus is alive. He has risen!"

If what they were preaching was a lie, why did the authorities not produce the body? Where was the official denial? Why didn't the authorities say, "That's nonsense! Jesus did not rise from the dead. We gave orders to move his body"?

The only reasonable answer is that the authorities could not produce the body. The authorities had no clue as to where the body of Jesus was because Jesus' body had risen from the tomb!

8. Swoon Theory

An eighth false theory is the swoon theory.

This theory was popular with the 18th-century rationalists. Today, it is popular on university campuses and with some Muslims.

The swoon theory states that Jesus really did not die on the cross. It is true, they say, that he was nailed to the cross and suffered from shock, pain and loss of blood. But instead of dying, he merely fainted (or swooned) from exhaustion. The disciples, mistaking him for dead, buried him alive. They were easily misled because medical knowledge was not very advanced at that time.

The cold tomb in which Jesus was placed revived him. The disciples were so ignorant, they couldn't believe mere resuscitation revived him, so they insisted it was a resurrection from the dead.

This theory in actual fact is more miraculous than the resurrection itself!

This theory is fraught with difficulties. Let me mention a few. First, when Jesus hung on the cross he was proclaimed dead by an experienced, professional Roman executioner. In fact, the Bible says that when the soldier pierced his side blood *and* water came out of it. Medical science tells us that this is a sign of death.

Second, Jesus was encased in linen and more than 100 pounds of sticky spices. If he were not already dead, the encasing linen and spices alone would have suffocated him.

And third, it would have been impossible for Jesus—weak as he was from his beating and crucifixion—to split out of the encasement, push the stone away from the tomb, fight off the guards, and walk away on pierced feet.

9. The Passover Plot Theory

And finally, a modern twist to the swoon theory is the Passover Plot theory.

This theory has been proposed by Hugh Schoenfield in his book titled *The Passover Plot*. According to Schoenfield, Jesus believed that he was the Messiah and therefore plotted a very timely and detailed plan to arrange what appeared to be his resurrection. Jesus took into his confidence Joseph of Arimathea, and an anonymous “young man.” Jesus knew of the many Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah, and ordered his life in such a way that he could fulfill these predictions and manipulate the minds of people.

Jesus arranged a feigned death on the cross by being administered a drug, Schoenfield said. The drug was given him when the wine vinegar was offered to him.

The plan was for Joseph to take his body to one of his tombs. When the effects of the drug wore off, Jesus would appear alive and reveal himself as the Messiah.

However, the plot ran aground when, unexpectedly, the Roman guard thrust a spear into the side of Jesus. He regained consciousness only temporarily and finally died. Before dawn, the mortal remains of Jesus were quickly taken away and disposed of so that his grave would be empty.

An emotionally crazed Mary then mistook the unknown “young man” as Jesus, Schoenfield said. On four different occasions the mysterious “young man” was identified as Jesus by the confused disciples. Neither Joseph of Arimathea nor the “young man” ever corrected the misapprehension of the disciples.

There are many problems with this theory. The major problem is Schoenfield's blatant "pick and choose" approach. It is a classic case of approaching evidence with a preconceived theory and selecting only those facts that support your view and rejecting all others.

Take, for example, the guard at the tomb. Schoenfield rejects the guard at the tomb because Matthew was the only writer to record this. His reasoning is that if only one writer records an event, then it should be dismissed as historically inaccurate. On this basis, Schoenfield should reject the soldier thrusting the spear into the side of Jesus—a major premise in his argument—since John is the only writer to record this detail.

This kind of sloppy reasoning and argumentation is found throughout Schoenfield's book.

B. The Fact of the Empty Tomb

The theories for explaining the empty tomb of Jesus have been examined in light of all the precautions taken at the tomb.

Only one conclusion takes into account all of the facts and does not adjust them to preconceived notions. It is the conclusion that Jesus Christ is in fact risen from the dead by a supernatural act of God in history.

II. The Resurrection Appearances

The second evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the resurrection appearances.

On several occasions, Jesus appeared alive after rising from the dead. The apostle Paul lists several people who saw Jesus, and the reason he mentions them is so that skeptics can interview and corroborate the claim that Jesus is alive.

Josh McDowell says that if you took the 500 witnesses who saw Jesus alive after his death and burial and place them in a court-

room, and give all of them just 6 minutes of testimony each, you would have more than 50 hours of firsthand eyewitness testimony!

Another factor to consider is the variety of locations and people involved in Jesus' appearances. These appearances are not stereotyped. No two of them is exactly alike.

Therefore, we must deduce from the number and variety of appearances, which could be corroborated by eyewitness testimony at the time, that Jesus rose from the dead.

III. The Transformation of the Disciples

The third evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the transformation of the disciples.

The disciples were so convinced about the reality of the resurrection that they were changed from a frightened, scared group of people into a fearless, indomitable band of witnesses. Despite threats, not one of the disciples changed his story about the resurrection. Tradition says that ten of the twelve apostles were martyred for their faith. In the first few centuries thousands of Christians were put to death for their belief that Jesus rose from the dead.

Do you think that people would willingly die for something that they believed was not true? Of course not. They willingly died because they were utterly convinced that Jesus was alive!

Conclusion

Friends, Jesus is alive!

The tomb is empty. The disciples saw him. And the transformation of the disciples testifies to his resurrection.

This is the good news, the gospel. This is what the apostle Paul meant when he wrote to the Corinthians **“that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”**

What are the implications of the resurrection of Jesus Christ for you and for me? Since the resurrection is true, to fail to adjust your life to its implications means eternal loss.

The Bible says that “salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). The apostle Paul says to the Corinthians that it is **“by this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you.”**

So believe in the risen Jesus and be saved. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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