

# Why We Can Believe the Resurrection Really Happened

“And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.”

The Apostle Paul in a letter to the Corinthian church, circa AD 55 (1 Corinthians 15:17 ESV)

The events we celebrate this week are the most significant events of history. They are the bedrock of our Christian faith, and the ultimate source of hope for those who trust in Christ. As Paul writes, if Jesus was not resurrected, then our faith is worthless. As a church, then, we would do well to spend time remembering why we can have complete confidence that the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus are historical facts.

This guide is content-heavy and may feel “academic.” You may even claim that your faith doesn’t need all these facts! Even if that’s you, our intent is that this would better equip you to help others understand why they can believe that Jesus really was crucified and raised from the grave. As the Apostle Peter urged his listeners to live in such a way that they were “always...prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15). Consider this one resource to help you lovingly and skillfully make that defense!

There are three basic questions surrounding the events of Easter weekend: (1) Did Jesus really die? (2) Was the tomb really empty? and (3) Was Jesus really physically resurrected? These will guide our discussion. As we get into it, you’ll notice there are a lot of footnotes. They’re included so that you will know that the information in this sheet comes from viable sources and that you can know where to look if you’re nerdy enough to want do additional study! Ok, enough smalltalk.

## Question #1: Did Jesus really die?

The Bible tells us that Jesus was crucified, but we get few details of what that meant:

“And when they had crucified him,...”  
Matthew 27:35

“...there they crucified him,...”  
Luke 23:33

“And they crucified him...”  
Mark 15:24

“When the soldiers had crucified Jesus,...”  
John 19:23

The Roman philosopher and politician, Cicero, who died by assassination in 43 B.C., wrote that crucifixion was a “most cruel and disgusting penalty; and the ‘extreme and ultimate penalty for a slave.’” In addition, “The very name ‘cross’ should not only be far from the body of a Roman citizen, but also from his thoughts, his eyes, and his ears.”<sup>1</sup>

There was little mystery about what crucifixion entailed to a first and second-century audience. In fact, one of the whole points of crucifixion was to make a public spectacle of those who had somehow exhibited rebellion against the Roman Empire. It wasn’t merely a way the death penalty would be carried out. No, it was much more than that. It was a kind of “public service announcement” straight out of a horror story. *“See what happens to those who go against the Empire!”*

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 947.

To be crucified meant that a person would be “attached [to a stake] in various ways: impaling, hanging, nailing, and tying. Using a stake to impale would normally kill the victim instantly or quickly. Using a stake or pole to crucify would normally effect a slow death since no vital organ would be pierced.”<sup>2</sup> The possibility of a slow death was further increased when the vertical post was fully decked out with some kind of support—usually a small block at the victim’s feet or as a small seat that would allow the person to place part of his weight on. But don’t get the wrong idea, this was “not as an act of mercy but so that the suffering would last longer. If the condemned could lift himself up to get breath, he would survive longer than if the unsupported body were dead weight hanging from the nailed or tied arms.”<sup>3</sup> Crucifixion was a slow, tortuous death.

The act of crucifixion was nothing short of torture leading to inevitable death. But, it’s just one part of the story because crucifixion was preceded by an equally evil form of torture. The Romans used an instrument with bone and metal balls with “tentacles” embedding themselves into the victim’s body and dislodge only by tearing or taking flesh with them. An article published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 1986 investigated the physiological impact Jesus’s crucifixion had on his body. These medical doctors, when describing this pre-crucifixion flogging, said the following:

As the Roman soldiers repeatedly struck the victim’s back with full force, the iron balls would cause deep contusions, and the leather thongs and sheep bones would cut into the skin and subcutaneous tissues. Then, as the flogging continued, the lacerations would tear into the underlying skeletal muscles and produce quivering ribbons of bleeding flesh. Pain and blood loss generally set the stage for circulatory shock. The extent of blood loss may well have determined how long the victim would survive on the cross.<sup>4</sup>

Did Jesus really die? Consider these summary points:

- Jesus’ body was so severely beaten that He was unable to carry the cross beam to the crucifixion site.
- During the crucifixion, Jesus’ major nerves were pierced/severed by 6 to 7-inch nails driven through His wrists and feet.
- The Roman soldiers were expert executioners and they confirmed Jesus’ death by piercing His side, exposing the kind of fluids expected from someone who has died from crucifixion.<sup>5</sup>
- Multiple non-Christian sources outside the Bible claim that Jesus died by crucifixion.<sup>6</sup>
- If Jesus didn’t die, why would the apostles all face extreme persecution and even death for saying that He did? People do not die for something they know is not true!<sup>7</sup>

## Question #2: Was the tomb really empty?

The Gospel accounts record that Jesus’ body was requested by an unlikely figure:

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 945.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 951.

<sup>4</sup> W. D. Edwards, W. J. Gabel, and F. E. Hosmer, “On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 255 (1986): 1457.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 1463.

<sup>6</sup> Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2004), 48-50. They cite Josephus, Tacitus, Lucian, Mara Bar-Serapion, and the Talmud.

<sup>7</sup> Gary Habermas points to “a virtual consensus among scholars who study Jesus’ resurrection that, subsequent to Jesus’ death by crucifixion, his disciples really believed that he appeared to them risen from the dead.” See Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection*, 49-50.

“...Joseph, from the Jewish town of Arimathea. He was a member of the council, a good and righteous man, who had not consented to their decision and action; and he was looking for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid him in a tomb cut in stone, where no one had ever yet been laid”

Luke 23:50–53

We would expect that a family member or a disciple would request Jesus’s body; instead, it’s a member of the same group of officials who had demanded Jesus’s crucifixion.

The charge that the tomb might not have been empty is about as wild as the claim that Jesus might not have died on the cross. Consider the following reasons:

- The initial preaching in Acts of Jesus’s death and resurrection (an empty tomb is implied) take place in or near Jerusalem. If the tomb was not empty, it would have been easy to produce Jesus’s body!<sup>8</sup>
- It was a common practice in Palestine for tombs of “prophets or other holy persons” to be venerated as sites of “religious worship,” but “there is no good evidence that such a practice was ever associated with Jesus’s tomb.”<sup>9</sup>
- The charge developed that the disciples stole Jesus’s body (see an anticipation of this in Matt 27). If not for an empty tomb there would be no need for such a charge! It’s an alternate explanation for why the tomb was empty, but it does nothing to argue against an empty tomb.<sup>10</sup>
- The Gospels record that the first witnesses of the empty tomb were women. Women had such a low status in this culture that their testimony was “virtually worthless...No one would have invented a story and made women the first witnesses to the empty tomb.” On top of this, the women are specifically named, and thus could have been challenged if it wasn’t true.<sup>11</sup>
- The Gospel accounts of the empty tomb are notorious for being difficult to harmonize. Which women were there? Was it dark out or light? These differences can be explained, but the fact that they exist seems to add credibility to the notion that the accounts are not fabricated (i.e., one should expect that a made-up story would lack these difficulties).<sup>12</sup>

### Question #3: Was Jesus really physically resurrected?

In 1 Corinthians 15:3, the Apostle Paul recalls an earlier encounter he had with the believers in Corinth. More specific, Paul cites the gospel message he had passed on to them at that time when he writes, “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received.” The following verses express

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker House, 1987), 167. Moreland describes how implausible it would be for Joseph of Arimathea (and his tomb) to have been made up. As Moreland puts it, “Almost everyone knew who was on the Sanhedrin. A fictitious character would have been more plausible if someone obscure had been chosen.”

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>12</sup> Craig Blomberg presents a possible explanation of the differences. See Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 413-8.

what many scholars today believe to be an early creed of the Church. In other words, Paul is recounting how he had previously “received” the same gospel message that he later “delivered” to them. This is significant because it is likely that this creed, cited here by Paul, was circulating among the believers when he first came to faith—a time that was probably only a couple years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. The letter of 1 Corinthians itself likely dates to around 55 AD, meaning that it’s well within the lifetime [at most, 25 years later] of many of those who were eyewitnesses to Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.<sup>13</sup>

The timeframe is significant for the following reasons:

- Verses 5-9 list a number of eyewitnesses to Jesus’ resurrected presence. Note Paul’s comment in v. 6—“most of whom are still alive.” It’s as if Paul is inviting skeptics among the Corinthians to ask some of these 500+ eyewitnesses about their encounter.
- The references to James’ and Paul’s encounter with the risen Christ are remarkable since both did not initially believe. Both underwent inexplicable transformations unless they truly did experience what Scripture claims.

In addition to the timeframe and claims of 1 Corinthians 15, there are other factors that defy explanation apart from the resurrection:

- Jesus’s appearances to his followers reveal that they are slow to believe (e.g., the women report the empty tomb and encounter with Jesus but the men aren’t sure they believe; Thomas refuses to believe until he sees first-hand). These are not details one would make up since they cast a negative shadow on those who would form the foundation of the early church.<sup>14</sup>
- Early Jewish Christ-followers made significant changes to their religious practices very soon after Jesus’ death. For example, they began to hold Sunday as a day of worship rather than the Sabbath (Saturday), and they began to practice the Lord’s Supper and baptism.<sup>15</sup>
- Some propose that hallucinations rather than actual appearances of Jesus took place. Hallucinations are typically an individual occurrence, so it is extraordinarily unlikely that more than 500 people would have a simultaneous hallucination! Also, hallucinations do not explain the empty tomb.<sup>16</sup>

In sum, we have plenty of reasons to believe that Jesus really died by crucifixion, that the tomb really was empty, and that Jesus really was resurrected. This is not wishful thinking on our part, but is actually the best explanation for the events we commemorate on Easter weekend.

The Apostle Paul, after making the case for the importance of the resurrection, stated this:

“But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”

1 Corinthians 15:20

He is risen! He is risen indeed!

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<sup>13</sup> Blomberg, *From Pentecost to Patmos: An Introduction to Acts through Revelation* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006), 195-6.

<sup>14</sup> Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, 174-5.

<sup>15</sup> Habermas and Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection*, 179-80.

<sup>16</sup> Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, 177.