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Christ . . . Defeated . . . Death!
Acts 17:29-31

Even the most skeptical, cynical, and unbelieving historians agree on *four facts*. They all agree that a man named Jesus died on a Roman cross on Friday and was later buried in a tomb. Second, they all agree that the tomb where the body of Jesus was laid was empty on Sunday morning. Third, they all agree that countless individuals, both men and women, testified that they saw Jesus alive on multiple occasions after he had died. And fourth and finally, they all agree that James, his half-brother, who initially did not believe Jesus was the Messiah, came to faith and held so tenaciously to that belief that he was willing to be stoned to death, and that Saul of Tarsus, who for quite some time hated and persecuted those who claimed that Jesus was alive, also came to faith and devoted his life to spreading that message and was eventually beheaded for his belief and devotion to Jesus.

No respectable historian, even those who are atheists, can any longer deny these four facts: *Jesus died, Jesus was buried on a Friday in the tomb that on Sunday was empty, hundreds of people bore witness that they had seen and talked with Jesus after his death, and people like James and Paul who initially rejected Jesus as Messiah came to believe in him and were willing to endure horrific deaths for his sake.*

My question to such unbelievers and to all of you today is simple: *What is the best explanation of these incontrovertible facts? What best accounts for these four truths?*

Are you aware of the fact that the vast majority of scholars, whether they are Christians or atheists, agree that the tomb of Jesus was empty? There is no evidence anywhere in the ancient world that anyone disputed this point, not even those who crucified Jesus. And they were the ones who stood most to gain by simply hauling out the body of Jesus, pointing to it, confirming his identity, and forever putting Christianity in the grave as well. But they didn't.

So how do those who reject Christianity and ridicule the idea that Jesus was literally and physically raised from the dead respond to the reality of the empty tomb?

Why was the Tomb of Jesus Empty on Sunday morning?

(1) The disciples stole the body and created the story that he rose from the dead.

Stealing a dead body is one thing, but how then do you make it appear to be alive? We aren't dealing merely with the fact that the tomb was empty but also with the fact that hundreds of people testified to seeing Jesus alive with their own eyes. How did they make the dead body of Jesus appear to Paul on the road to Damascus a year later? And if the risen Jesus didn't appear to Paul, why did he turn from a lucrative career as a Pharisee to one as a hunted outlaw, destined to be stoned and beaten and jailed and ridiculed and eventually decapitated? Did Paul abandon everything he had worked and sacrificed to achieve on the basis of a fabrication?

If the disciples stole the body they obviously knew that Jesus didn't rise again. And if they knew the resurrection was a myth that they themselves had concocted, why did they so willingly and joyfully endure such persecution and eventual martyrdom? People don't typically die horrible deaths for something they know isn't true, unless, of course, they are certifiably insane.

In other words, even if they had some reason for creating a myth about Jesus rising from the dead, this would have quickly given way to their natural sense of self-preservation.

So, the evidence is strongly against the notion that the disciples stole the body. (1) They were fearful men who had fled in terror and self-protection when Jesus was arrested and crucified (Mark 14:50). (2) It is psychologically implausible. As previously noted, if they had stolen the body they obviously knew that Jesus was dead. Yet they preached courageously that he was alive and then were willing to be beaten, stoned, imprisoned, and martyred for that message, a message that all of them knew to be a fraud. It takes more faith to believe in such a silly story than it does

to believe that God raised Jesus from the dead. (3) These were pious, godly Jewish men who fled to Bethany after Gethsemane. They would not have defiled themselves and the Sabbath by traveling to Jerusalem and robbing a grave.

Stealing the body cannot account for the radical change in their lives and their willingness to endure horrific oppression and rejection for their beliefs. ***What did they stand to gain by stealing the body and lying about it?*** Try to envision this conversation between Peter and the other apostles who suggested that they steal the body and fabricate the doctrine of resurrection:

“Great idea, guys. We can perpetrate this lie and then devote ourselves to spreading it everywhere. And just think of what’s in it for us! Think about what we’ll gain by it: hatred, loss of income, beatings, mockery, loss of reputation, imprisonment, and I get to be crucified upside down! Wow! Sounds like a great idea. I can’t wait to get started.”

Really?

(2) Ah, I can hear some of you say, “But ***maybe Jesus didn’t even die at all.*** Maybe he appeared to hundreds of people after the crucifixion because he was still alive when they took him down off the cross.” This is the old “***swoon***” theory, the idea that Jesus was drugged on the cross and fell into an unconscious state that seemed like death; later, when laid in the tomb, he somehow revived and was refreshed and bolted from the grave as if he has been raised from the dead.

Needless to say, the “swoon” theory would require that several people be guilty of the most unimaginable incompetence or outright stupidity. It would require us to believe that the Roman military guard not only failed in their orders to execute Jesus but then also failed to determine if he was in fact dead. Either of these acts of incompetence would have guaranteed their execution as well. They had two ways of making certain that a crucified victim actually died. If the person lingered on the cross they would simply take a rod and break their legs to prevent them from pushing themselves up on the beam in order to keep their lungs open and functioning. And if after this they were still uncertain, they would pierce the side of the victim with a spear. We are told that “blood and water” flowed out from his side when he was pierced (John 19:34), an indisputable sign of death, as the red and white blood corpuscles had separated.

The “swoon” theory would also require us to believe that after enduring the agony of Gethsemane, several trials all through the night, a savage beating ordered by the Sanhedrin, a crown of thorns and being beaten on the head with a rod, the horrors of a Roman scourging, a spear in the side, massive loss of blood, three days in the tomb without medical attention, that Jesus then removed the stone from in front of the tomb, overpowered the armed guards stationed there, somehow convinced his disciples that he had conquered death and the grave, and then lived out his life in obscurity only to die of natural causes at some later time. If you have enough faith to believe that, more power to you!

Dr. Gary Habermas rightfully points out that if we are to believe the swoon theory, we must believe that Jesus (1) didn’t die from blood loss and infection, (2) recovered his strength without medical attention, food or water, (3) was strong enough to move a stone that had sealed shut his tomb, (4) that he overpowered and evaded the Roman guard who were present where he was buried, and (5) and that he recovered quickly and completely enough to pass himself off as having a resurrected and glorified body.

And we must then still account for the ascension of Jesus into heaven. If he wasn’t the Son of God and didn’t rise from the dead in a glorified body, then how did he make it appear to his followers that he ascended into heaven, sufficiently persuasive to convince them that it literally occurred so that they found the courage to endure horrific mockery and persecution?

(3) Perhaps the alleged appearances of Jesus to his followers were in fact the ***mass hallucination*** of people who desperately wanted and needed for Jesus to be alive. ***But mass hallucinations simply do not happen.*** It’s one thing for one individual to hallucinate, but for in excess of 500 people to experience the identical hallucination is virtually impossible. In fact, ***I would argue that it would take a greater supernatural miracle to explain such a mass hallucination than it would to simply believe that a man actually rose from the dead.***

As one author put it: The mass hallucination argument “is not really a naturalistic explanation [of the empty tomb] at all. It’s just swapping one miraculous event for another” (Michael Patton). And it would have been easy for the

disciples of Jesus simply to go to the tomb and see if it was empty. If that many people experienced the same hallucination, thinking that they saw Jesus alive from the dead, surely some among them would have made the effort to verify the sight of Jesus alive by visiting the tomb to make certain that it was in fact either empty or still contained the body of Jesus.

Furthermore, this theory cannot account for their subsequent strong belief in the literal, physical reality of the resurrection. When a person hallucinates, such as those who take LSD or similar drugs, after the “high” is over and the hallucination ends, they know it precisely for that. They know what they “saw” or experienced wasn’t objectively real.

Also, if the post-mortem appearances of Jesus were only visions or hallucinations, why did they end so suddenly? What cured these visionaries of their hallucinations so quickly? Why didn’t they continue? We know that the appearances of Jesus ended after 40 days, precisely because he ascended into heaven in their physical presence. Gregory Koukl sums up well, in saying:

“It is hard to believe that so many different people – even complete skeptics – in different locations, at different times, as individuals and in groups, over more than a month, could have had the same hallucination about the same person who they all were quite certain (for good reason) had been killed and buried just days or weeks before” (Greg Koukl, *The Story of Reality*, 151).

Think about the appearances of Jesus after the resurrection. (1) He wasn’t merely seen by a handful of people or just the disciples, but by over 500 (1 Cor. 15:5). (2) His appearance wasn’t a singular event on one day but occurred over a sufficiently long period of time, 40 days (Acts 1:3). It wasn’t an anomalous singular occurrence. (3) He was seen on at least 10 occasions to provide ample testimony to the reality of who he was. (4) He didn’t make an appearance for a split second and then disappear, but remained with many for a long enough duration that his identity was made unmistakably clear. (5) And he didn’t just appear to them. He also ate dinner with them. They touched his body and conversed with him.

To sum up, Jesus appeared: (1) to certain women at the tomb itself (Matt. 28:1-10); (2) to Mary Magdalene at the tomb on her second visit there (John 20:11-18; Mark 16:9-11); (3) to Peter (Luke 24:34; 1 Cor. 15:5); (4) to two disciples, Cleopas and another on the way to Emmaus in the middle of the day (Mark 16:12-13; Luke 24:13-35); (5) to the ten apostles, minus Thomas on Easter Sunday night (John 20:19-23); (6) one week later to all eleven apostles (John 20:26-28); (7) to several disciples at the sea of Galilee while they were fishing (John 21:1-23); (8) to the apostles and about 500 others on a mountain in Galilee (Matt. 28:16-20; 1 Cor. 15:6); (9) to James (1 Cor. 15:7); and finally, (10) to the apostles at Jerusalem on the Mt. of Olives (Acts 1:3-8).

(4) Maybe ***the Roman authorities themselves removed the body from the tomb***. But there are only two reasons to do so. On the one hand, if you wanted to fabricate a resurrection you simply steal the body and claim that Jesus rose from the dead. But that is the last thing in the world the enemies of Christianity wanted to happen. On the other hand you might steal the body in order to disprove the resurrection. That is to say, when the followers of Jesus begin to claim he rose from the dead you simply put the body on display and end the debate. The Romans fought and resisted the early Christians but never once attempted to refute their claim that Jesus was alive. But if they had stolen the body they could easily have done so.

(5) ***Maybe it was dark and the women went to the wrong tomb and finding it empty proclaimed that Jesus had risen from the dead***. But if they went to the wrong tomb and used this as the basis for declaring that Jesus had risen from the dead, why didn’t the Roman authorities go to the correct tomb, produce the body, and put an end to Christianity right from the start? And are we to believe that Peter made the same mistake in broad daylight when he went to the tomb (John 20:6)? How is it that both the women and Peter saw the empty grave clothes if they were at the wrong tomb?

The Resurrection of “Faith”!

Rudolph Bultmann, 20th century German NT scholar, argued that ***what emerged from the tomb wasn’t a body but a belief!*** It wasn’t just the figure of Jesus who had died and was buried but also the faith of the disciples. What rose out of the tomb, therefore, wasn’t the person of Jesus but their faith in God, their hope for tomorrow, their belief that all

Jesus had taught them was real and valid and a path to living a happy and successful life. Thus Christ is “alive” today only in the sense that the message of love and justice which he preached is among us, powerfully shaping our lives and energizing our hearts.

But “it was not faith which created the experience of the appearances [of Jesus] but the appearances [of Jesus] that created belief in the resurrection” (George Ladd, 22).

So why is it that people reject the resurrection of Jesus from the dead? There are only two possible answers that make any sense at all. The first is that they are atheistic naturalists and do not believe in anything supernatural. God didn’t raise Jesus from the dead because there is no God. And scientific naturalism tells us that Jesus didn’t rise from the dead because dead people don’t come to life again. But the second reason is the more prominent. People reject the resurrection of Jesus from the dead because ***they don’t want to believe it is true.*** Why? Because of what Paul said in his sermon on Mars Hill:

“Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:29-31).

People hate the idea of resurrection because it means they are accountable to God and are called to turn from their sin and trust the saving work of Jesus on the cross. They hate the idea of resurrection because it is the inescapable reminder to them that a day is coming when they will stand before God and be judged in righteousness. The bottom line is that people reject the resurrection because to accept and believe it and live in the light of its reality means they must abandon their sinful lifestyles, and they don’t want to.

People have a vested interest in denying the resurrection because it is God’s way of providing incorrigible proof that in and through Jesus Christ all unrepentant men and women will be judged. People don’t reject the gospel and the truth of Christ’s death and resurrection for intellectual or philosophical reasons. They reject it for moral reasons. It is not for lack of evidence that they reject the resurrection but because of their love for sin.

Conclusion

There is a story that has long circulated about how news of Wellington’s defeat of Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo reached England. I can’t verify that it is true, but even if it isn’t, it makes a good point. Winchester, England, is famous for its college and cathedral. A caretaker of the cathedral, now deceased, who used to lead people on tours of the old church loved to tell the visitors how the news of the battle of Waterloo reached England. There were no telephones or telegraphs in those days, but everyone knew that Wellington was to meet the French commander Napoleon in a great battle. A ship returning to England after the battle was over signaled to a man on top of Winchester Cathedral. He in turn signaled another man on a hill who in turn relayed the message to others, and so on. This is how the news of the battle’s outcome spread throughout England.

But there was a heavy fog that day and the signal was misread. The man on board the ship signaled one word: “Wellington,” followed a moment later by the second word: “defeated.” But then the fog rolled in and prevented anything else from being sent from the ship to the shores of England. Word spread throughout England and the people were understandably distraught. But when the fog lifted the full message came through: “Wellington . . . defeated . . . Napoleon!” And all England rejoiced.

So also with the resurrection. For three days the fog of death prevented the full signal to come through, and the world alive at that time mourned. But soon the fog of death lifted in the bright sunlight of the resurrection and the message came through: ***“Christ . . . defeated . . . death!”***

Roll Call among the Dead

And now, as has been my custom every Easter for countless years of ministry, it is time to call roll among the dead.

"Julius Caesar?" . . . "Here!"
"Confucius?" "Yo!"
"Muhammad?" . . . "Here!"
"Buddha?" . . . "Present!"
"Mahatma Gandhi?" . . . "Yo!"
"Joseph Smith?" . . . "Here!"
"Martin Luther?" Present!
"Martin Luther King, Jr.?" "Yo!"
"Charles Darwin?" "Right here!"
"Abraham Lincoln?" "Yeah, I'm here."
"Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia?" Present!
"Jesus?" "Jesus of Nazareth?" "Where is Jesus of Nazareth?"

The only reply is that of the angel, who said to the women at the tomb on that glorious Easter morning:

"He is **NOT** here! For he has risen, just as he said!"