

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

Introduction

The bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is the foundation upon which the Christian church and the Christian faith exist. It is the “without which, nothing” of our faith, as Paul says in the classic text on the resurrection, 1 Cor. 15.

For I delivered to you as of **first importance** what I also received, **that Christ died for our sins** according to the Scriptures,⁴ and **that He was buried**, and **that He was raised** on the third day according to the Scriptures,

¹²Now if Christ is preached, **that He has been raised from the dead**, how do some among you say that **there is no resurrection of the dead**?

¹³But if there is no resurrection of the dead,

not even Christ has been raised;

¹⁴**and if Christ has not been raised,**

then our preaching is vain,

your faith also is vain.

¹⁵Moreover

we are even found to be false witnesses of God,

because we testified against God that He raised Christ,

whom He did not raise,

if in fact the dead are not raised.

¹⁶For if the dead are not raised,

not even Christ has been raised;

¹⁷**and if Christ has not been raised,**

your faith is worthless;

you are still in your sins.

¹⁸Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.

¹⁹If we have hoped in Christ in this life only,

we are of all men most to be pitied.

³²If from human motives I fought with wild beasts at Ephesus,

what does it profit me?

If the dead are not raised,

LET US EAT AND DRINK, FOR TOMORROW WE DIE.

If Jesus Christ did not rise **bodily** from the grave, then your faith and mine is a sham, Paul says, and the Christian faith is the biggest hoax ever propagated upon the human race. There is just no way to get around this fact.

But 1 Cor. 15—which I hope to cover later—is the classical text on the theological importance of the resurrection presented by Christ’s favorite theologian, the Apostle Paul, who was chosen to write one-third of the NT. What I would like to do today—and we’ll see how far we get—is to deal with the subject of the resurrection apologetically, that is, defending the resurrection against its critics. But I will do that by examining the text of Scripture itself since the gospel writers spend so much space merely describing what happened seemingly without any view to presenting a defensible apologetic.

Maybe this statement will become clear as we move along, but I am simply saying that the gospels weren't written for secular philosophers or liberal theologians like Rudolf Bultmann who deny the resurrection. They were written to tell the story of Jesus Christ just the way it happened. Now, if there had been non-miraculous stories of Jesus' death preserved for us, we could take a look at them as well. The problem is that they don't exist. While we have over 5,000 existing copies of Greek texts telling the miraculous story of Jesus' death and resurrection, we have not a single copy of a manuscript describing Jesus as an ordinary person who died, who was buried, and who stayed buried. If it really didn't happen, that is a very strange thing.

From the very first day of the resurrection, various theories have emerged to dismiss it as the wishful thinking of gullible, mindless Christians—like you and me. Today we will take a brief look at one of these theories only because it's the one mentioned in the Bible. Other theories against the resurrection include the theory that Jesus wasn't actually dead when they placed Him in the tomb or that the women went to the wrong tomb. We will take a briefer look at these theories since they are not specifically mentioned, but they are adequately refuted by the text.

Other arguments are based upon the unproven and unprovable presupposition that the gospel accounts are embellished stories written in the second century with the goal of manufacturing a picture of Jesus which would be marketable to the masses. This is the presupposition of the Jesus Seminar started in 1985 by 50 scholars and 100 "laymen", dissolved in 2006. The real, historical Jesus is the one who didn't perform any miracles and didn't rise again from the dead. He is hidden under 2000 years of Christian traditions, myths, and legends. Lord willing, later on in our study we will look at presuppositional bias which keeps many people from believing that Jesus rose from the dead.

I. The Bible Conspiracy Theory of Jesus' Resurrection

The story circulated at the time of the resurrection was that the disciples stole Jesus' body from the tomb.

¹¹Now while they were on their way, some of the **guard** [*Koustodia*] came into the city and reported to the chief priests all that had happened. ¹²And when they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, **they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers** [*stratiotes*], ¹³and said, "You are to say, 'His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.' ¹⁴"And if this should come to the governor's ears, **we will win him over and keep you out of trouble.**" ¹⁵And they took the money and did as they had been instructed; and this story was widely spread among the Jews, *and is to this day.* (Matthew 28:11-15 NASB)

For hundreds of years, skeptics who did not believe that Christ rose from the dead have used this old, worn-out theory as justification for their unbelief. In fact, the Jewish skeptic Trypho uses the theory against Justin Martyr, a Christian apologist who lived from 100 to 165 AD.

You have sent chosen and ordained men throughout the whole world to proclaim that a godless and lawless heresy had sprung from one Jesus, a Galilean deceiver...whose disciples stole him by night from the tomb.¹

However, the apologist William Craig says the conspiracy theory of Jesus' resurrection has not been taken seriously by informed scholars for 200 years. Yet, many non-Christians use the argument today to justify their unbelief.²

¹ *Dialogue with Trypho*, p. 108, quoted from Chamblin, p. 1479, quoting from Hendriksen, p. 994

² William L. Craig, *Knowing the Truth About the Resurrection—Our Response to the Empty Tomb*, p. 31

A. Eusebius

The theory was first refuted by the Christian historian **Eusebius** in the fourth century around 315 AD. Eusebius argued that it would be inconsistent to believe that Jesus was world renown as a religious teacher, but that the disciples who perpetuated His religion were a bunch of detestable liars.

What's more, Eusebius argued that such a conspiracy was so absurd that it could never stand serious scrutiny. He even made up a story as a satire of this conspiracy. Imagine, Eusebius says, that the disciples of Jesus get together to contrive this lie, and they say to one another,

“Let us band together to invent all the miracles and resurrection appearances **which we never saw** and let us carry the sham even to death! Why not die for nothing? Why dislike torture and whipping inflicted for no good reason? Let us go out to all nations and overthrow their institutions and denounce their gods! And even if we don't convince anybody, at least we'll have the satisfaction of drawing down on ourselves the punishment for our own deceit.”³

But even if the resurrection story were fabricated, Eusebius argues, how could such an absurd story hold up for the last 300 years? (He wrote his defense of the resurrection from 314 to 318 AD.) How could so many people agree to propagate the lie about Jesus being resurrected when it never happened, especially when they had nothing to gain from it. Throughout the history of the church, Christians have given up family, worldly pleasures and riches, and their own lives, to go all over the world or send others to preach the message of a risen Savior. How could so many people decide to do such a foolish thing if there was so little evidence for the resurrection? The only answer, Eusebius reasoned, is that there was overwhelming evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Now, I would like to pause a moment to make an important point. We must understand that believing in the truth of Christianity is not like believing in any other religion. Many people suffer today for religions they believe to be true but one that is false. Muslims and Buddhists also suffer for their faith because they believe that their faith is true. But the case of the 11 apostles and the early Christian disciples was not like that. What the skeptics are accusing them of doing is suffering for something they knew was false. That's not the same thing.

But secondly, Christianity is different from all other religions in that it exposed itself to empirical investigation. In other words, Christianity was empirically falsifiable. All its critics had to do was prove that Jesus did not rise bodily from the grave, something which should have been a simple matter, given the fact that His tomb was one of the few “bench” tombs in Jerusalem carved out of rock. Find the tomb; find the body. The case for Christianity is thus dismissed. They had their shot at disproving the resurrection, and they failed. Here we are in Ridgeland, MS thousands of miles away from the former epi-center of Christianity and 2000 years later, and we still believe this story. What's more, our belief is not a blind leap of faith.

At this point in history, Christianity is not empirically falsifiable, nor can it be empirically proven. We are too far removed from the historical situation to prove empirically that Jesus was resurrected or not. Our proof today is the word of God and the testimony of witnesses found therein. The skeptics will simply pull out the rationalist card and say, “Miracles cannot happen; therefore, the resurrection of Christ did not happen.” Excuse me. Did I hear an argument in there somewhere? No. It is merely a statement of one's opinion that miracles are not possible and that

³ Craig, p. 19, emphasis mine

they never occurred in the past. But miracles are rare even in the Biblical narrative. That's why we call them miracles. They are only recorded during the time of Moses who wrote the Pentateuch, in Joshua, and in the "former" prophets Samuel and Kings (Elijah and Elisha), Daniel, Jonah, Jesus, and the apostles. We will deal with the presuppositional argument later, Lord willing. I will say just briefly that the Christian faith is the only truly rational opinion. It's copy-cat, the Muslim faith, gets closer than any other religion in that it claims to have a divine book and a god who has communicated his will to his followers. But the modern materialist has nothing but self-created matter and energy and millions of years which cannot be empirically verified from modern geological dating methods. Out of the big bang and this random, chance collision of molecules we not only get complicated organisms called people but we also get love (?) generosity (?) meaning (?) purpose (?) and human dignity (?) I don't think so. Christianity is demonstrably true because of the impossibility of the contrary. So, stay tuned. Don't touch that dial!

On the other hand, Hindus believe that man is trapped in an endless cycle of reincarnation in which he may live in the form of a human in one life but return as a cockroach or rat in the next life due to some infraction of the rules—what rules? The goal is to escape this life and be absorbed into the world soul. Buddhism is somewhat similar in its goal, as are other eastern religions. Well, disprove that. Or prove that. Religions of this sort can neither be proven nor disproven according to their own truth claims. They are not falsifiable in the ordinary sense. The convert simply "believes", and even otherwise intelligent people believe such religions while others discount them outright.

On the other hand, there is Christianity which claims that Christ was crucified on a cross and died. He was also buried. He claimed to be God the Son who had been sent by God the Father to die for sinners who repent of their sins and believe in Him for the forgiveness of their sins. Yet, this same Christ who claimed to be God also claimed to have risen bodily from the grave to demonstrate the truth of His claims and to show that all who believe in Him will also one day rise again from the grave.

Now, if this is all nonsense, then all the first-century skeptics had to do was prove that Jesus' body rotted in the grave like that of everyone else. Either His body was discovered in the grave where it was laid—followed by loud public exposure of this fraud in the city streets of Palestine—or it was not; but the whole story at least loaned itself to investigation. Other religious claims do not. I have no way of investigating whether or not you were a human or a camel in a former life, but do not ask me to take your word for it, to stake my eternal destiny on it, or to die for it. The Muslims claim that Mohammed was Allah's last and greatest prophet, but they make no claims of Mohammed rising from the dead. They therefore have no burden of the modern skeptic. The Quran does not have the quality and internal coherency of the Bible, nor has its teaching changed the world for good. Quite the contrary, people today live in fear of jihadists who take its teaching literally, and women in Muslim countries still live in some lesser or greater state of oppression, even if they will not admit to it.

B. Nathaniel Lardner

After Eusebius in the 4th century, the Conspiracy Theory did not raise its ugly head again until the 18th century with the attacks of the Deists. The Deists said they believed in God; it's just that the god they believed in was not worth believing—the cosmic watch-maker who winds the world up, sets it on a shelf, and has nothing else to do with it. God certainly did not come to earth in human flesh to save sinful men. But the Deists had not counted on fierce opposition to their arguments like that of **Nathaniel Lardner** and his twelve-volume work, *The Credibility of the Gospel*

History, written over a period of 25 years from 1730 to 1755. Lardner and others argued that the gospels were written too soon after the resurrection to allow the theory that Jesus' body had been stolen away. Too many people living in Jerusalem (pop. 40,000 to 50,000) would have known that the conspiracy story was a lie. Whether this man Jesus had risen from the dead was one thing but believing that the disciples had been able to steal the body was another. Too many knew how ruthless Roman soldiers were.

Only a few weeks after the resurrection, the Day of Pentecost, the disciples were preaching the risen Christ on the streets of Jerusalem. Now just imagine: Had there had been any credibility to the story that the disciples had stolen Christ's body, they would have been laughed off the streets, and nothing whatever would have come of their preaching. The astounding conversions of Acts 2 would have never happened—3000 souls brought to faith through the winsome preaching of the Apostle Peter: **this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death** (Acts 2:23). The fact of the matter is that everyone living in Jerusalem—as well as those who were now visiting Jerusalem (possibly up to 200,000 people) to attend the Passover and weeks later the Pentecost—would have heard this theory by now and dismissed it out of hand as nonsense.

The question is: Why does the conspiracy theory lack serious credibility?

1. The sealing of the tomb by a Roman guard—Matt. 27: 62-66; 28: 11-15

Consider first of all, the sealing of the tomb by the Roman guard.

Now on the next day, the day after the preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered together with Pilate,⁶³ and said, "Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I *am to* rise again.'⁶⁴ "Therefore, give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, **otherwise His disciples may come and steal Him away** and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last deception will be worse than the first."⁶⁵ Pilate said to them, "You have a **guard** [*koustodia*]; go, make it *as* secure as you know how."⁶⁶ And they went and made the grave secure, and along with the guard they set a seal on the stone. (Matthew 27:62-66 NASB).

The chief priests and Pharisees are concerned that Jesus' disciples will steal the body and thereby claim that He had risen from the dead. There is amusing irony here. Had the Sanhedrin left the tomb unguarded, then the story later circulated by the chief priests that disciples had stolen the body (Matt. 28: 13) would have been credible; but since the tomb was heavily guarded, their story loses credibility. Thus, the Council unintentionally promotes the credibility of the resurrection of Christ by setting a Roman guard (*koustodia*) at the tomb.⁴ *Custodia* is a Latin term used in the Greek text as *koustodia*. The word was always used of a Roman guard, not the Jewish temple police. These were Roman soldiers.

D. A. Carson, with whom I don't like to disagree, takes the position that they were temple police, not Roman soldiers because they reported to the chief priests when Jesus' body went missing. In his unpublished commentary on Matthew, Knox Chamblin also takes this position. **Officers from the chief priests** are specifically mentioned when Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane.

⁴ *Custodia* is a Latin term for a Roman guard, not the Temple police made up of Jews, as some commentators claim.

Then Jesus said to the chief priests and **officers** [*strategos*] **of the temple** and elders who had come against Him, "Have you come out with swords and clubs as you would against a robber? (Lk. 22:52 NASB)

Judas then, having received the *Roman* cohort and **officers** [*huperetes*] **from the chief priests** and the Pharisees, came there with lanterns and torches **and weapons**. (Jn. 18:3 NASB)

Chamblin later reversed his opinion in his published two-volume commentary on Matthew⁵ The fact that the soldiers later reported the missing body to the **chief priests** is consistent, Chamblin says, with their assignment from Pilate to the chief priests. Besides, it is no secret that Roman governors wished to stay on good terms with the powerful Jewish Sanhedrin who could make their lives miserable—the very reason Pilate later capitulated to their demand for Jesus' execution. You remember: **Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar."** (Jn. 19: 15b). They knew that that statement would just about do it.

These are Roman **soldiers** (*stratiōtes*; Matt. 28: 12) commanded to guard the tomb at the risk of punishment—possibly execution—if they failed (although their assignment here was hardly a strategic military objective). A formal **seal** was placed over the tomb consisting of a cord attached to the stone door and the rock on each side by melted wax stamped with the Roman imperial insignia.⁶ Any tampering would have been easily discovered. Serious business. This is why is the chief priests told them that they would protect them from Pilate when he heard that the body of Jesus was missing (Matt. 28: 14). Their risk of punishment was serious enough that the chief priests had to give them a **large sum of money** to make the payoff commensurate with the risk they were taking.

But does it really matter whether they were temple police or Roman soldiers? How could all of them remain fast asleep while the disciples were rolling the stone away?

But the irony goes much deeper than this. Pilate's words to the chief priests are: **Go make [the tomb] as secure as you can**. Pilate is fascinated by how threatening Jesus continues to be to the Jewish leaders even from the grave. Moreover, could it be that Pilate suspects that the securing of the grave will be of little or no use?⁷ We wonder what Pilate really believes, especially after his personal encounter with Jesus and the unsettling dream his wife recounted to him before the crucifixion: **Have nothing to do with that righteous man; for last night I suffered greatly in a dream because of Him**. (Matt. 27: 19)?

What really happened at the tomb while it was guarded by Roman soldiers? We learn this primarily from Matthew's gospel.

¹Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first *day* of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the grave. ²And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone and sat upon it. ³And his appearance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. ⁴**The guards shook for fear of him** and became like dead men. (Matthew 28:1-4 NASB)

Comparing Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we learn that the earthquake had already happened before Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Salome, and other women come to the tomb to

⁵ Chamblin, *Matthew* (vol. 2, p. 1451.

⁶ Chamblin, p. 1453

⁷ Chamblin, p. 1452

anoint Jesus' body with additional spices. Before their arrival, an angel had come and rolled the stone away, a very large stone. Matthew gives us a description of the angel— **his appearance like lightning** which scared the Roman guards half to death. Verse 4 says they **became like dead men**—another note of irony. Jesus is very much alive and these Roman soldiers look dead.⁸ The story also dispels any notion of effeminate angels weighing 60 pounds dressed in night gowns with little wings attached—like cherubs on Valentine's Day cards. Rugged Roman soldiers—perhaps experience soldiers calloused against danger and death—would not have been frightened to unconsciousness at the sight of Tinkerbell!

Anyway, we don't hear any more about the guards until Matt. 28: 11-15 which we read earlier. The guards are paid off by the chief priests to lie about the body being stolen. Matthew's irony continues to amuse us. The chief priests assure the soldiers that they would win Pilate over and keep them out of trouble. But wait a minute, the reason they set the guard in the first place is to keep the body of Jesus from being stolen. Yet, now, they are bribing them into silence about what really happened.

If the chief priests had really believed that the body had been stolen, you would think they would have been the first to press charges against the soldiers, even agreeable to Pilate executing them. But by convincing Pilate not to punish the guard, the chief priests virtually prove that their story is false.⁹

But let us consider the merits of this story. Should any sane person with half his brain tied around his back believe that a Roman soldier was asleep on a guard duty ordered by the Roman governor? Furthermore, should anyone believe that all of the Roman soldiers on this detail were asleep at the same time? And are we to believe that the disciples were able to roll a heavy stone (by some estimates, 1800 kg) uphill away from the opening without waking even one of these soldiers?

Moreover, none of the gospel accounts mention the presence of soldiers when the women arrive at the tomb, nor do the soldiers mention the presence of disciples in their report to the chief priests. The women who come to the tomb in the early morning hours and report back to the disciples never mention the presence of Roman soldiers unconscious in front of the tomb. (The description we have in Matthew 28: 1-4 is the authorial comment of Matthew who is telling the reader how the stone was rolled away before the women arrive.) After waking up, whenever that was, the soldiers—upon discovering the empty tomb—waste no time getting out of there. **Some** of them, not all, go to the priests to relate what happened. The rest are probably hiding or at least keeping a very low profile, but none of them would have left the scene had Jesus' body still been in the tomb.

So what's the point? All this proves that the chief priests are desperate and wish to suppress the truth of the resurrection against overwhelming evidence to the contrary.¹⁰ They know all about the miracles that Jesus performed in Jerusalem and elsewhere but maintaining their power and control over the people—and their money—is more important than submitting themselves to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Miracles do not convince people of the truth against their sinful wills. Only the Holy Spirit can do this. Jesus predicted this in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man begs **Father Abraham** to send Lazarus from the dead and warn his five brothers of

⁸ Chamblin, p. 1464

⁹ Chamblin, pp. 1477-78

¹⁰ Chamblin, p. 1477

the torments of hell. Abraham says, **“They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.”** Let them go their synagogues and have the scribes and Pharisees read the OT.

"But he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them **from the dead, they will repent!**'³¹
"But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.'" (Lk. 16:30-31 NASB)

And sure enough, when Jesus rose from the dead from a tomb heavily guarded by Roman soldiers, they didn't believe. They tried to cover it up.

Many years ago in one of my classes at Westminster Theological College in Kampala, some of my students said, "If only people could see miracles, more of them would believe the gospel." I responded with this parable. It takes more than a tangible, visible miracle to change the human heart. Jesus criticized the Jews for always demanding signs and wonders.

So Jesus said to him, "**Unless you people see signs and wonders, you simply will not believe.**" (Jn. 4:48 NASB)

As the crowds were increasing, He began to say, "**This generation is a wicked generation; it seeks for a sign, and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah.**"³⁰ "For just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation."³¹ "The Queen of the South will rise up with the men of **this generation** at the judgment and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here."³² "**The men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation at the judgment and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.**" (Lk. 11:29-32 NASB)

Then He began to denounce **the cities in which most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent.**²¹ "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes."²² "Nevertheless I say to you, it will be **more tolerable** for Tyre and Sidon in *the* day of judgment than for you."²³ "And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day."²⁴ "Nevertheless I say to you that it will be **more tolerable** for the land of Sodom in *the* day of judgment, than for you."²⁵ At that time Jesus said, "I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from *the* wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants."²⁶ "Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight."²⁷ "**All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.**" (Matt. 11:20-27 NASB)

Visible miracles were necessary to authenticate the ministry of Jesus as the new and greater Moses, the prophet Moses had promised in Deut. 18. They were also necessary to authenticate the ministry of the apostles who carried on the continuing ministry of Jesus. They have never produced conversion experiences. It takes a greater, invisible miracle to do that, the miracle of regeneration by the Holy Spirit.

The conspiracy theory that Jesus' disciples stole His body lacks credibility: first, because of the sealing of the tomb by the Roman guard.

2. The Transformation among the Disciples

The second reason for dismissing the Conspiracy Theory is the psychological and spiritual transformation of the eleven remaining disciples. What the disciples lacked in military skill to overcome a Roman guard by stealth or brute force is compounded by lack of courage. Would these disciples attempt to steal the body of Jesus? Peter has already denied he even knew Jesus three times, and although he had chopped off the servant's ear in a momentary fit of courage, he ran with the others like rabbits the night Jesus was betrayed (Matt. 26: 56)—not a very promising beginning for a new religion. The disciples had abandoned their leader when he was still alive. Are we to believe that they are risking their lives now for a leader they believed to be dead?

Consider that according to the gospel accounts, the disciples themselves were at first the biggest skeptics of all. One group of **women** report to the eleven disciples that the tomb was empty and that angels had told them that Christ was risen, but the eleven disciples thought the women were talking nonsense (Lk. 24: 11).

But these words appeared to them as nonsense, and they would not believe them. (Lk. 24:11 NASB)

I know what some of you ladies are thinking. "MEN! They never listen! But the cultural situation was much worse back then. You can thank the Lord that the status of women has vastly improved with Christianity. Nevertheless, Peter and John at least are curious enough—"augh, maybe the women aren't hallucinating"—to scurry to the tomb and enter, finding only Jesus' grave clothes. They now see the grave clothes and no body, but what do Peter and John do? Do they then go out into the streets of Jerusalem shouting the good news that Jesus had risen from the dead? Do they go back and apologize to the women for disrespecting their testimony? No. They simply go home, leaving poor Mary Magdalene **standing outside the tomb weeping** (Jn. 20: 10-11). After which, Jesus reveals himself to...none other than Mary Magdalene.

John's gospel says that the apostles had not yet understood the Scripture, that Jesus must rise from the dead (Jn. 20: 9). Why not? Jesus had predicted His resurrection on a number of occasions, three of them recorded.¹¹ He had already raised three people from the dead: the son of the widow of Nain, Jairus' daughter, and Lazarus, a personal friend of Jesus. John's gospel says that John **believed**, but this may mean only that he believed Mary's report that the tomb was empty. Well, he could see that with his own two eyes. But armed with that startling information, John goes home. To do what? Get a cup of tea and read the morning newspaper? We don't know.

None of the men in the gospel story come off looking very good. The women do much better, but they are still looking for a dead man. The two angels at the tomb ask them, "**Why do you seek the living One among the dead?**" (Lk. 24:5) And only after the angels remind them of Jesus' words do they begin to connect the dots.

"He is not here, but He has risen. Remember how He spoke to you while He was still in Galilee,⁷ saying that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, **and be crucified, and the third day rise again.**"⁸ And they remembered His words, (Lk. 24:6-8 NASB)

Too bad the apostles didn't remember his words, although he told them at least three times on separate occasions that He would be killed and would rise from the dead.

¹¹ Matt. 16: 21; 17: 22-23; 20: 18-19

From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and **be raised up on the third day**. (Matt. 16:21 NASB)

On a separate occasion, closer to the time of His death:

As Jesus was about to go up to Jerusalem, He took the twelve *disciples* aside by themselves, and on the way He said to them, ¹⁸ "**Behold**, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, ¹⁹ and will hand Him over to the Gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify *Him*, and **on the third day He will be raised up**." (Matt. 20:17-19 NASB)

When Jesus had finished all these words, He said to His disciples, ² "You know that **after two days the Passover is coming**, and the Son of Man is *to be handed over for crucifixion*." (Matt. 26:1-2 NASB)

The idea of a dead Messiah did not register with the disciples, much less the idea of a crucified Messiah—which Paul said later was a **stumbling block** to the Jews. The Jews were looking rather for another Judas Maccabeus and his brothers who gave the Jews 100 years of political freedom from Syrian rule. Never mind that the Maccabean Period left the Jewish people in spiritual ruin. By the time of Jesus, the office of high priest was sold to the highest bidder among the wealthiest families in Judea—but that didn't matter so much. "It's the economy, stupid!" As long as my 401k is doing well, what else matters? Much less would the disciples naturally default to the belief that Jesus had risen from the grave. Thomas said he wouldn't believe until he saw tangible, empirical evidence. So much for the theory that the ancient people of the first century were a bunch of gullible idiots who believed anything they were told. Later on, Peter said,

For we did not follow **cleverly devised tales** when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. (2 Pet. 1:16 NASB)

Peter didn't write these words for 21st century skeptics teaching in American universities and liberal seminaries. He wrote it for the common man and woman living in his day who were not well-disposed to believing in miracles or fantasies.

But all this is another reason to believe that the gospel accounts are true. No one looks like a tower of faith in any of them. Yet, if one was wishing to start a religion on the testimony of its founding fathers, you might wish them to look a little better in the narratives. Do I really want to follow these people?

But what happens later in the book of Acts? We have Peter and the rest of the apostles testifying to what they had seen and heard at the risk of imprisonment and death. You can't shut them up. And Paul, **one untimely born**, sees Christ on the road to Damascus with the same effect upon his life—except on steroids. All of them die a martyr's death except John who dies on the island of Patmos. How did this happen? Because in the 40 days since Jesus was crucified, they have seen, heard, and touched the risen Savior. Writing years later, John says,

What was from the beginning, what we have **heard**, what we have **seen** with our eyes, what we have looked at and **touched** with our hands, concerning the Word of Life—(1 John 1:1 NASB)

On the other hand, look at what the skeptics want us to believe. They wish for us to believe that eleven uneducated men were able to change the world by means of a made-up plot that they themselves knew to be a lie, and while knowing the resurrection to be a lie were able to convince

the whole world that it was not a lie. The skeptics also wish for us to believe that these same disciples were willing to forego the pursuit of their own happiness, were willing to look poverty and persecution squarely in the eye, were willing to die and did all die for a manufactured savior and that these liars were then able to furnish the world with a religion and system of ethics unsurpassed for wisdom in the history of the world.¹² To quote once more Eusebius' satirical story about the disciples,

“Let us band together to invent all the miracles and resurrection appearances which we never saw and let us carry the sham even to death! Why not die for nothing? Why dislike torture and whipping inflicted for no good reason? Let us go out to all nations and overthrow their institutions and denounce their gods! And even if we don't convince anybody, at least we'll have the satisfaction of drawing down on ourselves the punishment for our own deceit.”¹³

It would seem to me that believing in the resurrection of Christ is much easier than not believing it.

3. The Testimony of Women

And then we have the testimony of the female disciples—a serious liability to the whole resurrection story. The testimonies of women were considered worthless in Jesus' day. Their testimony was not allowed in court cases. Yet, women are given the privilege of being the first to discover and talk to the risen Christ. If you want to start a new religion in Palestine in the first century, you don't do it this way. But God does have a sense of humor, and He enjoys debasing the currency of the world's wisdom. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John could not have made this stuff up. Remarking on the remarkable presence of women in the gospel accounts, N.T. Wright says,

...the tradition which Paul is quoting, precisely for evangelistic and apologetic use, has carefully taken the women **out of it** so that it can serve that purpose within a suspicious and mocking world.

Wright is referring to 1 Cor. 15: 3-8.

³For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,⁴ and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,⁵ **and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.**⁶ **After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep;**⁷ **then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles;**⁸ **and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.** (1 Cor. 15:3-8 NASB)

Hmm! What happened to the women? For Paul's evangelistic and apologetic purpose in the first century AD, the mention of women would have been a liability. Wright continues.

But this only goes round the edge of the issue. The underlying point is more ruthlessly historical.

Even if we suppose that Mark made up most of his material, and did so some time in the late 60's at the earliest, **it will not do to have him, or anyone else at that stage, making up a would-be apologetic legend about an empty tomb and having women be the ones who find it.** The point has been repeated over and over in scholarship, but its full impact has not always been felt: women were simply not acceptable as legal witnesses.

¹² Craig, p. 22

¹³ Craig, p. 19

At this point Wright quotes Josephus, first century Roman-Jewish historian saying,

From women let no evidence be accepted, because of the levity and temerity of their sex (Antiquities, 4.219)

According to Josephus, ladies, you are light-weight, foolish, and shouldn't be taken too seriously. But we will not let Josephus have the last word. Jesus appears to women and talks with women before His own apostles. Peter later says that you are **fellow heir[s] of the grace of life** (1 Pet. 3: 7) and warns husbands that if they mistreat you God will not hear their prayers. The Apostle Paul, who is supposed to be—by all accounts from liberal theologians and feminists—a misogynist, says that in Christ there is neither male nor female—without in the slightest degree apologizing for the necessity of role division in the home and church.

But this first century male attitude towards women makes the gospel accounts, in the words of Wright, “more ruthlessly historical” and therefore believable. He continues.

We may regret it, but this is how the Jewish world (and most others) worked. The debate between Origen and Celsus shows that critics of Christianity could seize on the story of the women **in order to scoff at the whole tale**; were the legend-writers really so ignorant of the likely reaction? **If they could have invented stories of fine, upstanding reliable male witnesses being first at the tomb, they would have done it.** That they did not tells us either that **everyone in the early church knew that they women**, led by Mary Magdalen, were in fact the first on the scene, or that the early church was not so inventive as critics have routinely imagined, or both. Would the other evangelists have been so slavishly foolish as to copy the story unless they were convinced that, despite being an apologetic liability, it was historically trustworthy?

The argument thus works in the same way as our previous ones. It is easy to imagine that, **when a tradition was established for use in preaching to outsiders**, stories of women running to the tomb in the half-light would **quietly be dropped**, and a list produced of **solid** witnesses who could be called upon to vouch for what they had seen. **It is not easy at all**—in fact, I suggest, it is virtually impossible—to imagine a solid and well-established tradition, such as that in 1 Corinthians 15, feeling itself in need of some extra stiffening in the first place, or, if such a need was felt...coming up with a scatter of women on a dark spring morning...we must affirm that the story they tell is one which goes back behind Paul, back to the very early period, **before anyone had time to think**, ‘It would be good to tell stories about Jesus rising from the dead; what will best serve our apologetic needs?’ It is far easier to assume that the women were there at the beginning, just as, three days earlier, they had been there at the end.¹⁴

C. But What is the Response of Modern Scholarship?

Remember I said earlier that the conspiracy theory has not been taken seriously for 200 years. Modern skeptics attack Christianity not by disproving the gospel accounts as they stand, but by trying to prove that the gospel accounts themselves are legends or myths. According to the skeptics the gospel accounts were not orally transmitted by eye-witnesses soon after the crucifixion but fabricated by zealous followers of the Jesus movement in the second century. This demythologizing of the Bible is the method behind the once-popular, now defunct, “Jesus Seminars” years ago in the US featuring liberal theologians attempting to sift through the rubric of the gospel accounts in order to discover the genuine “historical Jesus”, namely, the real Jesus, not the mythical Jesus of the gospels. Modern liberal scholars will not grant the historical reliability

¹⁴ N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, pp. 607-608, italic emphasis his, bold emphasis mine.).

of the gospel accounts, because once they do so, there is no way to give them a natural explanation.¹⁵ Better then, not to treat the gospels as serious history in the first place.

But this explanation of legendary accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection will not hold up to serious argumentation, even by the standards of scholarship two centuries ago. The modern critic is almost exactly 200 years late in his arguments against the historicity of the gospel accounts.

D. William Paley

William Paley, confronting the Deists in 1794, makes the important argument that there are **no non-miraculous** accounts of Jesus' death. Now this is very significant. Assuming for the sake of argument that the liberals are correct—that the gospel accounts we have in our Bibles are fake, that they are legendary accounts of the Jesus myth, and that the “historical Jesus” remains to be discovered out there somewhere. The question is: Where is the real history of Jesus? Why don't we have the non-mythical accounts with us today? We have historical accounts of kings Sennacherib and Esarhaddon of Assyria other than the ones in the Bible. We have historical accounts of Caesar Augustus, of Julius Caesar, of Genghis Khan, Buddha, Gandhi, and many other important figures of world history—none of whom were as influential and important as Jesus Christ.

So why don't we have the real historical accounts of Jesus' life and ministry? Answer: We do! They are called Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John by anyone who is not prejudiced against their testimony. And their testimony is supported by the book of Acts and all the other books of the New Testament of which we have in our possession 5,700 copied manuscripts of textual evidence. Moreover, if we were to assume, hypothetically, a NT of 500 pages, the textual differences would amount to half a page, none of which would affect a single doctrine or ethical teaching of Holy Scripture.¹⁶ By the standards of so-called “modern scholarship” today, history as we know it would be impossible because history is based upon manuscript evidence. We have more ancient copies today of the gospels than we do of any accounts of Julius Caesar or Caesar Augustus. Yet, no one doubts the historical accounts of these Roman rulers. The only reason people doubt the Biblical accounts of Jesus is because they contain accounts of miracles¹⁷—and by the popular vote of biblical scholars today in the US and Great Britain, miracles cannot happen.

But this brings up a big problem. We do not have one single page of any non-miraculous accounts of Jesus' life and ministry.

Summarizing William Paley, the scholar William Craig says,

That an original non-miraculous story should be completely lost and another miraculous story replace it goes beyond any known example of corruption of even oral tradition, not to speak of written historical transmission...

Thus, it is clear that the miraculous story of the Gospels was the story which the Christian believers had from the beginning. That means that the resurrection of Jesus was always a part of that story...

The Gospels and Acts are quoted as genuine by ancient writers [including] Clement of Rome...Ignatius, who was a church leader in Antioch about thirty-seven years after Christ's death...Polycarp, who knew personally the disciple John...Papias, who also knew John, specifically says Matthew and Mark wrote their gospels...Justin Martyr about twenty years [after Papias]

¹⁵ Craig, pp. 36-37

¹⁶ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, Vol. IV, p. 76

¹⁷ Craig, p. 26

frequently quotes the Gospels. Irenaus, who knew Polycarp, specifically names the four Gospel writers. Paley traces this chain of ancient writers all the way to Eusebius in A.D. 315...

The books of the New Testament were collected together into one volume at a very early date...

Thousands upon thousands of copies of the New Testament books were laboriously made by hand...

The early enemies of Christianity recognized that the Gospels contained the story on which the faith was founded. Celsus [a Roman philosopher] ...admits that the Gospels were written by the apostles. Porphyry [another Roman philosopher] attacked the Christian faith as it is found in the Gospels. The heretic Julian pursued the same procedure...

The apocryphal books [*written in the second century*] were never treated in the above manner...the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Thomas, and so forth. It is a simple historical fact that during the first three hundred years, with one exception, no apocryphal Gospel was ever even quoted by any known writer. In fact, there is no evidence that any forged Gospel whatever existed in the first century, when the four Gospels and Acts were written. The apocryphal Gospels were never quoted, never read or preached upon in Christian assemblies, not collected into a volume, not included in the lists of authentic Scriptures, not appealed to by heretics, not noticed by Christianity's enemies, not the subject of commentaries or harmonies. They were almost universally rejected by Christian writers of that age.

Therefore, Paley concludes, the Gospels must be the authentic writings of the apostles.¹⁸

To summarize the summary, if forgeries of the gospel or non-miraculous accounts had been available to enemies of Christianity in the first century, they would have used them. But they simply didn't exist.

According to Craig, William Paley's book, *A View of the Evidences of Christianity*, written in 1794, buried the conspiracy theory over 200 years ago. The book was required reading for anyone wishing to enter Cambridge University right up until the 20th century. No modern scholar today would dare even entertain the conspiracy theory.¹⁹

But it seems to me that his argument should also bury the modern theory that the gospels are forgeries written in the second century, and that by some miracle we have lost all of the original, non-miraculous accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. But how could we have over 5000 manuscripts of forgeries while having not one single copy of the real, unembellished history of Jesus? Belief in that theory takes far more faith than believing the Bible.

But maybe Jesus was not really dead after all. Maybe he only appeared to be dead. This brings us up to the **apparent death theory**, also known as the "swoon theory".

II. The Apparent Death Theory—Matt. 27: 57-61; Mk.15: 42-47; Lk. 23: 50-56; Jn. 19: 38-42

This theory maintains that Jesus wasn't really dead when they laid him in the tomb. He only **appeared** to be dead. The theory has proven to be as worthless as the Conspiracy Theory for the following reasons:

And I must preface my remarks by saying that I am relying on the Biblical texts for my arguments. Why? Because, I do not possess any **non-miraculous** accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. **They don't exist.**

¹⁸ Craig, pp. 26-29

¹⁹ Craig, pp. 22, 31

A. The Roman guards executing Jesus made sure that He was dead before taking Him down from the cross. (John 19: 31-34)

Then the Jews, because it was the day of preparation, so that the bodies would not remain on the cross on the Sabbath (for that Sabbath was a high day), asked Pilate that their legs might be broken, and *that* they might be taken away.³² So the soldiers came, and broke the legs of the first man and of the other who was crucified with Him;³³ but coming to Jesus, when they saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs.³⁴ But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out. (John 19:31-34 NASB)

Medical experts who have studied crucifixion tell us that with the weight of the body hanging from the arms, the lungs collapse, and it is almost impossible to breathe. Sometimes the cross would include a block or pin serving as a seat for the victim to sit on, and mid-way up the post there was a block of wood for the feet allowing the victim to push upward with the legs while pulling up with the arms to get a breath of air. When the victim's strength gave out, he was no longer able to push himself up with his legs, and he died by suffocation.

Another cause of death was the loss of blood pressure to the upper part of the body resulting in damage to the brain and also heart failure. Heart failure and death would occur very rapidly without the foot block and/or the seat; therefore, they were provided for the victim not to help him but to **prolong his agony**. Breathing is an automatic, involuntary reflex; and most victims, although hoping for a quick death, **survived the ordeal for two or three days** by involuntarily gulping the next breath of air as they raised themselves up by the feet. Christ was able to utter **seven statements** from the cross. This proves that He could raise Himself up to breathe and speak, therefore indicating the presence of the foot block. If the executioners wanted a quicker death, the legs were often broken below the knee thus hastening suffocation and heart failure. The two criminals beside Jesus had their legs broken, but Jesus had already died. He died sooner than they did because of the extent of His previous torture and loss of blood.

On the other hand, it was often difficult for Roman soldiers to determine the exact point of death. After such suffering, the victim could **appear** dead without actually **being** dead. Therefore, just to make absolutely certain that Jesus was dead, a soldier stabbed his side with a spear. When he was stabbed, blood and water poured out of Jesus' body, which means that the spear probably penetrated not only the lung but the heart as well. The flow of fluid "could have been serum from the pericardial sac mixed with blood from the heart or a hemorrhagic fluid in the pleural cavity between the ribs and the lungs."²⁰ But once the spear pierced the lungs and the heart, there was **no possibility of survival**. This was the very reason Roman soldiers used this method to ensure death. They didn't want any surprises. Some people use this text to prove that Jesus died of a broken heart. But that was not John's purpose. He wrote this to prove that Jesus was **dead**.

But notice the next thing John says, adding emphasis to his testimony of what happened.

And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you also may believe.³⁶ For these things came to pass to fulfill the Scripture, "NOT A BONE OF HIM SHALL BE BROKEN."³⁷ And again another Scripture says, "THEY SHALL LOOK ON HIM WHOM THEY PIERCED." (John 19:35-37 NASB)

These references from OT passages predict the manner in which the Messiah would be put to death, a method of execution which was not in existence when these texts were written. The normal Roman procedure was to leave the victim on the cross after expiration, even days or weeks

²⁰ Craig, p. 33

until the body had decayed or scavenger birds had eaten the carcass. This would serve as a warning to anyone considering rebellion against the Roman government or committing any crime punishable by death. But in this case, the Council had not wished for the bodies to remain on the crosses during the Passover. This fulfilled yet another OT prophecy of David in Ps. 16: 10 and repeated in Acts 2: 27 and 13: 35.

For You will not abandon my soul to Sheol; Nor will You allow Your Holy One to undergo **decay**.
(Psalm 16:10 NASB)

We also learn from John that Nicodemus prepared the body of Jesus with 100 pounds (45 kg) of myrrh and aloes, virtually drenching the linen wrappings (Jn. 19: 39-40). Are we then to believe that both Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus observed Jesus being wrapped by their servants with wet suffocating grave linens while not noticing that He was still alive? Would they not feel the warm flesh of a body still alive?

But the main thing to notice for our purpose is that the Apostle John expected his readers to believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ **on the basis of personal eye witness testimony**. While speaking in the third person, he is speaking of himself, "I know that I am telling the truth, so that you also may believe." He also adds this statement at the end of the book,

Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book;³¹ but **these have been written so that you may believe** that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name. (John 20:30-31 NASB)

In no sense did John consider the evidence **insufficient** for the reader to come to a firm conclusion that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God in whose name a person could have eternal life. The evidence was not **probably** true. It was **compelling**, so compelling that Paul tells the Athenians on Mars Hill,

"Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all *people* everywhere **should repent**,³¹ because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, **having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.**" (Acts 17:30-31 NASB)

Was Paul being overconfident in his assertion that God had **furnished proof** of the gospel? No. Paul wasn't bluffing. He was ready to provide tangible evidence to these philosophical skeptics on Mars Hill that Jesus had risen from the dead.

One of the most powerful statements **denouncing the apparent death theory** of Jesus comes from someone who himself denied the historical resurrection of Christ. His name was D.F. Strauss who had this to say in the year 1869,

It is impossible that a being who had stolen half-dead out of the sepulcher, who crept about weak and ill, wanting medical treatment, who required bandaging, strengthening and indulgence, and who still at last yielded [in death] to his sufferings, could have given to his disciples the impression that he was a Conqueror over death and the grave, the Prince of Life, an impression which lay at the bottom of their future ministry. Such a resuscitation could only have weakened the impression that he had made upon them in life and in death, at the most could only have given it an elegiac [mournful] voice, but could by no possibility have changed their sorrow into enthusiasm, have elevated their reverence into worship.²¹

²¹ Craig, p. 34

We have looked at the conspiracy theory and the apparent death theory.

III. The Wrong Tomb Theory

Another attempt to disprove the resurrection is by claiming that the women involved in Jesus' ministry **simply went to the wrong tomb**. This theory was first proposed by the liberal theologian, Kirsopp Lake, in 1907. The most effective argument against this theory is Joseph of Arimathea. It is significant that all four gospel writers include the story of Joseph of Arimathea in their accounts.

When it was evening, there came **a rich man from Arimathea**, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus.⁵⁸ This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given *to him*.⁵⁹ And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth,⁶⁰ and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the entrance of the tomb and went away. (Matthew 27:57-60 NASB)

When evening had already come, because it was the preparation day, that is, the day before the Sabbath,⁴³ **Joseph of Arimathea came, a prominent member of the Council**, who himself was waiting for the kingdom of God; and he gathered up courage and went in before Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus.⁴⁴ Pilate wondered if He was dead by this time, and summoning the centurion, he questioned him as to whether He was already dead.⁴⁵ And ascertaining this from the centurion, he granted the body to Joseph.⁴⁶ Joseph bought a linen cloth, took Him down, wrapped Him in the linen cloth and laid Him in a tomb which had been **hewn out in the rock**; and he **rolled a stone** against the entrance of the tomb.⁴⁷ **Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses were looking on to see where He was laid.** (Mark 15:42-47 NASB)

And a man named Joseph, who was a member of the Council, a good and righteous man⁵¹ (he had not consented to their plan and action), *a man from Arimathea*, a city of the Jews, who was waiting for the kingdom of God;⁵² this man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.⁵³ And he took it down and wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid Him in a **tomb cut into the rock**, where no one had ever lain.⁵⁴ It was the preparation day, and the Sabbath was about to begin.⁵⁵ **Now the women who had come with Him out of Galilee followed, and saw the tomb and how His body was laid.** (Luke 23:50-55 NASB)

After these things **Joseph of Arimathea**, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret *one* for fear of the Jews, **asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus**; and Pilate granted permission. So he came and took away His body.³⁹ **Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night**, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds *weight*.⁴⁰ So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.⁴¹ **Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden**, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid.⁴² Therefore because of the Jewish day of preparation, since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there. (John 19:38-42 NASB)

Several important facts should be noted about these references to Joseph of Arimathea.

- (1) **First**, he was **rich**, a fact which made him more conspicuous to everyone reading the gospel accounts. Rich men are **more recognizable** than the average person.
- (2) **Second**, Joseph of Arimathea was a **member of the Council**—that is, the council of the Jews consisting of 71 members including Sadducees and Pharisees, as well as former high priests. This fact makes Joseph even more conspicuous to the reader.
- (3) **Third**, not only was Joseph a member of the Jewish Council, according to Mark he was a **“prominent member of the Council”**, making him more conspicuous than most other members of

the Council. Some of these members may have been nameless to the average Jew, but Joseph of Arimathea had name recognition, which is possibly why all four gospel writers mention his name.

(4) Fourth, Joseph **personally asked Pilate** for the body of Jesus, a request granted, **proving** the statement that Joseph was a prominent member of the Jewish Council. Pilate would not have granted such a request to the average Joe Smith (or think of another common name in Kenya). This fact also makes the story **more falsifiable**. It would have been relatively easy to prove that Pilate **granted no such request** to a man named Joseph of Arimathea. It would be surprising to any Jew that such a request was granted in the first place. Convicted criminals were usually dumped in shallow unmarked graves. Moreover, if the story is not true, it would also have been easy to prove that the gospel writers made up the fictional character of Joseph of Arimathea. Yet, we have no record of anyone contesting the story.

(5) Fifth, Joseph put Jesus **in his own tomb**, making the **location** of Jesus' grave **more conspicuous and easily identifiable**. Rich men do not have unmarked graves. I have seen tombs of rich people. They are big, expensive, and stand out from the graves of average people. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us it was a tomb **hewn or cut out of a rock**. It was not a tomb built with rocks, **but cut out of rock**. In other words, its construction was very labor intensive and therefore very expensive. Matthew and Mark tell us that a **large stone** was rolled across the entrance to the tomb. Based on the description of Joseph's tomb, it was most likely what was known as a "bench tomb" consisting of a shelf cut out around the inner walls, providing a resting place for the body. The **most expensive bench tombs** also had large circular stones used to seal the tombs against invasion by animals. The large stones were positioned uphill from the entrance and could be easily pushed across the entrance using a slanted groove across the door. The same design would also make it very difficult for someone to open the tomb once it was shut. There were very few tombs like this in Palestine, making this particular tomb very identifiable. Similar tombs that have been discovered by archaeologists all date from the first century during the time of Christ's death.

(6) Sixth, John tells us that **the tomb was located in a garden**, thus making the Jesus' grave site even more easily located. Historians tell us that two famous Jewish high priests, John Hyrcanus and Alexander Jannaeus were buried in part of Jerusalem known as the Garden Gate.²²

(7) Seventh, both Mark and Luke make note of the fact that **some women were careful to notice where this tomb was located**. We know also from Mark and Luke that these same women were planning to bring additional spices to anoint Jesus' body the next day.

All of the evidence points to one main conclusion—**no one went to the wrong tomb**. The tomb of Jesus was made conspicuous and easily marked by the fact that it was the expensive tomb of a wealthy, prominent member of the Jewish Council who also requested the body of Jesus directly from Pilate. This is the stuff that people talk about on the public streets which would have been **circulated throughout Jerusalem**. It would not have been remarkable that Jesus' body was placed in an unmarked, shallow grave—the normal procedure for convicted criminals. Secondly, the women made a special effort to remember the right tomb—one that would be easy to remember. And they examined the tomb, it was empty.

On the other hand, if the body of Jesus had been buried in a shallow grave for criminals, it would have been a simple matter for Jewish authorities to locate the grave even weeks after the burial and exhume the body as definitive proof that Jesus had not risen from the dead. Moreover, it

²² Craig, pp. 48-49

would also have been easy for the Jewish authorities to claim that Jesus' body was stolen if He had been buried this way. It would be easy to exhume the body from a shallow, unguarded grave, but virtually impossible to do so from a sealed bench tomb, the kind Jesus was buried in.

It is therefore important to the story that Jesus' burial in a rich man's expensive tomb—complete with a large stone over the opening—is further proof that no one went to the wrong tomb.

IV. Conclusion

We have only scratched the surface of the overwhelming evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We have not even looked at the **post-resurrection appearances of Christ** found in the gospels and Acts 1 in which Luke says that Jesus appeared to many **over a period of 40 days** before His ascension into heaven. These were sightings subject to investigation. Surely if the Jews had wished to disprove the resurrection of Christ, they had plenty of time to do so during a forty day period. Moreover, if the disciples wished to create a resurrection hoax, they would not create a legend in which Christ remained on earth an additional 40 days after His death. They would get Him to heaven as soon as possible to prevent the exposure of their hoax.

We have not had time to deal with the whole phenomenon created by the resurrection story—namely, disciples of the Christian faith who have literally changed the world over the last 2000 years. How could a religion based upon a lie do so much good in the world? But if you wish to compare the influence of the Christian faith with that of Buddhism, Hinduism, or Islam, I would happily invite you to do so. Personally I haven't seen any Buddhist relief organizations. Wherever in the world you find a vital Christian church and a critical mass of committed Christians who understand the implications of their faith, you will find freedom and liberty. Wherever you find Islam or some other religion as the dominant religion, you will find tyranny and bondage. And if you don't believe me, just look at your neighbor Somalia to the east. So if you wish to change your home country from Kenya to Somalia or Saudi Arabia or Iran, or Libya, then be my guest. I shall live in Kenya, Uganda, or the US—thank you very much.

We have also not treated Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 15: 6.

...He appeared to more than **five hundred brethren at one time**, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep (1 Corinthians 15:6 NASB)

In this statement, Paul is inviting any of his readers to cross-examine the witnesses who saw Christ after the crucifixion. Most of them, Paul says, are still living and are available if you care to ask them. He goes on to say in the same chapter that "Christ also appeared to me, so you can ask me what I saw, as well."

We could go on for another four weeks talking about the evidence for the resurrection of Christ. In conclusion I would say to the fervent believer this morning that **your faith is not based upon wishful thinking or mythology**. It is based upon **the most solid evidence about any historical event ever occurring in the history of mankind**. On the contrary, all the wishful thinking is by those who wish the resurrection **were not true**—people who want to live their lives as they please without having to submit themselves to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Because if Jesus did rise from the dead, such wishful thinkers will have a lot of explaining to do on judgment day.

But the question I wish to ask you is this: **What are you going to do about the resurrection of Jesus Christ?** You cannot remain indifferent to it. You must do something about it.

I am not asking whether you can make an intellectual assent to the factuality of the resurrection. I am not asking you whether you can repeat all the logic and proof of this sermon. There have been simple souls for hundreds of years who believe in Christ who have never understood some of the implications of these texts. The question is: **What are you going to do about the resurrection of Jesus Christ?** For those of you who are professing Christians, how has the resurrection of Christ changed your life? Has it really changed it? Is there any difference in the way you live **now** from the way you lived **before** you believed in the resurrection? I would say to you. Unless your whole life has radically changed because of the resurrection, then you really don't believe it at all.

And for those who are not professing Christians, does this evidence for the resurrection bring you now face to face with the truth claims of the gospel of Jesus Christ? You cannot walk away this morning without making some important decision with respect to it.

If the resurrection is true, then none of you can remain neutral to it. Belief in the resurrection is not like belief in so many other things—like the theory of electromagnetism or the right political party to occupy public office in Kenya. Those things are important, but my opinion of those things will not appreciably change or alter my life. I may have no understanding at all of electromagnetism—and I don't—but I can still function quite well in this life—and I do. I can have the wrong political views and still inherit everlasting life by believing in Jesus. I can remain in the same church with all kinds of people who have different political and scientific viewpoints, but I cannot remain in the same church with someone who disbelieves the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, because what he believes makes my faith a joke. More importantly, one cannot be a true Christian who disbelieves the bodily resurrection of Christ. There are certain fundamentals of the Christian faith which cannot be sacrificed without redefining what Christianity is. Christianity is not simply a superb moral system. It is a relationship with a **living** Savior who not only informs us how we must live but gives us the desire and the power to live that way.

But I might ask why one would wish to be a Christian without the hope of the resurrection. The Apostle Paul made no apology for saying that he would not have endured the suffering of the cross if Christ had not risen from the dead. Rather he said, we might as well follow the hedonists who live for pleasure.

Why are we also in danger every hour?...

If from human motives I fought with wild beasts at Ephesus, what does it profit me? If the dead are not raised, LET US EAT AND DRINK, FOR TOMORROW WE DIE. (1 Corinthians 15:30, 32 NASB)

But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised;¹⁴ and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. ...¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised;¹⁷ and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins.¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.¹⁹ **If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.** (1 Corinthians 15:13-19 NASB)

Why did Paul say that we should be pitied if Christ has not been raised? Because we have sacrificed many of the material and sensual pleasures of this life for a lie. We have been faithful to our wives and husbands because of our faith in Christ when we could have been enjoying sex with many people. We have given to others and sacrificed for others when we could have been spending all our money on ourselves. We have believed and practiced a moral code which cannot be justified by any rules of logic—a system which is simply not based on truth—if Christ has not risen from the dead.

Oh, but those of us who are true believers know that the Christian faith is true, and that Christ really rose again from the dead. And because it is true, we have been fully satisfied with one wife and being faithful to one husband. Faithfulness in marriage is the ultimate sexual experience. And we have found that it is more blessed to give to others than to receive. We have learned with Paul to “count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus *[our]* Lord, for whom *[we]* have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that *[we]* may gain Christ” (Philippians 3:8 NASB) In the words of Michael Card, “It’s hard to imagine the freedom we find in the things we leave behind.”

But without the resurrection, the truth is that you and I are chance collisions of tiny molecules that somehow, without any purpose, collided with one another and clung together to make up a human organism. But this human organism has no defensible meaning in a universe without purpose and without moral absolutes. We have no more meaning than a snail inching its way across a hot sidewalk. **We are here because we are here—nothing more.** You don’t mean anything, and I don’t mean anything. We are part of a species of human organisms trying to survive and propagate our own kind without being able to produce any reason **why** our kind should continue surviving. This is **evolutionism**—the philosophy that the world created itself out of chance, exists by chance, and will one day be extinguished by chance. And there can be no purpose, no meaning, no morality, and no love, in a chance universe.

So what are you going to do with the resurrection? Peter was asked this question on the Day of Pentecost after telling the Jews, “Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom **you** crucified.” (Acts 2:36 NASB) And they asked, “Brethren what shall we do?”

You also crucified Jesus Christ, because it was your sin that put him on the cross. So this is the question you should be asking yourself this morning if you do not know Jesus Christ as your Savior. And my response is the same as Peter’s, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38 NASB)