



Evidence for the Resurrection

JESUS IS ALIVE

(Taken from daily emails written by Pastor Mark)

PART ONE: THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS, A SERIES OF MESSAGES

For those that identify themselves as Christians, Easter is the most important holiday of the year because the resurrection of Jesus is the central and defining aspect of the Christian faith. So, if you are reading this and you are a Christ follower, my hope is that these messages will serve to strengthen your faith and encourage you to share that faith with others. If you are not a believer, or maybe just skeptical about an actual resurrection, my hope is that you would at least read these messages out of intellectual curiosity and allow them to challenge what you currently believe, or don't believe, about the claims of a risen Jesus.

Every year near Easter and Christmas time some news outlets run stories calling into question the very existence of Jesus of Nazareth, and this year is no exception as CNN republished an article from 2012 in which John Blake suggests that Christ's historical existence is an open question. But as John Stonestreet from Breakpoint recently stated, "This is the very definition of fake news: No credible historian believes Jesus is a myth. Even among skeptics of religion, that theory has been abandoned. There is broad consensus among scholars that Christianity began with the life and death of a real and extraordinary Man. Even ancient writers hostile to Christianity like Josephus, Tacitus, and Pliny the Younger, confirm the existence of a Man from Nazareth who preached throughout Galilee and Judea, ran afoul of the authorities, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and sparked what would eventually become the world's largest religion."

Therefore, this series of messages will not address whether or not Jesus of Nazareth was a real person, as that is no longer a credible point of contention, but instead will focus on the historicity of His resurrection. For some, belief in the resurrection is a given; something they have always believed and accepted as part of their faith. For others, the resurrection is simply an outrageous claim or a myth created to make Jesus of Nazareth into something he never claimed to be. For me personally, as an engineer, I've always been most comfortable with data and evidence. Does this imply a lack of faith? I don't believe so. Doubt can be a powerful motivator to seek out the truth, which is what I have spent

much time doing in my years of being a follower of Christ. I've always been drawn to apologetics and the writings of people that had been atheists or skeptics but upon deeper investigation became committed followers of Jesus Christ (C.S. Lewis, Charles Colson, Anne Rice, Lee Strobel, etc.). And based on my reading, studying, and discussions with other believers, I have been surprised to find so much evidence pointing to the reality of the resurrection. This has been very significant for me personally in my faith journey and I wanted to share it with each of you.

With that as an introduction, tomorrow I will focus on the importance and centrality of the resurrection to the Christian faith. In fact, it is so important that the Apostle Paul, in a letter he wrote to the church in Corinth, basically says that if Christ has not been raised from the dead, then our faith is futile and that we should be pitied because of our allegiance to a mere man who was crucified by the Romans.

PART TWO: THE IMPORTANCE & CENTRALITY OF THE RESURRECTION

One of the unique aspects of the Christian faith is that it is centered primarily on a single, and very public, event in history. It is not based primarily on a set of writings, guidelines to follow, secrets, or rituals to practice. It centers on a single event in history. That event is the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth; an event that changed the world. This is an event we all need to wrestle with, whether you consider yourself a person of faith or not. Why? Because this is not just a set of writings that you can read and decide if you like them or not. It is not a set of beliefs and guidelines that you can consider applicable to your life or not. We are talking here about the claim that Jesus of Nazareth rose from death following execution by the Roman government. If this event actually happened, it demands a response and a decision as to whether or not you will worship Jesus as God. And if it didn't happen, then we don't need to worry ourselves about anything Jesus said or did.

Below I have included verses from Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth where he describes the importance of the resurrection of Christ. Regardless of what you believe about the Bible as a whole, scholars date this letter from Paul at about 55 AD, which is approximately 20 years after Jesus' death. Verses 3-7 below are a creed that likely dates to within a few years of Jesus' death, making these verses some of the oldest in the New Testament. **In summary, Paul states that if Christ has not been raised from the dead, then the Christian faith is futile and Christ followers should be pitied because of their allegiance to a mere man who died on a cross.** So there it is. The very core of the Christian faith is dependent upon whether or not Jesus actually got up on the 3rd day following his crucifixion.

1 Corinthians 15: 1-8

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

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

1 Corinthians 15: 12-19 *(emphasis added by me)*

But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. ***And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.*** Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. ***If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.***

In the next section, I will begin to share evidence that I believe supports the claim of the resurrection as an historical event.

PART THREE: THE RESURRECTION REPORTED IN EARLY MANUSCRIPTS

Some claim that the resurrection was something that was added to the story many years later. But this claim is simply not supported by the evidence. The gospel accounts of Jesus' life (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) were all written within 30-60 years of Jesus' death. However, the earliest accounts of his resurrection are not found in the gospels, but in the letters of Paul, which historians agree were written within 15-20 years of the death of Jesus.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, which I referenced in the last part, is dated by scholars to have been written about 55 AD, which is approximately 20 years after Jesus' death. Here again are 6 verses from that letter (1 Corinthians 15:3-8):

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

Verses 3-7 above are believed to be a creed that likely dates to within a few years of Jesus' death, making those verses some of the oldest in the New Testament. And look at what he says in these verses about the eyewitnesses. He mentions several, including 500 brothers. It's like he's saying, "If you don't believe me, ask someone else who saw him because there are plenty!" And remember, this was a public letter that was intended to be read openly to many people.

Let me reference one other letter from Paul. In his letter to the church in Philippi, Paul quotes a hymn to Christ as God, which is generally recognized by scholars to have been written just a few years after the resurrection.

Philippians 2:5-11

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Given when these letters and gospels were written, there was simply not enough time for legends to have formed. It typically takes a few generations for a legend to form. Before that, there are too many people that know the truth that would prevent the legend from gaining credibility. The resurrection was simply not a story that developed gradually over the years. The evidence does not support that.

In the next part, I will discuss what eventually happened to Jesus' original disciples. Their story is what froze me in my tracks and forced me, several years ago, to grapple with the historicity of the resurrection.

PART FOUR: THE DISCIPLES DIED AS MARTYRS

All of the disciples (except John) died as martyrs proclaiming the resurrection to be true.

In reading the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) you get a picture of the disciples as ordinary men who had doubts, who had trouble understanding what Jesus was saying and doing, and that argued over who would be the greatest when Jesus came to power. And when Jesus was arrested by the authorities and tried and beaten, most of them scattered and hid. Even Peter, who followed him on the night of his arrest to see what would happen, denied knowing him on three occasions that evening because he was so scared for his life. And yet something happened after the death of Jesus that transformed these men. These same men began preaching boldly the resurrection of Jesus and

proclaiming him as the promised Messiah. In addition, almost every one of these men died brutally for preaching Jesus as the resurrected Christ. In fact, history reveals that not one of the apostles ever denied their testimony about the resurrection of Jesus.

What happened to these men to make them so bold? No one willingly dies for a lie, which is different than dying for a belief. It is not uncommon to see and hear of people dying for their belief. Thousands of Christians are martyred every year because they refuse to deny their faith in Jesus Christ. However, dying for something you KNOW to be a lie is something completely different and no one does this. The original disciples were in the unique position to know whether Jesus had risen from the dead or not. If this story had been fabricated, none of them would have been willing to sacrifice their lives for a story they had made up.

What we know about the deaths of the apostles is derived from early church tradition and which was subsequently documented by early church historians such as Eusebius (AD 325). I've included a few examples below of apostles and early church leaders:

- 1.** Peter was crucified upside down because he felt it would be inappropriate to be crucified upright as his Lord Jesus was.
- 2.** James (son of Zebedee) was beheaded in Jerusalem.
- 3.** Matthew was killed by the sword in Ethiopia.
- 4.** Mark died in Egypt where he was dragged by horses through the streets until he was dead.
- 5.** Luke was hanged in Greece.
- 6.** James, half-brother of Jesus, was thrown from the southeast pinnacle of the Temple (a 100 foot drop); when they discovered that he survived, they beat him to death.
- 7.** Paul was tortured and then beheaded by Emperor Nero at Rome in AD 67.

With my job at Lilly, I often traveled to the city of Strasbourg, France where there is a beautiful and famous cathedral that was completed in the mid-15th century and is adorned with immaculate statues. In one area of the cathedral, there are statues depicting the various ways that the apostles of Christ had been martyred; not a “feel good” display, but it is another way of passing on church history.

In summary, no one dies for what they know to be a lie. But history tells us that not just one, but all but one of the disciples of Jesus went to their violent death claiming Jesus had risen from the dead. That is a powerful testimony to the historical reliability of this event.

Next, we will look at the miraculous emergence of the Christian church and how that lends credence to the resurrection as an actual historical event.

PART FIVE: THE MIRACULOUS EMERGENCE OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

In his book “The Reason for God,” Timothy Keller writes:

Most people think that, when it comes to Jesus’ resurrection, the burden of proof is on believers to give evidence that it happened. That is not completely the case. The resurrection also puts a burden of proof on its nonbelievers. It is not enough to simply believe Jesus did not rise from the dead. You must then come up with a historically feasible alternate explanation for the birth of the church. You have to provide some other plausible account for how things began.

Secular historians have searched for a natural explanation for the emergence and flourishing of the Christian church. However, there isn’t one that has been able to stand up to intellectual scrutiny.

Consider for a moment some things we know about Jesus:

1. He grew up in Nazareth, a small town where the only people that lived there were those that were born there. Nazareth was not a destination.
2. His preaching/teaching ministry lasted 3 years at the most.
3. He never traveled more than a few miles from the place of his birth.
4. He had a small band of loyal followers.

And yet we see this amazing growth of the Christian church globally. In fact, the church started in the very place where it would have been easiest to disprove if had been made up. The eyewitnesses would have dispelled the myths long before they gained momentum. Historians also tell us that there were several Messianic movements at this time in history. However, each of them died out when their leader died. Why did the church of Jesus Christ survive and thrive? The Jewish leaders wanted to shut down this cult-like group of people that belonged to “The Way.” The Roman government tried to wipe it out via brutal persecution. Roman Emperor Nero tortured and murdered many Christians. The mighty Roman empire vs. this small community of believers. How did it survive? Today, over 2 billion people globally claim to be followers of Jesus Christ and the Roman Empire disappeared long ago.

I’d like to share with you some more verses from the Bible that I think address this very question because I believe it is very important to share these particular verses with you which come from a book in the Bible named Acts (short for the Acts of the Apostles) that was written by a man named Luke who was an historian, a physician, and someone that spent significant time traveling with the apostle Paul. In the book of Acts, Luke gives an account of the birth and growth of the early Christian church following the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

In the verses below, Luke is recounting a situation where some of the apostles were facing persecution because they were preaching about Jesus and healing the sick. As you read this, pay particular attention to the final two verses, 38 & 39.

The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.”

Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than human beings! The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.” When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. Then he addressed the Sanhedrin: “Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.”

The words of Gamaliel, a respected and honored Jewish leader and teacher, spoken a short time after Jesus resurrection and recorded in Luke’s historical account of the early church, answer for us the question of how the church of Jesus Christ survived past the 1st century.

In the next part I will start by discussing the first eyewitnesses of the empty tomb and why that was so problematic.

PART SIX: THE FIRST EYEWITNESSES & SOME UNLIKELY CONVERTS

I want to look at two additional pieces of evidence that I believe further support the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The first is that the Bible reports that women found the empty tomb. In fact, this is consistently reported in all four gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). In order to appreciate why that is a big deal, we need to look at cultural context. In that culture, women had very low social status and were considered so untrustworthy that their testimony was not admissible in court. If the gospel writers were making this up, they would never have stated that women found the tomb because in doing so, it could only have undermined the credibility of the testimony. N.T. Wright argues in his book “The Resurrection of the Son of God” that there must have been enormous

pressure on the early proclaimers of the Christian message to remove the women from the account. Yet, they could not do so because the stories were so well known. This fact helps support that the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) are accurate historical accounts of the events.

The second piece of evidence I want to consider is the unlikely conversion and belief of Saul of Tarsus (who became the apostle Paul) and James, half-brother of Jesus. Saul was a Pharisee and a persecutor of Christians. He hated this sect that had risen up and wanted to put an end to it. The Bible, in the book of Acts, tells us that Saul was present and gave his approval to the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. In Acts 8:3 the Bible tells us that Saul “began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.” But the Bible then tells us that a meeting with the resurrected Christ changed him into a pillar of the Christian church. This unlikely convert to Christianity contributed 13 of the 27 books of the New Testament, all of which are letters written to the early churches.

James, Jesus’s half-brother (James was one of Mary and Joseph’s sons but I list him as a half-brother because Joseph wasn’t technically Jesus’ father), did not believe that Jesus was anything special during his life. In the gospel of John, chapter 7, we read a story where Jesus’ brothers are ridiculing him and it says that “his own brothers did not believe in him.” That’s of course not surprising if you have siblings. I imagine trying to convince your biological brothers that you are the Son of God would be neigh impossible. And yet the Bible later tells us specifically that James is one of the people that Jesus appeared to after his resurrection. James went on to become the leader of the church in Jerusalem and I mentioned last week how he was brutally killed.

Other than an actual resurrection, there was no good reason that James and Saul would have become believers, leaders and teachers in the early church, and ultimately martyrs for their faith.

Next we will consider the fact that no one in that culture expected a bodily resurrection and how that fact supports that this is not a story the disciples would have made up.

PART SEVEN: NO ONE EXPECTED A BODILY RESURRECTION

The disciples were huddled together in hiding following Jesus’ death. Once they heard from the women that his body was gone, they ran to the tomb to verify for themselves; but still, they didn’t put it together. Luke, one of the gospel writers, says in Luke 24:12, “Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.” He wasn’t expecting it.

A typical explanation for the resurrection given by skeptics is that it was a story fabricated by his followers that eventually picked up momentum and eventually came to be accepted by many. The thought is

that people of that time, not being as scientifically advanced as we are, or as culturally enlightened as we are, would be very open to a person rising from the dead. The problem with this explanation is that it has no credibility based on the cultural context of that time.

1. The Greco-Roman culture considered the soul as good but the physical body as being corrupt and weak. Therefore, death was an opportunity for the soul to be liberated from the body. No soul would ever desire to be reunited with its body after it had been freed.
2. For the Jews, many did believe in the resurrection of the dead. However, their belief was that the resurrection of the righteous would occur in the future when God renewed the entire world. To suggest that an individual person would be resurrected in the middle of history made no sense to them.

The bodily resurrection of Jesus is not a story the disciples would have fabricated because it would not have fit into the world view of that time. In other words, the people of that culture and time struggled just as much as we would today to the story of a bodily resurrection from the dead.

As I mentioned in a previous section, historians tell us that there were several Messianic movements at that time in history that all died out when their leader was executed. In his book “Who Was Jesus?” N. T. Wright says, *“In not one single case do we hear the slightest mention of the disappointed followers claiming that their hero had been raised from the dead. They knew better. Claiming that the original leader was alive again was simply not an option. Unless, of course, he was.”* Timothy Keller, in “The Reason for God,” summarizes it like this:

There were dozens of other messianic pretenders whose lives and careers ended the same way Jesus’s did. Why would the disciples of Jesus have come to the conclusion that his crucifixion had not been a defeat but a triumph – unless they had seen him risen from the dead?

Next we will consider the fact that no one ever disputed the empty tomb, and that within weeks of the resurrection, thousands of Jews began to follow Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God.

PART EIGHT: THE EMPTY TOMB & A RADICAL NEW BELIEF FOR JEWS

The empty tomb is very important because it shows that this was not just a spiritual resurrection but a bodily resurrection (which was problematic for everyone in that culture as I discussed previously, giving further evidence that this is not a story line the disciples would have made up). The Roman authorities and the Jewish leaders could not dispute that the tomb was empty. In fact, all they needed to do to put an abrupt end to this story of his resurrection would have been to produce the corpse. But they couldn’t because there wasn’t one. So, they fabricated a story that the disciples had stolen the body,

even though the tomb was guarded by Roman soldiers (Matthew 28:11-15). In addition, the location of the tomb would have been well known because it is documented that it belonged to Joseph of Arimathea who was a member of the Jewish council. This historical fact is not only documented in the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), it is also documented by Josephus, the Jewish historian who was NOT a follower of Christ.

The final piece of evidence that I will present in support of the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus is that within weeks of the crucifixion, thousands of Jews begin to follow Jesus as the resurrected Messiah and Son of God. I can't overemphasize the important of this last piece of evidence. The question is how could a group of first century Jews have come to worship a human being as divine? Author and Pastor Timothy Keller says this in "The Reason for God":

Jews believed in a single, transcendent, personal God. It was absolute blasphemy to propose that any human being should be worshipped. Yet hundreds of Jews began worshipping Jesus literally overnight. What enormous event broke through all of that Jewish resistance? If they had seen him resurrected, that would account for it. What other historical answer can do so?

We don't fully appreciate the implications of this decision for the life of a first-century Jew. Here in our Western culture, to declare yourself a Christian will not bring about any substantive persecution and will actually number you among the majority. However, for a first-century Jew, a decision to proclaim Jesus as Messiah would have meant becoming an outcast from the social and political structure of their time. It would have meant forsaking the key social practices that they and their families had been living by for centuries. It would likely have meant leaving their family if their family did not follow them in their belief. In the last part I will wrap up this series with final thoughts and implications.

PART NINE: FINAL THOUGHTS & IMPLICATIONS

I bring this article to a close leading up to the most important holiday on the Christian calendar: Easter, or as many appropriately refer to it, Resurrection Sunday. When I started this series, I had assumed I would finish with part eight, having completed sharing some of the evidence that I have found significant in my faith journey and that I believe supports the resurrection as a true historical event. However, it seemed to me that one more part was needed to bring some closure.

In part one, I stated one of my purposes by saying that if you are reading this and you are a Christ follower, my hope is that these messages will serve to strengthen your faith and encourage you to share that faith with others. I certainly hope that this has been the case. We are to worship the Lord with our hearts AND our minds. There is no need to separate our emotions from our intellect; we don't

check our brains at the door to the church. And as you celebrate Resurrection Sunday, remember that our Lord Jesus Christ said, *“Greater love has no one that this, the he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.”*

I also stated another purpose for these messages. Specifically I said that if you are not a believer, or maybe just skeptical about an actual resurrection, my hope is that you would at least read these messages out of intellectual curiosity and allow them to challenge what you currently believe, or don’t believe, about the claims of a risen Christ. I equally hope that this too has been the case. I believe the evidence in support of this event demands our attention and requires us to consider the question “What are we to make of Jesus Christ?” You see, the very essence of Christianity is that Jesus is God, and his resurrection confirmed those claims that he made of himself (John 10:30; John 8:58).

Chuck Colson, an atheist turned believer that went on to start Prison Fellowship, summarizes this well in his book *Born Again*. In discussing his struggle with who this Jesus was, he reflected on this intellectual struggle as he read C.S. Lewis’ *Mere Christianity*:

Lewis puts it so bluntly that you can’t slough it off: for Christ to have talked as He talked, lived as He lived, died as He died, He was either God or a raving lunatic. There was my choice, as simple, stark and frightening as that, no fine shadings, no gradations no compromises.

If He is not God, He is nothing, least of all a great moral teacher. For what He taught includes the assertion that He is indeed God. And if He is not, that one statement alone would have to qualify as the most monstrous lie of all time – stripping Him at once of any possible moral platform.

I realized suddenly that there is less heresy in rejecting Him altogether, dismissing His as a raving lunatic, to use Lewis’s word, that to remake Him into something He wasn’t (and isn’t). Jesus said take it, all or nothing. If I was to believe in God at all, I had to take Him as He reveals Himself, not as I might wish Him to be.

It has been a blessing for me to share these thoughts and reflections with each of you. I will close then with an invitation to reach out to hello@redeembible.church with any questions, challenges, or just an interest to continue a conversation about who Jesus was and what Christians believe. I love to talk about this because I truly believe it to be true and believe therefore that there is no more important decision a person can make on this earth than to place their faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior.

** Each of these parts were taken from a series of emails sent by Pastor Mark to his coworkers when he worked at Eli Lilly. We pray that these evidences were a blessing to you and increased your faith in our Living Savior!*