

Evidence of Jesus' Resurrection

Jesus Really Died

Anyone reading the accounts of the trials and crucifixion of Jesus will be impressed by the brutality of His treatment. The brutal beatings included a series of lashes by a whip made from leather strips into which were tied small, sharp metal pieces designed to rip the human flesh. The six hours of hanging on the cross, fastened by nails through His wrists and the heels, brought further exhaustion and dehydration, resulting in hypovolemic shock. To ensure Jesus' death, soldiers thrust a spear through His side. Although this may not have pierced His heart, it would have punctured enough organs to cause mortal damage to an already severely injured body.

Add to this the partial embalming in connection with Jesus' burial and the wrapping of his body, including His head, in grave clothes. This last treatment no doubt would have obstructed His ability to breathe. The claim that Jesus was not dead but merely in a state of shock or in a coma seems extremely unlikely. A rejection of the resurrection on the grounds of this argument, therefore, is at best far-fetched.

Jesus Was Buried in a Tomb

The claim that Jesus was never buried in a tomb or that the disciples went to the wrong tomb seems unreasonable. It is almost impossible to imagine that the disciples would invent a story about a tomb belonging to a prominent member of the Sanhedrin that sentenced Jesus to death unless it was true. To further include Nicodemus, who was also a Sanhedrin member, in the story makes it even more unlikely that the story was made up. If the disciples desired to concoct a story about an empty tomb, they would not have used the names of prominent members of the Jewish council who could easily have disproved the claim. And indeed, had it not been so, Joseph and Nicodemus most likely would have exposed the disciples' story as false.

Furthermore, the timing of Jesus' burial late on the day of preparation made the story suspect in itself. It simply does not sound like an invented story. Had it been invented, or had the story simply been developed later as the stories about Jesus were told and retold, it is almost impossible to imagine that no other burial tradition would have been developed alongside it. Since this did not happen and this is the only burial tradition we have of Jesus, it seems most reasonable to conclude that what we have is a description of what actually happened.

In addition, the story places women as the first witnesses to the empty tomb. This may not seem important in our time and society, but in first-century Judaism women could not serve as witnesses because their testimony was considered inherently suspect. If, therefore, the disciples had fabricated the story of the empty tomb, it is highly improbable that they would have placed women as primary witnesses. When the Gospels place women as witnesses at the crucifixion, at the burial site, and at the empty tomb, the only logical conclusion is that

the Gospel writers merely reported what happened (see Mark 15:40-41,47; 16:1-6). Were these stories fabricated, the disciples would have placed prominent, trustworthy men in these positions.

Jesus' Tomb Was Empty

Was the tomb empty because someone stole the body? If so, did the disciples themselves steal it, or was it the Jewish leaders? Both of these suggestions are highly unlikely because guards were protecting the tomb. The soldiers possibly could have been bought off or been removed in another way. But suggestions of theft prove unlikely due to the historical situation and the evidence that follows the resurrection account.

First, it is unlikely that the disciples stole the body since we have no indication that they really expected the resurrection. In fact, when they first heard about it, they doubted it. Even after Jesus had reportedly appeared to Peter and several other apostles, some continued to doubt the resurrection. After Jesus' death the disciples were distraught, and there is no indication they were looking forward to Jesus' rising from the dead.

Moreover, it is an indisputable fact that after Jesus' death His followers were under extreme pressure, being both tortured and killed for their faith. That in itself, of course, is not exceptional. Martyrdom, risking one's life for the faith, has a pedigree that reaches far back in history. However, although it is understandable that some are ready to die for what they believe to be true (that's the essence of martyrdom), it is completely irrational, even unthinkable, that someone would be willing to die for what they know to be false. If the disciples had stolen the body themselves and therefore knew the resurrection stories were fabricated, it is unimaginable that they would die for such a story. This fact alone makes it incomprehensible that the disciples stole Jesus' body from the grave.

Could the Jewish leaders have had the body removed to make sure the disciples did not steal it? Not likely. First, the earliest Jewish explanation presupposes the empty tomb. This is never really questioned. The Jewish leaders were working overtime to try to disprove that the disappearance of Jesus' body was due to His resurrection from the dead (see Matt. 28:12-13). Given this scenario, it would have been easy to silence all rumors about Jesus' resurrection by simply producing the body. As Christian preachers proclaimed the resurrection of Christ, the only thing the Jewish leaders needed to do was to present the body of the dead Jesus. If they had stolen it, they could have settled the case once and for all. Because that never happened, the claim that they stole the body loses credibility.

The Disciples Did Not Hallucinate

Hallucination occurs when expectations become so strong that individuals cease to distinguish between their hopes and reality. As already mentioned, nothing indicates that the disciples had any anticipation of Jesus' resurrection. Theologically, their expectations regarding resurrection were tied to the general resurrection of all people at the end of the age. They did not expect anyone to be resurrected before then.

Hallucinations could also happen as a result of mass hysteria. If all of the disciples had come together and created an ecstatic atmosphere that aroused their faith's imagination, an argument for hallucination could have been attempted. However, all evidence points in the opposite direction. The recorded postresurrection appearances of Jesus happened in a variety of places, at various times, and to various groups of different sizes (see 1 Cor. 15:5-8). None of this provides a basis for the claim of hallucination.

The Resurrection Was Not a New Variation on the Story of the Dying and Rising of Gods

Mythological parallels in ancient stories about the dying and rising of gods are so different from the resurrection story of Jesus that any claim of parallelism seems utterly stretched. Most of these mythological stories are linked to fertility cults and a cyclical understanding of history and the harvest calendar. Mythological gods rise in the spring and are in their prime during the summer and early fall (the harvest season), only to die during the winter in order to rise again the next spring. Furthermore, these stories are so laden with mythological detail that almost no similarity exists between them and the story of Jesus. The claim that Jesus' resurrection parallels mythological stories fails to convince. It leaves no credible argument.

Further Evidence for the Historicity of Jesus' Resurrection Exists

The objections to the historicity of Jesus' resurrection are driven by philosophical presuppositions that disallow the possibility of resurrection from the dead even before historical investigation has begun. When Jesus' resurrection is studied without such presupposition, massive amounts of historical detail point to the resurrection as a verifiable event in history. Beyond the previous evidence, several additional points can be made in favor of the historicity of Jesus' resurrection. Although not conclusive in themselves, they complement the arguments presented.

- The message of Christianity spread rapidly.
- The disciples were transformed from frightened, discouraged people into bold witnesses.
- Paul's conversion from prosecutor to preacher assumes the resurrection (see Acts 9).
- The disciples began observing the first day of the week (Sunday), when Jesus rose, as the day of worship rather than the Sabbath (Saturday).
- Neither the Jews nor the Romans ever produced evidence to disprove the resurrection.
- The church has existed and continued growing for almost two thousand years.

Jesus' Postresurrection Appearances

People	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John	Acts/ I Corinthians
Women leaving tomb	28:9-10				
Mary Magdalene		16:9-10		20:14-17	
Two disciples on road to Emmaus		16:12-13	24:13-31		
Peter			24:34		I Corinthians 15:5
10 disciples in upper room			24:36-49	20:19-23	
11 disciples in upper room		16:14		20:26-31	I Corinthians 15:5
7 disciples fishing				21:1-23	
Disciples on Galilee mountain	28:16-20	16:15-18			
More than five hundred					I Corinthians 15:6
James and then all apostles					I Corinthians 15:7
Ascension		16:19	24:50-51		Acts 1:7-9
Paul					Acts 9:3-6

Preben Vang and Terry Carter, *Telling God's Story* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 242-47.