

## Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ

Shaun Roberts

### Introduction

Greetings and welcome to this closing chapter on our series on apologetics. I am sure we can all agree that this series has been enlightening, and it is my prayer that the Lord has equipped his saints to not only defend the faith, but also to contend for truth in our modern society. The truth is always under threat, and unless we stand to defend it, we will continue to see the moral standards dropping all around us, in our schools, our homes and sadly even within the church.

As Jude says in his letter, we must “*contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people.*” I know I speak to fellow, passionate believers here today. Remember this, apologetics may seem like something that only the front line soldiers do, the elite commando unit, if you will. But the truth is something we all are required to defend, in our workplaces, in our communities, in our country, even in our own homes and families. Let us glorify and honour the name of God and his truth, at every opportunity that we have.

Now today's message is about what is probably the most fundamental belief we hold as Christians. Today we will be talking about the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

### Why is this significant?

Now, before we get into the evidence, we must appreciate the significance of this event. It is no understatement to say that the whole of Christianity hinges on this one event. Why would I say this? Well, if Jesus is not the risen Son of God, that is, the resurrected Son of God, then our faith is irrelevant. We are essentially believing in a complete fraud.

C.S. Lewis (the Christian author and apologist) put it best in his seminal work **“Mere Christianity”**:

*“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”*

Everything that we hold to as doctrine, everything that we believe in terms of ethics, everything that we believe within the Christian worldview begins to fall flat, because we have understood all of these things from Jesus Christ. I like how Paul puts it:

1 Corinthians 15:17-22 (ESV)

**"And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.** Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. **But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.** For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive."

If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, the whole religion falls flat.

Let's look at some of what Jesus himself had to say on the matter of the crucifixion and resurrection. Here we see **Jesus predicts these events:**

Mark 9:31 (ESV)

"For he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, **after three days he will rise.**"

Luke 9:22 (ESV)

"Saying, 'The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, **and on the third day be raised.**"

Jesus also explains **the reason** for his death and resurrection:

John 3:14-16 (ESV)

"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.** For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

The **disciples understood this too** following his death and resurrection:

1 Peter 1:3-4 (ESV)

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be **born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead**, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you."

So rather simply, the importance of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is that it is the very means by which we have **received the gift of eternal life**. Apart from this event, we have no hope. Apart from this event, we have no future. Apart from this event, our life in this world is all that we have.

When we talk about the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, understand that this is not an apologetics topic, but rather it is the very crux of our faith. It is the foundation, the Rock on which we have built our entire lives. If there is but a single defense you want to make for your Christian faith, this is the one. Let it be written on your very hearts, because our Saviour is deserving of nothing less.

Romans 4:25 (ESV)

"He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification."

Jesus defeated death on the cross of Calvary. He did so willingly, He did so for you and for me, and in doing so he broke the stranglehold of sin and death over us. He fulfilled countless prophecies in doing so, even his own prophecies as we mentioned earlier. We have mentioned many of these already in this series in the messages on the **Historicity of the Bible** and on **Why Christianity is the One True Religion**, so we won't be rehashing these again, we will focus specifically on the resurrection event and its proof.

Psalm 16:10 (ESV)

"For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption."

Now just to make it clear, while the resurrection is central to Christian faith, other significant events, such as Jesus' incarnation, crucifixion, and ascension, are also crucial. However, the resurrection uniquely confirms Jesus' divinity, ensures the efficacy of His atoning sacrifice, and provides the foundation for Christian hope and the promise of eternal life.

### **The evidence of the resurrection**

One of the beautiful things about the Bible and indeed about the resurrection of Jesus Christ, is that it can be tested. **It is falsifiable**. Biblical scholars of all beliefs are able to look into the facts and the history surrounding this claim and are free to draw their own conclusion. Of course as Christians we have one view, but you can be a complete skeptic and look at these events from a completely neutral standpoint.

So imagine you look at the gospels as historical documents. You take them as purely historical records of some events, one of which is the resurrection of Jesus. Can you look at this objectively and conclude that it is true? Well, interestingly enough, the vast majority of historical scholars do indeed come to that conclusion. Let's present some reasons for why they do so.

At the outset, it is a key point to stress that when you are trying to confirm the historical authenticity of something, when you can draw upon various **independent** sources which confirm the same thing, some of which are closely dated to the original event, then you have compelling evidence to believe that it is so.

To make this defence simple to recall and internalise, I will break it down into just four points that prove the resurrection.

### 1. Empty tomb

Let's begin with the empty tomb. The first evidence of Jesus having risen from the dead is that the tomb itself was empty. Now we of course know this from scripture:

John 20:1-9 (ESV)

"Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, **and he saw and believed**; for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead."

Some things to consider here. Where was his body taken? What happened to it? Firstly, the Jewish leaders actually asked Pilate for a Roman guard to protect the tomb and to seal it.

Matthew 27:62-66 (ESV)

"The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, 'Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, "After

three days I will rise." Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, "He has risen from the dead," and the last fraud will be worse than the first.' Pilate said to them, 'You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can.' So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard."

This implied that for anyone to come in, they would have to break through a guard of soldiers, and not only that, they'd have to move a rock weighing a couple of tons, and not only that, they would have to break a seal, which, for all intents and purposes would make them marked for death as they'd have committed an act of treason against the Roman Empire.

Now the disciples, bless them, were certainly not in a state to do such a thing. We read just a few verses earlier that they were afraid and fled for their lives following Jesus' arrest. Would they really have the courage to undertake such a quest, knowing the consequences, and in their state of confusion, fear and loss? It is highly improbable.

Now check this passage:

Matthew 28:11-15 (ESV)

"While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers and said, 'Tell people, "His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep." And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.' So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day."

So undoubtedly, the body **was** actually gone. But not stolen by the disciples - the chief priests didn't actually know how to address this. Think about this, if the body had never been taken out of the tomb, it is a simple matter of course that either the Jewish leaders, or the Romans could have simply presented his body as evidence that it was never removed from the tomb, and yet lo and behold, there is simply no evidence of this in any historical records. At all.

One other interesting thing to think about here, is that it is significant that **Joseph of Arimathea** was the one who took Jesus' body and buried it. All four gospels mention this fact. He was a member of the council, he was actually part of the same group who had made this decision to crucify Jesus (although as we see he didn't consent to it), but he was nevertheless afraid of the Pharisees. Understand that in that period post the crucifixion, the early church would've still had a

great deal of resentment towards this group. It seems illogical that they'd then spin a story about a member of this very council being the one to bury their Lord.

Luke 23:50-53 (ESV)

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

It is significant that Joseph of Arimathea was the one to bury Jesus, because it adds a detail to the story that you would never have expected had the whole thing been a hoax.

*Michael Grant*

*"The historian cannot justifiably deny the empty tomb. According to the evidence, it is irrefutable that there was an empty tomb. If we apply the same sort of criteria that we would apply to any other ancient literary sources, then the evidence is firm and plausible enough to necessitate the conclusion that the tomb was indeed found empty." (Michael Grant, Jesus: An Historian's Review of the Gospels)*

## **2. Eyewitness accounts**

The next evidence we point to is the eyewitness accounts of this event. Now apart from the fact that the gospels are themselves written by eyewitnesses of the various events therein (a key concept for historical reliability), the eyewitness accounts of seeing the resurrected Jesus are even more significant.

First, it is profound that the first eyewitnesses to the resurrected Lord are women - the two Marys. In this time, women's testimony was absolutely disregarded - here is a quote from the Jewish historian Josephus (non-Christian):

***Josephus - Antiquities of the Jews, Book 4, Chapter 8, Section 15***

*"But let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex;*

This was in the context of the legal and societal norms of the Jewish people at the time. It would be a grave mistake to point to female eyewitnesses if one wanted to establish credibility for their "story" if you will. Yet this is precisely the case in **all** the gospels.

The next thing to consider is that many people like to say that the disciples hallucinated. They were seeing things, or that at this stage in history, people didn't understand visions or hallucinations. Listen, it is deeply established that the peoples of this time understood what a vision is, understood what a hallucination is, understood what a ghost was. And add to this the fact that in Corinthians, Paul mentioned the 500 witnesses who all saw Jesus. Have you ever imagined 500 people having the same hallucination? In fact one can argue that whoever puts forth such a ludicrous statement is the one having a hallucination. Remember that these eyewitnesses would have been alive at the time Paul wrote this. He is effectively saying, if you don't believe me, go and ask these guys about it - anyone could've gone and checked his claim.

Another thing to note is that in that same list of eyewitnesses to Jesus, he also appeared to his brother, James. Guys, this is profound. Firstly, Jesus' brothers didn't actually believe in him until **after** he was killed.

John 7:3-5 (ESV)

"So his brothers said to him, 'Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples also may see the works you are doing. For no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.' **For not even his brothers believed in him.**"

Now imagine your own brother claims to be the Son of God, God incarnate. What would it take for you to believe such a thing? Not only that, what would it take you to believe such a thing to the very death, because James was martyred for his belief in his brother.

#### ***Antiquities of the Jews, Book 20, Chapter 9, Section 1***

*"Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the Sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned."*

So we have Jesus appearing to the women, to the apostles multiple times, to Paul, to James (his brother), to two of the disciples on the way to Emmaus, and to 500 brothers and sisters at once. These are in different books, by different authors.

*Gerd Lüdemann:*

*"It may be taken as historically certain that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus's death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ." (Gerd Lüdemann, *What Really Happened to Jesus: A Historical Approach to the Resurrection*)*

### **3. Transformation of disciples**

Next, let's look at how the disciples were radically changed following all of this.

Think about this for a second - the disciples all believed (as any Jew would) that the coming Messiah was meant to come and liberate them from Roman rule and establish his kingdom on earth. He would be a victorious, conquering king. We see that his apostles believed precisely this in many passages where they seem to be waiting for his victory push, and cannot seem to make sense of his predictions around his death.

In addition, remember that Jews believed in resurrection, of course, but believed that this would come at the end of time. The final resurrection. They didn't have any belief or theology of anyone rising from the dead prior to this time. So when Jesus was crucified, they literally believed that was that, their saviour was gone. We see this in their sorrowful reactions in the wake of his arrest and crucifixion.

Disciples understanding of the death and resurrection:

Matthew 16:22-23 (ESV)

"And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.'

Mark 9:32 (ESV)

"But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him."

Jesus rebuking their unbelief AFTER the resurrection:

Luke 24:25-26 (ESV)

"And he said to them, 'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?'"

Something that is so profound about the cross is that Jesus was **literally hanging there as a man cursed by God**. The disciples knew this too - look at this passage:

Deuteronomy 21:22-23 (NKJV)

If someone guilty of a capital offense is put to death and their body is exposed on a pole, you must not leave the body hanging on the pole overnight. Be sure to bury it that same day, because anyone who is hung on a pole is **under God's curse**.

So now you ask yourself to consider this - either the story of the resurrection is true or false. It's one or the other. So if it's false, this means the disciples had two options:

- forget the whole movement and move on with life, thereby at least preserving their own lives, or
- Lie about the whole thing and pretend that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead

What possible motive would the disciples have to lie about this? Perhaps they were believers in what Jesus taught, but still viewed him as just a man - but in that case they could easily have just taken another figurehead and continued the religion through him - maybe Peter or John. They didn't have to make up a story about Jesus rising from the dead.

But no, they chose the option to declare Jesus's resurrection, and to be martyred in some of the most horrific ways as a consequence. They were so convinced that even death itself was not an obstacle. Do we have this kind of faith today?

Consider how the disciples, like Peter and John were suddenly changed into mighty, persuasive speakers in the public sphere, boldly declaring the truth of Jesus even though it meant constant persecutions and beatings. Peter went overnight from being the disciple who denied Jesus to the most prominent speaker of the faith. His faith suddenly skyrocketed - what was the thing that caused this? It was his encounter with the living Christ.

Acts 4:13 (ESV): "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus."

#### 4. Early church

Now lastly, let's look at the establishment of the early church. The church itself stands as profoundly convincing evidence of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Something was born in the wake of all of this that has stood for almost 2000 years now - the very church we are a part of today. This church began suddenly, and it took hold in a dramatic way that has stood the test of time despite endless persecutions, endless attempts to silence it, endless attempts to shut it down and eradicate the Christian faith from existence.

The early church history as recorded in Acts is deeply compelling. From a small group of closely knit believers to churches of thousands upon thousands, powerfully performing signs and wonders and bringing people to Christ in a way that frankly has never been seen since.

Acts 2:40-41 (NET)

With many other words he testified and exhorted them saying, "Save yourselves from this perverse generation!" So those who accepted his message were baptized, and that day about 3,000 people were added.

The Holy Spirit came upon them and empowered them in such a way that literally nothing could stop it. The chief priests and Pharisees tried, the Romans tried, people have tried throughout history, but it always fails. Why? Well because the church is quite simply Jesus' bride. He loves her and cherishes her and will protect her to the very end.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ was the central message of the early church. It wasn't part of some other story, it was **the story**. Listen to this passage from Paul:

1 Corinthians 15:3-8 (ESV)

"For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, **that he was raised on the third day** in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."

In this passage, Paul is referring to a creed that summarizes the foundational beliefs of the early Christian church. This creed includes the death, burial, resurrection, and appearances of Jesus Christ. Scholars generally agree that this creed dates back to very early in the history of the Christian church, within a few years of Jesus' crucifixion. When we consider that Paul was converted within a short period following Jesus' death, around AD 33-35, then it's highly likely that he got this creed from the early Christian church's teachings and doctrine, possibly during his visit to Jerusalem that he mentions in Galatians 1:18-19. Here he met Peter and James, and they instructed him regarding these core doctrines. This would've been AD 36-38 - in other words we are talking about just a couple of years following Jesus' death. So this teaching was already well established shortly following the events of the resurrection. And this has stood so until this very day. This is powerful evidence for Jesus' resurrection.

## 5. Critiques

Lastly, I thought it would be worth mentioning some of the absolute depths that many go to, to try to explain away the cross.

- Many will say that the body was stolen, but we have shown how that isn't possible - there was a Roman guard and a seal, as well as a 2000kg stone in front of the tomb.
- Many will say that Jesus didn't actually die on the cross, he only swooned and fainted, and so he never died. In the history of the crucifixion as a means of execution, no one had ever survived it.
- Some will even say that Jesus wasn't actually buried, they took his body and replaced it with a different person's body. How can this be when the Pharisees and Romans were in control of this process?
- I have even heard the story of someone suggesting that Jesus actually had a twin, and the twin was the one who was crucified but he was actually somewhere else and safe, and so he appeared to the disciples following his brother's death.

Honestly, sometimes all you can really do is smile at people's excuses. When someone doesn't want to believe something, no matter how much the evidence is factually laid out before them, there is precious little you can do to convince them. This is where we bow before our Lord in prayer and cry out for their salvation. Jesus can melt the hardest heart. There is no one who is too far for him to reach, absolutely no one.

## Conclusion

As I mentioned at the outset, the importance of this topic cannot be underestimated. When we acknowledge the truth of this event, we are left at a crossroads. A profound, life-changing decision lies before us:

Jesus died for my sins. He has opened the way for me, to enter into eternal life, to enter into freedom from the yoke of sin, to enter into the presence of the Almighty God. Do I respond:

- Nah, I'm good. I don't need any of this, I can make my own way in this world, I don't need rescuing. I will live for my own purposes. **OR**
- Yes, YES, Lord. I believe! Thank you for this gift, thank you for this peace in my soul, thank you for this joyous hope, thank you for your mercy. I want to be a child of God. I want to accept Jesus into my life, and I want to live faithfully for him all the days of my life.

For those who already believe, let this message strengthen your faith and renew your commitment to share the gospel with others. Stand firm in the truth of the resurrection, and live out your faith boldly, knowing that our hope is secure in the risen Christ.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. Why is the resurrection of Jesus considered the cornerstone of the Christian faith?
2. How does the empty tomb serve as evidence for the resurrection, and what are the counterarguments to this claim?
3. Why do the eyewitness accounts of women seeing the resurrected Jesus hold particular significance in the context of that time?
4. How does the transformation of Jesus' disciples after His resurrection serve as evidence for its truth?
5. What role does the early church's rapid growth play in validating the resurrection of Jesus?
6. How might the resurrection of Jesus be understood differently if viewed purely as a historical event versus a theological truth?
7. What are the strongest arguments against the resurrection, and how do you personally reconcile these with your faith?
8. How does Paul's reference to 500 witnesses in 1 Corinthians 15 contribute to the credibility of the resurrection account?
9. In what ways does the resurrection challenge the moral and ethical foundations of Christianity?
10. Reflect on how the evidence for the resurrection impacts your personal faith and understanding of Christianity.

### **Assignments**

1. **Research and Present:** Investigate the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ outside of the Bible. Prepare a presentation that includes at least three non-biblical historical sources that corroborate the events surrounding the resurrection. Discuss how these sources strengthen or challenge the biblical account.

2. **Critical Analysis Paper:** Write a paper analyzing the transformation of Jesus' disciples after the resurrection. Focus on how their actions and writings post-resurrection serve as evidence for the truth of the resurrection. Include an evaluation of alternative explanations, such as the possibility of mass hallucinations or conspiracies.
3. **Debate Preparation:** Prepare for a class debate on the topic: "The Resurrection of Jesus Christ: A Historical Event or a Myth?" Develop arguments both for and against the historicity of the resurrection, using the points discussed in Shaun Roberts' message. Be ready to defend your position with evidence from both scripture and external historical sources.