

Christ Has Been Raised

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Easter Sunday

1 Corinthians 15:1-20 (v.14)

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People of the Risen Lord,

Investigative shows like NCIS or CSI are popular these days. CSI stands for *Crime Scene Investigation*. These shows follow the work of detectives at the various police bureaus. Using the latest in scientific procedures and techniques, the investigators sift through clues, looking for anything that will help them discover the truth about a crime.

An article entitled *CSI: Resurrection* asks, What would top detectives make of Christ's resurrection? A miracle or myth? What would happen if we applied serious detective work to history's most controversial event: the resurrection of Jesus Christ? It's okay for us to do that. In fact, it's good and important.

In the early church already, the Apostle Paul put his finger on the centrality of the resurrection by saying that the Christian religion either stands or falls with the truth of Jesus' resurrection. Paul writes,

¹ Cor 15:13 If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. ¹⁹ If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.

Let's be honest, like Paul. If the resurrection of Jesus didn't actually happen and it's just a nice story made up by some disciples trying to save face, then we have a big problem. If it's not an actual space-time fact and the body of Jesus of Nazareth is still lying in a tomb somewhere then our faith is useless. If Jesus didn't get out of the tomb, then there's no point in believing everything he said or expecting help from him in our daily lives today. Without the resurrection of Jesus, we have no comfort, no grace, no hope. But because he lives, we can know that his way for life is the best way and that he has all power in heaven and on earth to make all the difference in our lives.

The *CSI Resurrection* author puts it like this: The resurrection has been the cornerstone of the Christian faith for 2,000 years. Christians believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and that his death and resurrection provide salvation—and life abundant—for those who trust in him. If it is all an elaborate hoax, it is among the most wicked and heartless ever devised. If it is true, however, it must be the most significant event in history.

So let's do a little CSI style inquiry.

Some Say He Didn't Actually Die

Those who deny the resurrection have come up with all kinds of theories to undercut the truth of Jesus' rising from the dead. Some have said, for example, "Jesus did not really die, but only fainted from exhaustion." In other words, he was mistaken for dead and therefore buried. But then in the coolness of the tomb he revived.

Well, such an argument seriously undermines the credibility of the Romans. The Roman soldiers were professionals at crucifixions. Crucifixion "was designed to inflict maximum suffering and to result in certain death. To survive being beaten, whipped, nailed to the cross and speared through the heart, would be a bigger miracle than the resurrection." (CSI article)

The biblical account even shows how the guards were trying to speed things up for the sake of the Jews who were about to celebrate a special Sabbath. They were going to break the legs of the three men on the crosses. That would stop them from being able to lift their body up for a breath and they would quickly suffocate. The Apostle John writes,

Jn 19:32 The soldiers ...came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. ³³ But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. ³⁴ Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.

You can be sure that the Jews who wanted Jesus dead would not have been satisfied unless they knew Jesus was actually dead. Moreover, science will also tell us today that a spear to the side which Jesus received into his vital organs cannot be survived. That was the soldier's guarantee that he was dead. And remember that these soldiers were professional killers. Just in case any question arose whether Jesus had died on the cross, a spear to the side would remove all doubt.

And if Jesus just happened to survive all this by some remote possibility, it is highly unlikely that he could have survived the burial. Think about it. Jesus' body is taken to a tomb. It is wrapped in layers of cloth which, according to some accounts, are even glued together so your body is sealed in this clothe shell, which hardens to become something like a cast. I'm not sure that's the case since some of the gospel writers talk about the grave clothes being folded up neatly. However, even without the glue, it would be hard enough for a healthy man to wiggle out of that straight jacket but Jesus had been beaten, crucified and stabbed in the side. In addition, a heavy stone is rolled in front of the tomb by several strong men and moved in place from the outside. It's impossible for Jesus to have moved that stone all by himself from the inside if he were just an ordinary man trying to deceive the world so he could run off with Mary Magdalene or something absurd like that.

In short, the arguments that Jesus survived the crucifixion just don't hold up to good scientific/investigate inspection.

Some Say He Didn't Actually Rise

If we agree that it is unreasonable to think that Jesus survived the crucifixion, then we still have to deal with those who try to discount the truth of the resurrection by saying that Jesus' disciples stole his body and claimed that he arose. As interesting as that theory is, it doesn't hold water either.

Don't forget that the Jews requested that guards be stationed outside of the tomb. They were taking no chances. They didn't want some desperate disciples to steal Jesus' body and say, "See! He arose!" Matthew tells us this:

Mt 27:62 The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. ⁶³ "Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.' ⁶⁴ So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first."

You hear in those final words—"this last deception will be worse than the first"—that the Jewish leaders understood how important it was to make sure there was no fraud. They went out of their way to guarantee that the disciples would not try to give the impression to people that Jesus had risen. They didn't want to take any chances that *the Jesus-movement* would live on. They expected it to die with him and so they went the extra mile to make sure that the tomb was sealed and guarded until at least the third day.

And when the Roman soldiers guarded it, it was secure! "The soldiers who kept watch over Jesus' body would have guarded it with their lives," writes Geoff Moulton. "The likelihood of the Galilean disciples stealing the body of Jesus out from under the noses of highly disciplined and skilled Roman soldiers while they slept is remote." For you see, sleeping on the job in the Roman army was an offence punishable by death. The tomb was secure and no one would be able to get past the guards. And probably no one would really dare since these soldiers were well-known for their discipline and willingness to use force—even kill—when challenged!

So with more investigation, it seems clear that the resurrection of Jesus did actually happen.

Witnesses Say He Did Actually Rise

That is also confirmed by witnesses. In the passage we read from 1 Corinthians, Paul says,

^{1 Cor 15:5} and ... (Jesus) appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also....

In other words, we have a lot of witnesses to this event. 500 people said they saw Jesus. It wasn't insanity, a joke or a conspiracy. It just couldn't be explained away.

We marvel at science as we watch the CSI investigators sift through evidence and look for clues that will lead to the truth. As author Steve Brown writes, "We're so sophisticated. We think we're the only ones in the world to ask a question, to even wonder about a dead man getting up from the grave. In the first century, though, they questioned just as much as we do, but with an important advantage. They could go and ask the witnesses. If the witnesses' account proved to be accurate, the Christian faith would have grown to be the greatest religion in the history of the world. [And lo and behold,] That is what happened. Their story checked out!"

Moreover, with so many people bent on stopping the followers of Jesus and blowing the story of his resurrection to bits, you can be sure they looked for every bit of evidence they could find to disprove the resurrection. This was a big deal to the Jewish leaders and they were not going to let it go forward without uncovering every clue and story. With such a large number of witnesses, all the Jewish leaders had to do was interrogate a few people, find out where they body of Jesus had been moved to and then dig it up. Just present a corpse and the story would be over. But there was no body. Jesus did get up from the grave. He did resurrect! (cf. Brown) So many witnesses add to the truth of the story if you're doubting it and want to investigate to find the facts.

The Resurrected Jesus Changes Lives

Finally, the greatest proof of the resurrection is in the fruit it produces. Before the crucifixion, Jesus' disciples scattered like scared birds, abandoning and denying Jesus, one after the other. But after his resurrection they were filled zeal and courage because they had seen the Lord Jesus, risen and victorious over death. His resurrection—and the power of the Holy Spirit—strengthened their faith in a way that no human determination alone could. The book of Acts records how the disciples preached the gospel fearlessly and faced daily opposition from the same leaders who put Jesus to death.

A wise Pharisee name Gamaliel told his peers that groups like Jesus and his disciples had risen before but died out in time. He concluded,

Acts 5:38 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. ³⁹ But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."

As it turned out, the Christian faith did not die out. The most important evidence of the resurrection is the growth of the Church, beginning with the early Church, despite the cost of following their Lord. Peter, for example, was crucified upside down on a cross because he didn't want to die the way Jesus did. James was put to death with a sword. Bartholomew was hacked to pieces. Stephen was stoned to death. John was the only one to die of old age but he died in exile on the Island of Patmos. These men died as martyrs with the name and the story of Jesus on their lips. Any one of them could have escaped death quite easily by just denying the resurrection and admitting, "We just made it up!"

You see, the frightened disciples, who scattered from Christ's side at his trial and crucifixion, were transformed by their encounter with the resurrected Jesus. They change from a dejected, disorganized group into men and women filled with zeal for the Lord. They are transformed into Christians who are willing to endure beating, stoning, lions, torture and crosses to follow their Lord. They are convinced of the truth of the risen Christ. They wouldn't have died for a lie. No one would.

And that brings us to ourselves. We are here today commemorating and celebrating the resurrection of Jesus. It is true! He has risen. And he has power for us today as well. The gospel still transforms people. And people all around us today—in the midst of the modern day sceptics—are watching us. If they want to talk about evidence, you can share some of the things I've said earlier. But above all else they will, I pray, see the power and love of our resurrected Lord in our actions.

The resurrection of Jesus changed people in the early church and Jesus' power continues to change us today.

How does it show in your life?

My oldest sister got married 50 years ago next month. I was almost 10 years old and decided I would tell some jokes at her reception. I found about 10 jokes in the Encyclopedia under "Jokes." Pretty old school, eh! I memorized those jokes, But when I went up to tell them, I couldn't remember one. My mind was blank. I just stood there and then I cried. That was my first time before a crowd. When I felt the Lord calling me into ministry, I first resisted but eventually said, "Okay, Lord, I'll go. But you have to help me!" Now, 30 years later, I don't cry when I stand before the crowd. By the power of Jesus, I've been able to do my work with joy. The risen Lord supplies my need. That's just one little story of how I believe the resurrected Lord is helping me every day.

Similarly, we are in the process of nominating elders and deacons. I can tell you that as I have watched elders and deacons in the past, I have seen them come into office with fear and trepidation but, lo and behold, in time they gain courage and find strength to do what they thought they never could do. The risen Lord supplies their needs.

Some of you may remember the show "Touched by An Angel". I was reading the story of Martha Williamson, the woman who produced the show. Martha was in the TV business before becoming a Christian. After coming to Christ, she had a strong desire to produce a show that would represent God well and give people something wholesome to watch on TV. She went forward, believing Jesus was in her desire and in her heart. She gave up other jobs which she knew would pay well because she believed God had a specific job for her in answer to her prayers. In faith she took the job to produce what became "Touched by An Angel," a show that ran successfully for about 10 years. And whether or not we agree with everything the show taught, Williamson did what she never could have done in her own strength. She did it in faith because Jesus rose from the dead and is living in her heart. The risen Lord supplied her need.

Dear congregation, everyone here has gone through trials and challenges that you'd say you could never have endured apart from Jesus. The risen Lord supplies your need. The church for the past 2000 years is a testament to him and the power of his resurrection at work in us.

No matter what the sceptics say, the evidence shows that believing in the resurrection of Jesus Christ is more reasonable than not believing it. Jesus lives! Our faith is based on his victory. He lives in your heart and mine and therefore we can do all things through the risen Christ who strengthens us.

It's not just the extraordinary things that count—the martyrs giving their lives. We may not have to die to serve Christ. But if we had to, Christ would give us strength for that too. Right now, we need strength to live our daily lives in a way that honours the risen Christ. Look to him, the way the early church did, and you'll find his strength for the daily challenges you face. In our own strength we fail, but in the power of our resurrected Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, we will overcome and be victorious.

He is risen. He is risen indeed!