

Did Jesus *Really* Rise from The Grave?

Jesus not only claimed to be God,¹ he proved it with many miracles. I think the most compelling was the sign of Jonah. Jesus said, “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”² In other words, Jesus pointed to his future resurrection as proof that he was the Messiah. But, how do we know that the resurrection account is reliable? If you shop at a supermarket, you have probably seen tabloids reporting that someone has seen Elvis or JFK. Why is our belief that Jesus is alive any different from those who claim that Elvis is alive? There are many reasons for believing that Jesus was resurrected. I’ll focus on four undisputed historical facts which authenticate his resurrection.

Fact #1—The Death of Jesus

No serious historian questions the claim that Jesus was an actual Jewish man who grew up around the Sea of Galilee, had a public ministry in the areas around Jerusalem, and was crucified by the Jewish and Roman authorities about 2000 years ago.

Fact #2—The Empty Tomb

Likewise, no serious historian disputes the claim that the tomb of Jesus was empty on the third day after his execution. Although scholars do not believe that the empty tomb proves Christ’s resurrection, they agree that the tomb was empty. In fact, even the enemies of Jesus, the Jewish leaders, accepted this truth.

Fact #3—The Changed Attitude of Many Jews.

Even non-Christian historians accept the fact that many people claimed to have seen the resurrected Jesus and, as a result, their lives were changed. These people include both the friends and foes of Jesus. For instance, the disciples changed from fearful cowards, to fearless evangelists, willing to die for their belief that Jesus rose from the grave. Ronald Nash inquired, “If the Resurrection never happened, what power or experience transformed that small band of terrified disciples into men and women who were willing to suffer torture and horrible deaths because of their refusal to renounce the Resurrection?”³

Fact #4—The Origin of the Church

No serious historian disputes the claim that Christianity originated with a relatively small group of Jewish followers of Jesus. According to Acts 1:15, there were only 120 believers at the time of Christ’s death. A short time after Christ’s resurrection, however, over 10,000 Jews changed their beliefs and accepted the fact that Jesus rose from the dead. What made these Jews give up their religion, their jobs, their families, their day of worship, their entrenched customs and their pride?

Alternative Explanations

¹If you are unconvinced, read Lewis’ *Mere Christianity*, pages 51-52

²Matthew 12:40

³Ronald H. Nash, *World-Views in Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 161.

Although one cannot deny the four historical facts mentioned above, they do not necessarily obligate one to believe that Jesus rose from the dead. There are alternative conclusions. The four most common theories are the Conspiracy Theory, the Swoon Theory, the Wrong Tomb Theory, and the Hallucination Theory. Each of these alternative explanations, however, falls short.

Conspiracy Theory

This theory proposes that the disciples stole Christ's body to fake his resurrection. This theory is implausible for three reasons. First, it does not take into consideration the fact that the disciples were afraid, not scheming. They had spent the past three years following a man who they believed was their Messiah—the one who their scriptures taught would never die. Hence, they had no reason to conspire, and every reason to believe that they had wasted the past three years. Second, this theory does not explain why they were willing to die for a lie. Although many will die for something they believe to be true, no one person will die for something that they know to be a lie. Third, even if the disciples wanted to steal the body, they did not have the means to do so.

The Swoon Theory

The swoon theory suggests that Jesus did not die on the cross. Instead, he fainted and then recovered in the coolness of the tomb. This theory fails in many ways. First, the reason the soldiers did not break Christ's bones was because he was dead. Roman soldiers were experts at execution. In fact, their lives depended on their success. If they failed to carry out an execution, they themselves would be executed. That's why they pierced his heart with a sword—to assure he was dead. Third, a healthy person could not have moved the stone—let alone a sick one. Fourth, a weak and dying Christ would not have inspired the disciples to do what they did.

The Wrong Tomb Theory

Some suggest that the women, who first found the tomb empty, went to the wrong tomb. They started a legend that has persisted to this day. There are too many problems with this theory to mention. However, the most significant objection is that the Jews could have squelched the Christian rumor by producing the actual body.

The Hallucination Theory

The hallucination theory proposes that the disciples imagined Christ's resurrection. Although this theory explains why they were willing to suffer and die, it fails to explain the empty tomb. Once again, all the Jews had to do to stifle Christianity would be to produce the body of Jesus.

Conclusion

If Jesus really rose from the grave, like he said he would, then he will also do the other things that he said he would. For instance, he will come again to judge the world and separate the sheep from the goats. According to 2 Peter 2:10, he will come like a thief in the night. Consequently, "You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming."