

Evidence for the Resurrection

by Josh McDowell

[edited & abridged]



The resurrection of Jesus Christ is either one of the most wicked, vicious, heartless hoaxes ever foisted on the minds of human beings—or it is the most remarkable fact of history. Let us investigate those facts like a detective might.

BACKGROUND

The body of Jesus, in accordance with Jewish burial custom, was wrapped in a linen cloth. About 100 pounds of aromatic spices, mixed together to form a gummy substance, were applied to the wrappings of cloth about the body. After the body was placed in a solid rock tomb, an extremely large stone was rolled against the entrance of the tomb. Large stones weighing approximately two tons were normally rolled (by means of levers) against a tomb entrance.

A Roman guard of strictly disciplined fighting men was stationed to guard the tomb. This guard affixed on the tomb the Roman seal, which was meant to prevent any attempt at vandalizing the sepulcher. Anyone trying to move the stone from the tomb's entrance would have broken the seal and thus incurred the wrath of Roman law.

But three days later the tomb was empty. The followers of Jesus said He had risen from the dead. They reported that He appeared to them during a period of 40 days, showing Himself to be really alive and not a ghost by many proofs. Paul the apostle recounted that Jesus appeared to more than 500 of His followers at one time, the majority of whom were still alive and who could confirm what Paul wrote.

RECORD IS FROM LIVING WITNESSES

The New Testament accounts of the resurrection were being circulated within the lifetimes of men alive at the time of the resurrection. Those people could certainly have confirmed or denied the accuracy of such accounts. The writers of the Gospels

either had themselves been witnesses or else were relating the accounts of eyewitnesses of the actual events.

FACT #1: BROKEN ROMAN SEAL

The breaking of the seal that stood for the power and authority of the Roman Empire. The consequences of breaking the seal were extremely severe. If they were apprehended, it meant automatic execution by crucifixion upside down. People feared the breaking of the seal. Jesus' disciples displayed signs of cowardice when they hid themselves.

FACT #2: EMPTY TOMB

The disciples of Christ did not go off to Athens or Rome to preach that Christ was raised from the dead. Rather, they went right back to the city of Jerusalem, where, if what they were teaching was false, the falsity would be evident. The empty tomb was "too notorious to be denied." The resurrection could have not been maintained in Jerusalem for a single day, for a single hour, if the emptiness of the tomb had not been established as a fact for all concerned.

Both Jewish and Roman sources and traditions admit an empty tomb. Those resources range from Josephus to a compilation of fifth-century Jewish writings called the *Toledoth Jeshu*. This is positive evidence from a hostile source, which is the strongest kind of historical evidence. If a source admits a fact decidedly not in its favor, then that fact is genuine.

FACT #3: LARGE STONE MOVED

On that Sunday morning the first thing that impressed the people who approached the tomb was the unusual position of the stone that had been lodged in front of the doorway. Such a stone was likely one and a half to two tons in weight. All the Gospel writers mention it.

Those who observed the stone after the resurrection describe its position as having been rolled away, not just from the entrance of the tomb, but from the entire massive sepulcher. Such a feat would take many able-bodied men.

How could the disciples tiptoe around the "sleeping" guards, silently roll the huge stone over, and steal Jesus' body without the guards' awareness?

FACT #4: ROMAN GUARD GONE AWOL

The Roman guards fled. They left their place of responsibility. Justin, in *Digest* #49, mentions all the offenses that required the death penalty. A Roman guard who fell asleep on duty or abandoned his post was liable to execution. One way a guard was put to death was by being stripped of his clothes and then burned alive in a fire started with his garments. Certainly the entire unit would not have fallen asleep with that kind of threat over their heads.

FACT #5: APPEARANCES OF RISEN JESUS

When studying an event in history, it is important to know whether enough people who were participants or eyewitnesses to the event were alive when the accounts were published. To know this is obviously helpful in ascertaining the accuracy of

the published report. If the number of eyewitnesses is substantial, the event can be regarded as fairly well established.

One of the earliest records of Christ's appearing after the resurrection is by Paul. He appealed to his audience's knowledge of the fact that Christ had been seen by Cephas (Peter) and by the other apostles on various occasions. More impressively, Jesus also appeared before more than 500 people at one time. Paul reminded them that the majority of these eyewitnesses were still alive. Saint Paul was saying in effect, "If you do not believe me, you can ask them." Such a statement in an admittedly genuine letter written within thirty years of the event is almost as strong evidence as one could hope to get for something that happened nearly two thousand years ago.

NATURAL EXPLANATIONS?

THE WRONG TOMB

This theory assumes that the women who reported that the body was missing had mistakenly gone to the wrong tomb. If so, then the disciples who went to check up on the women's statement must have also gone to the wrong tomb. We may be certain, however, that Jewish authorities, who asked for a Roman guard to be stationed at the tomb to prevent Jesus' body from being stolen, would not have been mistaken about the location. If the resurrection-claim was merely because of a geographical mistake, the authorities would have lost no time in producing the body from the proper tomb, thus effectively quenching for all time any rumor resurrection.

HALLUCINATIONS

Another attempted explanation claims that the appearances of Jesus after the resurrection were either illusions or hallucinations. Again, where was the actual body, and why wasn't it produced?

THE SWOON THEORY

The swoon theory says that Jesus didn't die; he merely fainted from exhaustion and loss of blood. Everyone thought Him dead, but later He resuscitated and the disciples thought it to be a resurrection. How can this be? When Roman soldiers were dispatched to hasten the deaths of Jesus and the two men crucified beside Him by breaking their legs, they were surprised to find Jesus already dead. To ensure that He was not merely unconscious but actually dead one of them stabbed Jesus in the side (i.e. in the heart) with a lance. The Gospel of John gives eyewitness testimony that water and blood flowed from the wound. This separation of fluids, and the fact that the blood did not spurt out, indicates that the heart had already stopped. Also, after being beaten, scourged, and crucified, a merely resuscitated Jesus would be a sorry sight. He would be extremely weak and half-dead in appearance. Hardly to be confused with someone miraculously resurrected from the dead. No one would think Him a Conqueror over death and the grave.

THE BODY STOLEN

This was in fact the explanation devised by the Jewish leaders who conspired to have Jesus executed. The Gospels tell us that they bribed the guards, promising to patch things over with their superiors, if the guards would say that they had fallen asleep and thus allowed the disciples to steal Jesus' body. The guards had nothing to lose with the body already missing. How could they explain this failure in duty to their superiors? The aid of the Jewish leaders was likely welcomed. As for the disciples, their depression and cowardice make it hard to believe that they would suddenly become brave and daring enough to risk almost certain death to face a detachment of Roman guards at the tomb and attempt to steal the body. And once they have the body what? No one is going to believe Jesus is risen based solely on the empty tomb – especially if the authorities are saying the disciples stole the body.

ANOTHER PROOF OF THE RESURRECTION: THE DISCIPLES' CHANGED LIVES

A most telling testimony is the lives of those early Christians. We must ask ourselves: What caused them to go from fearful and confused men to courageous and confident missionaries – willing to go everywhere telling the message of the risen Christ?

Had there been any visible benefits accrued to them from their efforts – prestige, wealth, increased social status or material benefits – we might logically attempt to account for their actions, for their whole-hearted and total allegiance to this “risen Christ.” As a reward for their efforts, however, those early Christians were beaten, stoned to death, thrown to the lions, tortured and crucified. Every conceivable method was used to stop them from talking. Yet, they laid down their lives as the ultimate proof of their complete confidence in the truth of their message. They feared not death because Christ had conquered it.

Josh McDowell is a Protestant apologist, evangelist, and writer. He is the author or co-author of some 77 books. His best-known title is Evidence That Demands a Verdict. Other titles include More Than a Carpenter; A Ready Defense; and Right from Wrong.