

The Case for Christianity

Lesson 6 Part One – Did Christ Rise from the Dead?

Luke 24:5 (ESV) ...Why do you seek the living among the dead?

"Faith in the resurrection is the very keystone of the arch of Christian faith, and, when it is removed, all must inevitably crumble into ruin." – H.P. Liddon (English Theologian)

"Our Savior's resurrection... is truly of great importance in Christianity; so great that His being or not being the Messiah stands or falls with it: so that these two important articles are inseparable and in effect make one. For since that time, believe one and you believe both; deny one of them, and you can believe neither." – John Locke (16th Century English philosopher and physician)

1 Corinthians 15: 14-19 (ESV) ¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ¹⁵ We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

All but four of the major world religions are based on mere philosophical propositions. Of the four that are based on personalities rather than a philosophical system, only Christianity claims an empty tomb for its founder.

Abraham, the father of Judaism, died about 1900 B.C., but no resurrection was ever claimed for him. The original accounts of Buddha never ascribe to him any such thing as a resurrection; in fact, in the earliest accounts of his death, we read that when Buddha died it was 'with that utter passing away in which nothing whatever remains behind. Mohammed died June 8, 632 A.D., at the age of sixty-one, at Medina, where his tomb is annually visited by thousands of devout Mohammedans. All the millions and millions of Jews, Buddhists, and Muslims agree that their founders have never come up out of the dust of the earth in resurrection.

Wilbur Smith was one of the most important biblical scholars of the 20th century and served as Professor of Biblical Studies for Trinity Evangelical Divinity School during the mid 20th century. His following quote sums up the importance of the resurrection of Christ well...

"From the first day of its divinely bestowed life, the Christian church has unitedly borne testimony to its faith in the Resurrection of Christ. It is what we may call one of the great fundamental doctrines and convictions of the church, and so penetrates the literature of the New Testament, that if you lifted out every passage in which a reference is made to the Resurrection, you would have a collection of writings so mutilated that what remained could not be understood."

The Resurrection entered intimately into the life of the earliest Christians; the fact of it appears on their tombs, and in the drawings found on the walls of the catacombs; it entered deeply into Christian hymnology; it became one of the most vital themes of the great apologetic writings of the first four centuries; it was the theme constantly dwelt upon in the preaching of the Ante-Nicene and post-Nicene period. It entered at once into the creedal formulae of the church; it is in our Apostles' Creed; it is in all the great creeds that followed. All evidence of the New Testament goes to show that the burden of the good news or gospel was not 'Follow this Teacher and do your best,' but, 'Jesus and the Resurrection.' You cannot take that away from Christianity without radically altering its character and destroying its very identity.

Jesus' resurrection is an historical test of truth unique to Christianity. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, he was a false prophet and a charlatan whom no rational person should follow.

The Evidence for Jesus' Resurrection

Was the Burial Story Accurate?

In order for us to determine if the claims of Jesus' resurrection are credible, we must first establish the veracity of Jesus burial story. Why? Because if the story of Jesus' burial is historical, then it's a very short inference to the fact of the empty tomb. For that reason, critics who deny the empty tomb feel compelled to argue against the burial. Unfortunately for them, Jesus' burial in the tomb is one of the best-established facts about Jesus.

1) Jesus' burial is reported in extremely early, independent sources.

The account of Jesus' burial in a tomb by Joseph of Arimathea is part of Mark's source material for the passion story (the story of Jesus' suffering and death). Mark is the earliest of the four gospels. In lesson 2, we examined the evidence and determined that Mark most likely wrote his gospel around 45 to 50 AD. So, the source material used by Mark would have to have been a very early source, which most scholars think is based on eyewitness testimony.

Also, Paul in 1 Corinthians 15: 3– 5 quotes an old Christian tradition that he had received from the earliest disciples.

1 Corinthians 15: 3-5 (ESV) ³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

Paul probably received this tradition no later than his visit to Jerusalem in AD 36, possibly earlier. We know this because of **Galatians 1: 18 (ESV)** ¹⁸ Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days.

If Paul's conversion was in AD. 33 (an approximate date), then this places the first Jerusalem visit CA. 36. It therefore goes back to within the first five years after Jesus' death in AD 30. To publicly proclaim Jesus' death and burial so close in time to the claimed event itself, would have invited widespread refutation had it not actually occurred.

Further independent testimony to Jesus' burial by Joseph is also found in the sources behind Matthew and Luke and the Gospel of John. The differences between Mark's account of the burial and those of Matthew and Luke suggest that they had sources other than Mark alone. Moreover, we have another independent source for the burial in John's gospel.

Finally, we have the early sermons in the book of Acts, which preserve the early preaching of the apostles. These sermons also mention Jesus' interment in a tomb. Thus, we have the remarkable number of at least five independent sources for Jesus' burial, some of which are extraordinarily early.

2) As a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin that condemned Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea is unlikely to be a Christian invention.



Mark 15: 42-47 (ESV) ⁴² And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, ⁴³ Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁴⁴ Pilate was surprised to hear that he should have already died. And summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he was already dead. ⁴⁵ And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the corpse to Joseph. ⁴⁶ And Joseph bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb that had been cut out of the

rock. And he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. ⁴⁷ Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid.

Joseph is described as a rich man, a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was a sort of Jewish high court, made up of seventy of the leading men of Judaism, which presided in Jerusalem. There was an understandable hostility in the early church toward the Jewish Sanhedrists.

In Christian eyes, they had engineered a judicial murder of Jesus. The sermons in Acts, for example, go so far as to say that the Jewish leaders crucified Jesus (Acts 2: 23, 36; 4: 10). Given his status as a Sanhedrist, Joseph is the last person you'd expect to care properly for Jesus.

Thus, Jesus' burial by Joseph is very probable, since it would be almost inexplicable why Christians would make up a story about a Jewish Sanhedrist who does what is right by Jesus.

For these and other reasons, most New Testament critics agree that Jesus was buried by Joseph of Arimathea in a tomb. According to the late John A. T. Robinson of Cambridge University, the burial of Jesus in the tomb is "one of the earliest and best-attested facts about Jesus." - John A. T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973)*, 131.

But if this conclusion is correct, then it's very difficult to deny the fact of the empty tomb.

Was Jesus' Tomb Found Empty?

Mark 16: 1-8 (ESV) ¹ When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ² And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³ And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" ⁴ And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—it was very large. ⁵ And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. ⁶ And he said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. ⁷ But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you." ⁸ And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.



There are five lines of evidence that support the fact that Jesus' tomb was found empty by a group of His women followers on the Sunday after His crucifixion.

1. The historical reliability of the story of Jesus' burial supports the empty tomb.

If Jesus' burial story is basically accurate, then the location of Jesus' tomb was known in Jerusalem to both Jew and Christian alike, since both were present when Jesus was laid in the tomb. But in that case, the tomb must have been empty when the disciples began to preach that Jesus was risen for several reasons.

First, the disciples could not have believed in Jesus' resurrection if His corpse still lay in the tomb. It would have been wholly un-Jewish, even stupid, to believe that a man was raised from the dead when his body was known to be still in the grave.

Second, even if the disciples had preached Jesus' resurrection despite His occupied tomb, scarcely anybody else would have believed them. One of the most remarkable facts about the early Christian belief in Jesus' resurrection was that it flourished in the very city where Jesus had been publicly crucified. So long as the people of Jerusalem thought that Jesus' body was in the tomb, few would have been prepared to believe such nonsense as that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

Third, even if they had so believed, the Jewish authorities would have exposed the whole affair simply by pointing to Jesus' tomb or perhaps even exhuming the body as decisive proof that Jesus had not been raised. They were deeply concerned about squelching the budding Christian movement (think of their hiring Saul of Tarsus to persecute Jewish Christians!). They would certainly have checked out the tomb.

2. The discovery of Jesus' empty tomb is independently reported in very early sources.

The early source that Mark uses to write his gospel account most likely didn't end with Jesus' burial but with the women's discovery of Jesus' empty tomb. For the burial story and the empty tomb story are really one story, forming a smooth, continuous narrative. They're linked by grammatical and linguistic ties.



Furthermore, it seems unlikely that the early Christians would have circulated a story of Jesus' passion ending in His burial. The passion story is incomplete without victory at the end. Hence, Mark's source probably included and may have ended with the discovery of the empty tomb.

Also, we've seen that in 1 Corinthians 15: 3– 5 Paul quotes from an extremely early tradition that refers

to Christ's burial and resurrection.

1 Corinthians 15: 3-5 (ESV) ³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

Although the empty tomb is not explicitly mentioned, a comparison of the four-line formula with the gospel narratives on the one hand and the sermons in Acts on the other reveals that the third line is, in fact, a summary of the empty tomb story.

1 Corinthians 15:3-5

Acts 13: 28-31

Mark 15: 37- 16: 7

Christ died...

Though they found no cause for a sentence of death, they asked Pilate to have him killed.

And Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last.

He was buried...

They took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb.

Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth and laid it in a tomb.

He was raised...

But God raised him from the dead...

"He has been raised, he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him."

He appeared...

...and for many days he appeared to those who came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, and they are now his witnesses to the people.

"But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him."

Also, Paul's expression "he was buried," followed by the expression "he was raised", implies the empty tomb. The idea that a man could be buried and then be raised from the dead and yet his body still remain in the grave would be nonsensical.

3. **Mark's gospel account is simple and lacks legendary development.** Like the burial account, Mark's account of the empty tomb is remarkably simple and unembellished in comparison to what you would expect from a later legendary account.



For example, the resurrection itself is not witnessed or described, and there's no reflection on Jesus' triumph over sin and death, no use of divine titles, no quotation of fulfilled prophecy, no description of the risen Lord. It's very different from a Christian fictional creation. To appreciate how restrained Mark's narrative is, you only have to read the account of Christ's empty tomb in the apocryphal Gospel of Peter which describes Jesus' triumphant exit from the tomb...

Gospel of Peter 9: 1— 10: 5 *Early in the morning, as the Sabbath dawned, there came a large crowd from Jerusalem and the surrounding areas to see the sealed tomb. But during the night before the Lord's day dawned, as the soldiers were keeping guard two by two in every watch, there came a great sound in the sky, and they saw the heavens opened and two men descend shining with a great light, and they drew near to the tomb. The stone which had been set on the door rolled away by itself and moved to one side, and the tomb was opened and both of the young men went in. Now when these soldiers saw that, they woke up the centurion and the elders (for they also were there keeping watch). While they were yet telling them the things which they had seen, they saw three men come out of the tomb, two of them sustaining the other one, and a cross following after them. The heads of the two they saw had heads that reached up to heaven, but the head of him that was led by them went beyond heaven. And they heard a voice out of the heavens saying, "Have you preached unto them that sleep?" The answer that was heard from the cross was, "Yes!"*

This is how real legends look: A gigantic Christ figure whose head reaches above the clouds, supported by giant angels, followed by a talking cross, heralded by a voice from heaven, and all witnessed by a Roman guard, the Jewish leaders, and a multitude of spectators! By contrast, Mark's account is stark in its simplicity. The simplicity of Mark's account is what you would expect from a true eye witness account.

4. **The discovery of Jesus' empty tomb by women.**

Mark 16: 1-8 (ESV) ¹ *When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.* ² *And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb.*

If Jesus' empty tomb was a lie and simply an example of legendary development, it's highly unlikely that the story would have been manufactured with women discovering the empty tomb. In order to understand why this is true, we need to understand two things about the place of women in Jewish society.



First, women were not regarded as credible witnesses. This attitude toward the testimony of women is evident in the Jewish historian Josephus's description of the rules for admissible testimony: *"Let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex"* (**Antiquities IV. 8.15**). No such regulation is to be found in the Bible. It is rather a reflection of the patriarchal society of first-century Judaism.

Second, women occupied a low rung on the Jewish social ladder. Compared to men, women were second-class citizens. Consider these rabbinical texts: *"Sooner let the words of the Law be burnt than delivered to women!"* (**Sotah 19a**) and again: *"Happy is he whose children are male, but unhappy is he whose children are female!"* (**Kiddushin 82b**). The daily prayer of every Jewish man included the blessing, *"Blessed are you, Lord our God, ruler of the universe, who has not created me a Gentile, a slave, or a woman"* (**Berachos 60b**).

If the empty tomb story were legend, then male disciples would have been made to be the ones who discovered the empty tomb. The fact that women whose testimony was deemed worthless, were the chief witnesses of the empty tomb, can only be plausibly explained if they actually were the discoverers of the empty tomb. The gospels just faithfully recorded what was for them, an embarrassing fact.

5. The earliest Jewish response.

Finally, the earliest Jewish response to the proclamation of Jesus' resurrection presupposes the empty tomb. In Matthew's gospel we find an attempt to refute what was the earliest Jewish response to the Christian proclamation of the resurrection:

Mathew 28: 11-15 (ESV) ¹¹ *While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place.* ¹² *And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers* ¹³ *and said, "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.'* ¹⁴ *And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble."* ¹⁵ *So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.*

Mark's remark at the end of this passage, *"This story has been spread among the Jews to this day."*, reveals that the disciples were concerned about a widespread Jewish explanation of the resurrection.

And, what were the Jews saying about the empty tomb? That these men were full of new wine? That Jesus' body still lay in the tomb in the garden? No. They were saying, "The disciples stole away His body." Think about that. "The disciples stole away His body." The Jewish authorities did not deny the empty tomb but instead entangled themselves in a hopeless series of absurdities trying to explain it away. In other words, the Jewish claim that the disciples had stolen the body presupposes that the body was missing.

Taken together, these five lines of evidence constitute a powerful case that Jesus' tomb was, indeed, found empty on the first day of the week by a group of His women followers.

As a historical fact, this seems to be well established. According to Jacob Kremer, a New Testament critic who has specialized in the study of the resurrection: "By far most scholars hold firmly to the reliability of the biblical statements about the empty tomb." *Jacob Kremer, Die Osterevangelien—Geschichten um Geschichte (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1977), 49–50.*



Pinchas Lapide
Jewish Theologian,
Historian and
Diplomat (1922 –
1997)

In fact, in a survey of over 2,200 publications on the resurrection in English, French, and German since 1975, Gary Habermas found that 75 percent of scholars accepted the historicity of the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb. *Gary Habermas, "Experience of the Risen Jesus: The Foundational Historical Issue in the Early Proclamation of the Resurrection," Dialog 45 (2006): 292.*

The evidence is so compelling that even a number of Jewish scholars, such as Pinchas Lapide (a Jewish theologian, Israeli historian and Israeli diplomat from 1951 to 1969) and Geza Vermes (a British scholar of Jewish Hungarian origin and writer on Jewish and Christian history) declared themselves convinced on the basis of the evidence that Jesus' tomb was found empty.



Geza Vermes - British
scholar and writer on
Jewish and Christian
History (1924 – 2013)