

The Resurrection

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is one of the central truths of Christianity. In fact, the Bible says that it's *the* central truth! If the resurrection didn't happen then the gospel is false and there's no hope for any of us:

1 Corinthians 15:12-19: “Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen: And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain. Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ: whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not. For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised: And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.”

There are some people who say that even if Christianity isn't true and Christ never rose from the dead, living for God is still worth it. As we can see, the apostle Paul strongly disagreed! He said that if this life is the only one we get then “we are of all men *most miserable*”. If this life is all there is then *Christianity isn't worth it*. In that case we would all be better off living as pagans and getting as much pleasure from life as possible before we die.

If Christ hasn't risen from the dead then we're still in our sins and are bound for Hell. Salvation depends upon the

resurrection. If there's no resurrection then there's no forgiveness, and if there's no forgiveness then we're all doomed. The resurrection is *that important*.

Some people have taught that the resurrection was just a spiritual resurrection and Jesus didn't rise bodily from the grave. However, that's not what the Bible teaches. A “spiritual” resurrection is utterly useless:

“If Christ did not rise in the same physical body that was placed in the tomb, then the resurrection loses its value as an evidential proof of His claim to be God (John 8:58; 10:30). The resurrection cannot verify Jesus' claim to be God unless He was resurrected in the body in which He was crucified. That body was a literal, physical body. Unless Jesus rose in a material body, there is no way to verify His resurrection. It loses its historically persuasive value.” (Geisler, *The Battle for the Resurrection*, p36)

If Jesus didn't rise bodily from the grave and His body is still in the tomb then what reason do we have to believe that He rose from the dead? Why would anyone believe that Jesus rose from the dead *if His body is still there*? The only resurrection that can prove His claim to be God is a *physical* resurrection. The body that died *had to* come back to life. If it didn't then Christianity is a lie that can save no one.

Some people might say that the resurrection is a matter of doctrine and it can't be proved one way or another. That belief is a serious error. We must find out if the resurrection is a genuine, historical fact. It either *did* happen or it *didn't*:

“The *meaning* of the resurrection is a theological matter, but the fact of the resurrection is a historical matter; the nature of the resurrection body of Jesus may be a mystery, but the fact that

the body disappeared from the tomb is a matter to be decided upon by historical evidence.

“The place is of geographical definiteness, the man who owned the tomb was a man living in the first half of the first century; that tomb was made out of rock in a hillside near Jerusalem, and was not composed of some mythological gossamer, or cloud-dust, but is something which has geographical significance. The guards put before that tomb were not aerial beings from Mt. Olympus; the Sanhedrin was a body of men meeting frequently in Jerusalem. As a vast mass of literature tells us, this person, Jesus, was a living person, a man among men, whatever else He was, and the disciples who went out to preach the risen Lord were men among men, men who ate, drank, slept, suffered, worked, died. What is there “doctrinal” about this? This is a historical problem.” (Smith, *Therefore Stand*, p386)

What evidence do we have that the resurrection really happened? How do we know that Jesus rose from the dead on the third day? Let's take a look and find out.

The Testimony of the Gospels

The Bible testifies that Jesus rose from the dead. We're told that His tomb was empty:

John 20:2: “Then she runneth, and cometh to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and saith unto them, They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulchre, and we know not where they have laid him.”

That an angel announced His resurrection:

Matthew 28:5-6: “And the angel answered and said unto the women, Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here: for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay.”

That the living Jesus appeared to His disciples:

Mark 16:9-14: “Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils. And she went and told them that had been with him, as they mourned and wept. And they, when they had heard that he was alive, and had been seen of her, believed not. After that he appeared in another form unto two of them, as they walked, and went into the country. And they went and told it unto the residue: neither believed they them. Afterward he appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he was risen.”

The resurrected Jesus also appeared to a crowd of more than 500 people:

1 Corinthians 15:3-8: “For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he

rose again the third day according to the scriptures: And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time.”

Each of the four gospels teaches that Jesus rose bodily from the dead (Matthew 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20) and was seen by many eyewitnesses. The testimony of the New Testament is very clear on this point:

“The New Testament reverberates and glistens with the reality of Jesus' resurrection. The Gospels record Jesus' teaching that he must be betrayed, killed, and rise again. Then they all testify that his tomb was empty and that he appeared to his disciples as he said. The book of Acts records the preaching of the resurrected Christ as its central fact. The various New Testament letters and the book of Revelation would melt into nothingness without a resurrected Jesus. The resurrection is attested to by four separate Gospels, the history of the early church (Acts), by the letters of Paul, Peter, John, James, Jude, and the letter to the Hebrews. There is a diversity of credible witnesses. Since the New Testament volumes show considerable fitness in terms of historical reliability . . . this is a good initial reason to accept the resurrection as an objective reality.” (Groothuis, *Jesus in an Age of Controversy*, p273)

But is this account true? The claim of the resurrection is the central claim of all of Christianity. Without it there's nothing left. What other reasons do we have for believing that this momentous event really happened?

The Existence Of The Church

One significant piece of evidence is that if there was no resurrection then there would be no Church either. When Christ was crucified His disciples were utterly broken:

“Without the belief in the resurrection **the Christian faith could not have come into being.** The disciples **would have remained crushed** and defeated men. Even had they continued to remember Jesus as their beloved teacher, his crucifixion would have forever silenced **any hopes of his being the Messiah.** The cross would have remained the sad and shameful end of his career. The origin of Christianity therefore hinges on the belief of the early disciples that God had raised Jesus from the dead.” (Craig, *Knowing the Truth About the Resurrection*, p116-17)

If Christ never rose from the dead then there wouldn't have been a gospel to share with the world. His death would have disproved His claims to be the Messiah. The disciples would have had nothing to preach and no reason to risk their lives. After all, what message would they have to share – that Jesus lived a good life and died and that was the end of it? The only way the Church could have come into being was if Christ really did rise from the dead:

“Christianity does not hold the resurrection to

be one among many tenets of belief. Without faith in the resurrection *there would be no Christianity at all. The Christian church would never have begun*; the Jesus-movement would have fizzled out like a damp squib with His execution. Christianity stands or falls with the truth of the resurrection.” (Green, *Man Alive*, p61)

The message that the apostles preached was never about living your best life now. What they preached was the resurrection of Jesus:

“From the very first the conviction that Jesus had been raised from death has been that by which their very existence has stood or fallen. There was no other motive to account for them, to explain them . . . At no point within the New Testament is there any evidence that the Christians stood for an original philosophy of life or an original ethic. Their sole function is to bear witness to what they claim as an event – the raising of Jesus from among the dead . . . The one really distinctive thing for which the Christians stood was their declaration that Jesus had been raised from the dead according to God's design, and the consequent estimate of Him as in a unique sense Son of God and representative man, and the resulting conception of the way to reconciliation.” (Anderson, *Christianity: The Witness of History*, p100-101)

If Jesus never rose from the dead then the apostles wouldn't have had a gospel to proclaim! There would have been no good news to share with the world.

What did Peter preached in his very first sermon on the day of Pentecost? It was the death and resurrection of Christ:

Acts 2:22-24: “Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it.”

The message of the Church has *always* been the resurrection of Christ and that was true from its earliest days. It's worth noting that this wasn't an easy message to proclaim. The disciples preached Jesus even though doing so caused them to be hunted, persecuted, and eventually executed:

“The great truths which the apostles declared were, that Christ had risen from the dead, and that only through repentance from sin, and faith in Him, could men hope for salvation. This doctrine they asserted with one voice, everywhere, not only under the greatest discouragements, but in the face of the most appalling errors that can be presented to the mind of man. Their master had recently perished as a malefactor, by the sentence of a public tribunal. His religion sought to overthrow the religions of the whole world. The laws of every country were against the teachings of His disciples. The interests and passions of all the rulers and great men in the world were against

them. The fashion of the world was against them.

“Propagating this new faith, even in the most inoffensive and peaceful manner, they could expect nothing but contempt, opposition, revilings, bitter persecutions, stripes, imprisonments, torments, and cruel deaths. Yet this faith they zealously did propagate; and all these miseries they endured undismayed, nay, rejoicing. As one after another was put to a miserable death, the survivors only prosecuted their work with increased vigor and resolution. The annals of military warfare afford scarcely an example of the like heroic constancy, patience, and unblenching courage. They had every possible motive to review carefully the grounds of their faith, and the evidences of the great facts and truths which they asserted; and these motives were pressed upon their attention with the most melancholy and terrific frequency.

“It was therefore impossible that they could have persisted in affirming the truths they have narrated, had not Jesus actually risen from the dead, and had they not known this fact as certainly as they knew any other fact . . .”
(Greenleaf, *The Testimony of the Evangelists*, p28-30)

The disciples had every reason *not* to preach Jesus and yet they proclaimed Him anyway. In The resurrection wasn't even a subject of debate. The Church has always accepted it as truth:

“In both ecclesiastical history and creedal history the resurrection is affirmed from the earliest times. It is mentioned in Clement of

Rome, *Epistle to the Corinthians (AD 95)*, the earliest document of church history and so continuously throughout all of the patristic period. It appears in all forms of the *Apostles' Creed* and is never debated." (Ramm, *Protestant Christian Evidences*, p192)

The fact that the Christian Church exists is strong evidence that the resurrection actually happened.

The Claims of Christ

Christ didn't simply claim to be a wise teacher or a good moral example. Instead He declared Himself to be God. He repeatedly said that He was going to be crucified and then come back to life:

Matthew 16:21: "From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day."

Matthew 17:9: "And as they came down from the mountain, Jesus charged them, saying, Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead."

Matthew 17:22-23: "And while they abode in Galilee, Jesus said unto them, The Son of man shall be betrayed into the hands of men: And they shall kill him, and the third day he shall be raised again. And they were exceeding sorry."

Matthew 20:18-19: "Behold, we go up to

Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be betrayed unto the chief priests and unto the scribes, and they shall condemn him to death, And shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify him: and the third day he shall rise again.”

Matthew 26:32: “But after I am risen again, I will go before you into Galilee.”

The passages above are all from the gospel of Matthew; the other gospels have similar passages. Jesus said *repeatedly* that He was going to be crucified and then rise again. In fact, He staked His proof of being the Messiah on it:

Matthew 12:38-40: “Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master, we would see a sign from thee. But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas: For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

Jesus said that the way people would know that He was truly the Messiah, the Son of God, was by His crucifixion and resurrection. That would be the sign that He was who He claimed to be:

“Christ Himself deliberately staked His whole claim to the credit of men upon His resurrection. When asked for a sign He pointed to this sign as His single and sufficient credential.” (Anderson, *Christianity: The Witness of History*, p103)

If Jesus was a fraud then these statements were completely insane. He claimed that His true identity would be proven *by His death and resurrection*:

“It was this same Jesus, the Christ who, among many other remarkable things, said and repeated something which, proceeding from any other being would have condemned him at once as either a bloated egotist or a dangerously unbalanced person. That Jesus said He was going up to Jerusalem to die is not so remarkable enough, though all the details He gave about that death, weeks and months before He died, are together a prophetic phenomenon. But when He said that He himself *would rise again from the dead*, the third day after He was crucified, He said something that only a fool would dare say, if he expected longer the devotion of any disciples – unless He was sure He was going to rise. No founder of any world religion known to men ever dared say a thing like that!” (Smith, *Great Certainty in This Hour of World Crises*, p10-11)

Christ never said that people should trust Him because He was wise or good. Instead He pointed to *His resurrection* as the critical sign! If He hadn't rose from the dead then everyone would have lost faith in Him. Even His enemies understood this:

Matthew 27:62-64: “Now the next day, that followed the day of the preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees came together unto Pilate, Saying, Sir, we remember that that deceiver said, while he was yet alive, After three days I will rise again. Command therefore that the

sepulchre be made sure until the third day, lest his disciples come by night, and steal him away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead: so the last error shall be worse than the first.”

If Jesus had failed to rise from the dead then His entire ministry would have been disproven. His defeated disciples would have abandoned all hope and the Church would never have been born. Christianity would have died then and there.

The Death of Christ

There are some people who argue that Christ didn't actually die on the cross. However, the evidence strongly supports the claim that He truly did die that day. We know more about the final hours of the life of Christ than we do of any other historical figure, and the testimony is clear:

“Let it simply be said that we know more about the details of the hours immediately before and the actual death of Jesus, in and near Jerusalem, than we know about the death of any other one man in all the ancient world.” (Smith, *Therefore Stand*, p360)

We also know more about His burial than we do the burial of anyone else in the ancient world:

“We know more about the burial of the Lord Jesus than we know of the burial of any single character in all of ancient history. We know infinitely more about His burial than we do the burial of any Old Testament character, of any king of Babylon, Pharaoh of Egypt, any

philosopher of Greece, or triumphant Caesar. We know who took His body from the cross; we know something of the wrapping of the body in spices, and burial cloths; we know the very tomb in which this body was placed, the name of the man who owned it, Joseph, of a town known as Arimathaea. We know even where this tomb was located, in a garden nigh to the place where He was crucified, outside the city walls. We have four records of this burial of our Lord, all of them in amazing agreement, the record of Matthew, a disciple of Christ who was there when Jesus was crucified; the record of Mark, which some say was written within ten years of our Lord's ascension; the record of Luke, a companion of the apostle Paul, and a great historian; and the record of John, who was the last to leave the cross, and, with Peter, the first of the Twelve on Easter to behold the empty tomb." (Smith, *Therefore Stand*, p370-371)

The four gospels (which record the life of Christ) were written within a few decades of the actual events. That's strong evidence that their accounts are accurate and trustworthy:

"...we can ask ourselves whether it is probable that such a book, describing events that occurred about thirty or forty years previously, could have been accepted and cherished if the stories of abnormal events in it were false or mythical. It is impossible, because the memory of all elderly persons regarding events of thirty or forty years before is perfectly clear.

"No one could now issue a biography of Queen Victoria, who died thirty-one years ago, full of

anecdotes which were quite untrue. They would be contradicted at once. They would certainly not be generally accepted and passed on as true. Hence, there is a great improbability that the account of the resurrection given by Mark, which agrees substantially with that given in the other Gospels is a pure invention. This mythical theory has had to be abandoned because it will not bear close scrutiny." (Fleming, as cited by Smith, *Therefore Stand*, p427-28)

There can be no doubt that Jesus died. The Romans believed that He died:

"It is St. Mark who lays stress upon Pilate's wonder at hearing that Christ was already dead, and upon his personal questioning of the centurion before he would give leave for the removal of the body from the Cross. The Roman soldiers were not unfamiliar with the evidences of death, or with the sight of death following upon crucifixion." (Day, *On the Evidence for the Resurrection*, p46-48)

The Jews believed that He died:

"The account in St. Matthew's Gospel of the guarding of the sepulchre is clear evidence that the Jews, for their part, believed that Jesus was dead." (Day, *On the Evidence for the Resurrection*, p46-48)

The details of the crucifixion are strong evidence that what Jesus went through resulted in death:

“The death of Christ was due, not to physical exhaustion, or to the pains of crucifixion, but to agony of mind producing rupture of the heart. His energy of mind and body in the act of dissolution proves beyond contradiction that His death was not the result of exhaustion; the soldier's spear was the means to exhibiting to the world that His death was due to a cardiac rupture.” (Day, *On the Evidence for the Resurrection*, p48-49)

The evidence of the “blood and water” is strong evidence of death:

“We are told on eyewitness authority that “blood and water” came out of the pierced side of Jesus (John 19:34, 35). The eyewitness clearly attached great importance to this. Had Jesus been alive when the spear pierced His side, strong spouts of blood would have emerged with every heart beat. Instead, the observer noticed semisolid dark red clot seeping out, distinct and separate from the accompanying watery serum. This is evidence of massive clotting of the blood in the main arteries, and is exceptionally strong medical proof of death. It is all the more impressive because the evangelist could not possibly have realized its significance to a pathologist. The “blood and water” from the spear-thrust is proof positive that Jesus was already dead.” (Green, *Man Alive*, p33)

It's foolish to think that Jesus somehow survived the crucifixion, laid in the tomb for three days, and then strolled out

to announce to His disciples that He was alive. He simply couldn't have survived:

“[are we to believe] that after the rigors and pains of trial, mockery, flogging and crucifixion He could survive thirty-six hours in a stone sepulchre with neither warmth nor food nor medical care? That He could then rally sufficiently to perform the superhuman feat of shifting the boulder which secured the mouth of the tomb, and this without disturbing the Roman guard? That then, weak and sickly and hungry, He could appear to the disciples in such a way as to give them the impression that He had vanquished death? That He could go on to claim that He had died and risen, could send them into all the world and promise to be with them unto the end of time? That He could live somewhere in hiding for forty days, making occasional surprise appearances, and then finally disappear without any explanation? Such credulity is more incredible than Thomas' unbelief.” (Stott, *Basic Christianity*, p48-49)

It's not reasonable to believe that the sight of a half-dead Christ could possibly have inspired any hope in His disciples at all:

“It is impossible that a being who had stolen half-dead out of the sepulchre, who crept about weak and ill, wanting medical treatment, who required bandaging, strengthening, and indulgence, and who still at last yielded to his sufferings, could have given to the disciples the impression that he was a Conqueror over death and the grave, the Prince of Life, an impression

which lay at the bottom of their future ministry. Such a resuscitation could only have weakened the impression which he had made upon them in life and in death, at the most could only have given it an elegiac voice, but could by no possibility have changed their sorrow into enthusiasm, have elevated their reverence into worship." (Strauss, *The Life of Jesus for the People*, p412)

Nor are the post-resurrection actions of Christ likely if He had never actually died:

"On His feet, which had been pierced through and through only two days back, He walks without difficulty the two leagues between Emmaus and Jerusalem. He is so active, that during the repast He disappears suddenly out of sight of His fellow-travelers, and when they return to the capital to announce the good news to the apostles, they find Him there again! He has overtaken them. With the same quickness which characterizes all His movements, He presents Himself suddenly in the room in which the disciples are assembled. . . Are these the actions of a man who had just been taken down half-dead from the cross, and who has been laid in a grave in a condition of complete exhaustion? No." (Kevan, *The Resurrection of Christ*, p9-10)

Given this evidence it's unreasonable to claim that Jesus never died. The evidence for His crucifixion and death is simply overwhelming.

The Empty Tomb

A critical piece of evidence is the fact that the body of Jesus was buried in a tomb:

Matthew 27:57-60: “When the even was come, there came a rich man of Arimathaea, named Joseph, who also himself was Jesus' disciple: He went to Pilate, and begged the body of Jesus. Then Pilate commanded the body to be delivered. And when Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, And laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock: and he rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre, and departed.”

It was *vital* that Jesus be put in a tomb that someone was guarding. If Jesus had been thrown into a common mass grave then it would have been impossible to demonstrate that He had risen from the dead. Likewise, if the tomb hadn't been guarded then there would be no way to prove that His body hadn't been stolen:

“Had the boy of Christ merely been thrown into a common grave and left unattended, there would have been no possible reason for the anxiety of His enemies to spread the report that the body had been stolen.” (Major, as cited in Smith, *Therefore Stand*, p578)

The tomb is the heart of the story. If Jesus Christ rose from the dead then He must have left behind an empty tomb. If there was still a body in His tomb then no one would have believed in the resurrection:

“If the burial story is basically reliable, then the

inference that Jesus' tomb was found empty lies close at hand. For if the burial story is fundamentally accurate, the site of Jesus' tomb would have been known to Jew and Christian alike. But in that case, it would have been impossible for the resurrection faith to survive in the face of a tomb containing the corpse of Jesus. The disciples could not have believed in Jesus' resurrection; even if they had, scarcely anyone else would have believed them as they preached Jesus' resurrection; and their Jewish opponents could have exposed the whole affair, perhaps even by displaying the body . . . No one can affirm the historicity of the burial story and plausibly deny the historicity of the empty tomb." (Craig, "Did Jesus Rise From The Dead?", as cited in Wilkins, *Jesus Under Fire*, p146-7)

If the tomb wasn't empty then the priests would have destroyed Christianity by displaying the body and proving that the resurrection was false – but that never happened!

Not only does the evidence say that Jesus was buried in a tomb, but it also says that the tomb was sealed with a giant stone:

"The question as to how they were to remove this stone must of necessity have been a source of considerable perplexity to the women. Two of them at least had witnessed the interment and knew roughly how things stood. The stone, which is known to have been large and of considerable weight, was their great difficulty. When, therefore, we find in the earliest record, the Gospel of St. Mark, the words: "Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the tomb?" we can hardly avoid feeling that this preoccupation of the women with the question

of the stone is not only a psychological necessity of the problem, but a definitely historical element in the situation right up to the moment of their arrival at the grave." (Morison, *Who Moved the Stone?*, p76)

"Let us begin by considering first its size and probable character. . . . No doubt . . . the stone was large and consequently very heavy. This fact is asserted or implied by all the writers who refer to it. St. Mark says it was "exceeding great." St. Matthew speaks of it as "a great stone." Peter said, "for the stone was great." Additional testimony on this point is furnished by the reported anxiety of the women as to how they should move it. If the stone had not been of considerable weight the combined strength of three women should have been capable of moving it. We receive, therefore, a very definite impression that it was at least too weighty for the women to remove unaided. All this has a very definite bearing upon the case." (Morison, *Who Moved the Stone?*, p147)

The stone was sealed by the Romans:

"The sealing was done in the presence of the Roman guards who were left in charge to protect this stamp of Roman authority and power. They did their best to prevent theft and the resurrection, but they overreached themselves and provided additional witness to the fact of the empty tomb and the resurrection of Jesus." (Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, p239)

“The door could not be opened, therefore, without breaking the seal; which was a crime against the authority of the proprietor of the seal. The guard was to prevent the duplicity of the disciples; the seal was to secure against the collusion of the guard.” (Whedon, *Commentary of the Gospels Matthew - Mark*, p343)

The tomb was guarded by Roman soldiers:

“Led by Annas and Caiaphas, their chief priests, a deputation of Jewish leaders sought out Pilate, to request that the tomb wherein Jesus was buried be sealed and that a Roman guard be stationed around it, giving as their motive their fear that the friends of Jesus might come stealthily by night and steal His body in order to make it appear that a resurrection had taken place.

“To this request the acquiescent Pilate responded: 'Ye shall have a guard; go your way; make it secure according to your wish.' They went their way, attended by a guard of Roman soldiers numbering from ten to thirty who, under their direction, sealed the tomb of Joseph of Arimathaea with the Imperial Seals of Rome, affixing thereto in wax the official stamp of the procurator himself which it would be a high crime even to deface. Thus did these zealous enemies of Jesus unwittingly prepare in advance an unanswerable challenge to their subsequent explanation of the resurrection – an explanation which did not, and could not, in the very nature

of things explain [it].” (Roper, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?*, p23-24)

Some people claim that the guards were actually temple police and not Roman soldiers. However, the evidence is against that:

“If they were the temple police, why worry about Pilate hearing about it? There is no indication that he would have jurisdiction over them. The writer feels this is what happened: They were a Roman guard to which Pilate had given instructions to secure the grave in order to satisfy and keep peace with the religious hierarchy. The chief priests had cautiously sought a Roman guard: 'Therefore command that the tomb be made secure' (Matthew 27:64)

“If the priests had wanted to post temple police at the tomb, they would not have needed the orders of the governor to do it. As it happened, the Roman soldiers came to the chief priests for protection, because they knew that they would have influence over Pilate and would keep them from being executed: “We will win him [the governor, Pilate] over and keep you out of trouble (Matt. 28:14).” (*Evidence for Christianity*, p289)

The Roman soldiers who guarded the tomb were professionals. They took their jobs very seriously:

“Commanding the guard was a centurion designated by Pilate, presumably one in which he had full confidence, whose name according to tradition was Petronius. It is, therefore,

reasonable to assume that these representatives of the Emperor could have been trusted to perform their duty to guard a tomb quite as strictly and as faithfully as they had executed a crucifixion. They had not the slightest interest in the task to which they were assigned. Their sole purpose and obligation was rigidly to perform their duty as soldiers of the empire of Rome to which they had dedicated their allegiance. The Roman seal affixed to the stone before Joseph's tomb was far more sacred to them than all the philosophy of Israel or the sanctity of her ancient creed. Soldiers cold-blooded enough to gamble over a dying victim's cloak are not the kind of men to be hoodwinked by timid Galileans or to jeopardize their Roman necks by sleeping on their post." (Roper, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?*, p33)

It's *highly* unlikely that they fell asleep. The punishment for falling asleep on a night watch was death:

"The punishment for quitting post was death, according to the laws (Dion. Hal, *Antiq. Rom.* VIII.79). The most famous discourse on the strictness of camp discipline is that of Polybuis VI. 37, 38, which indicates that the fear of punishments produced faultless attention to duty, especially in the night watches. It carries weight from the prestige of the author, who was describing what he had an opportunity to see with his own eyes." (Currie, *The Military Discipline of the Romans*, p41-43)

"In the various writers of [Justinian's] Digest 49.16, eighteen offenses of soldiers are

mentioned punishable by death. They are as follows . . . leaving the night watch (-10.1) . . .” (Currie, *The Military Discipline of the Romans*, p49-50)

Given all of these precautions it's absurd to think that the disciples stole the body. Not only was it being guarded by Roman soldiers, but there's also the fact that the disciples were terrified by the death of Christ and were huddling in fear of their lives:

“They were not naturally either very brave or large-minded. In the most cowardly fashion, when their Master was arrested, they 'all forsook Him' and fled, leaving Him to face His fate alone.” (Hanson, *The Resurrection and the Life*, p24-26)

It's ludicrous to think that the disciples would bravely challenge a group of professional Roman soldiers to steal a corpse – just so they could then be executed for preaching the resurrection of Christ. Not only was it out of character for them, but they had nothing to gain and everything to lose:

“They are Galileans, for the most part fisher-folk, all of them more or less strangers to cities and to the ways of city life. One by one, they had become adherents of the young Teacher from Nazareth and devoted to His way of life. They had followed Him gladly and reverently unto the hour of crisis came. When He was arrested on the outskirts of the Garden of Gethsemane, they all fell back and away, awed by the torches and the clamor and the rattling sabers.

“[The disciples] secreted themselves in their lodgings and nothing is heard of them until the

startling news is brought to them by the Magdalene on the morning of the third day. Thereupon, two – and two only – have the temerity to venture forth to learn for themselves of the news brought to them by Mary could be as reported by her or was as they themselves believed, just “idle talk.” The whole demeanor of the disciples is one of abject fright and self-preservation.” (Roper, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?*, p34-35)

The evidence is clear: Jesus died on the cross and was buried in a tomb which was sealed by a giant rock and guarded by Roman soldiers. That makes what happened next all the more fascinating.

The Empty Tomb

Something of tremendous significance utterly changed the lives of the disciples. That terrified group of men were changed overnight into dynamic missionaries who were willing to sacrifice their very lives.

What makes this all the more amazing is that the disciples weren't expecting the resurrection. They fully expected Jesus to remain dead:

“They believed Him to be dead, and they did not expect Him to rise again from the dead – at least, in our accepted sense of it. Of this there is abundant evidence from the moment of His death, in the burial-spices brought by Nicodemus, in those prepared by the women (both of which were intended as against corruption), in the sorrow of the women at the empty tomb, in their supposition that the Body

had been removed, in the perplexity and bearing of the Apostles, in the doubts of so many, and indeed in the express statement: 'For as yet they knew not the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead'" (Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, p623)

Nor were the disciples interested in believing that Jesus had risen from the dead. The initial reports of His resurrection were met with extreme skepticism:

"The apostles were dejected and depressed in their conclusion that Christ was not their expected Messiah (Luke 24:21). In such a condition, they can hardly be considered the subjects of hopeful visions and hallucinations. These were not men ready to believe. The very fact that Jesus rebuked them for their unbelief indicates that Thomas was not the only one who was a hardheaded skeptic. At one time or another Jesus rebuked all of the eleven apostles for their unbelief in His resurrection (Matthew 28:17; Luke 24:25-27, 38, 41; John 20:24-27). This proves they were finally convinced against their will." (John Ankerberg, Josh Weldon)

It's clear that the disciples would never have stolen the body from the tomb. They were utterly incapable of it! Nevertheless, something happened that caused the tomb to become empty. *No one* – not even the enemies of the gospel – ever doubted that the body of Christ was no longer in His tomb. Not one of the people who hated the apostles and persecuted them from city to city ever claimed that the body of Jesus was still in the grave. All the high priest had to do to disprove this new religion was display Christ's body, but that never happened:

“If ever a fact of ancient history may count as indisputable, it should be the empty tomb. From Easter Sunday on there must have been a tomb, clearly known as the tomb of Jesus, that did not contain His body. This much is beyond dispute: Christian teaching from the very beginning promoted a living, resurrected Savior. The Jewish authorities strongly opposed this teaching and were prepared to go to any lengths in order to suppress it. Their job would have been easy if they could have invited potential converts for a quick stroll to the tomb and there produced Christ's body. That would have been the end of the Christian message. The fact that a church centering around the risen Christ could come about demonstrates that there must have been an empty tomb.” (Corduan, *No Doubt About It*, p222)

No one would have accepted the resurrection if there was still a body in the tomb. The only way the Church could ever have come into existence was if the tomb was empty:

“The empty tomb is a *sine qua non* of the resurrection. The notion that Jesus rose from the dead with a new body while his old body still lay in the grave is a modern conception. Jewish mentality would never have accepted a division of two bodies. Even if the disciples failed to check the empty tomb, the Jewish authorities could have been guilty of no such oversight. When therefore the disciples began to preach the resurrection in Jerusalem and people responded, and when religious authorities stood helplessly by, the tomb must have been empty. The simple fact that the Christian fellowship,

founded on belief in Jesus' resurrection, came into existence and flourished in the very city where he was executed and buried is powerful evidence for the historicity of the empty tomb." (Craig, "Did Jesus Rise From The Dead?", as cited in Wilkins, *Jesus Under Fire*, p151-52)

It's very significant that no one from that time period ever argued that the tomb wasn't empty. Everyone agreed that the body of Christ was gone:

"In all the fragments and echoes of this far-off controversy which have come down to us we are nowhere told that any responsible person asserted that the body of Jesus was still in the tomb. We are only given reasons why it was not there. Running all through these ancient documents is the persistent assumption that the tomb of Christ was vacant." (Morison, *Who Moved the Stone?*, p115)

When Peter proclaimed the empty tomb just a few weeks after the crucifixion, no one stepped up to argue with him about it – even though he made that startling claim in the very city where Jesus was publicly crucified and buried:

"In Acts 2, Luke records Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost. There was no refutation given by the Jews to his bold proclamation of Christ's resurrection. Why? Because the evidence of the empty tomb was there for anyone to examine if they wanted to disclaim it. However, everyone knew that the grave no longer held the body of Jesus Christ." (*Evidence for Christianity*, p307)

So what happened to the body of Jesus? It's highly

unlikely that the story of the soldiers was true. After all, the penalty for sleeping on watch was death:

“The soldiers cannot have alleged they were asleep, for they well know that the penalty of sleeping upon a watch was death – always rigorously enforced.” (Thorburn, *The Resurrection Narratives and Modern Criticism*, p179-82).

Nor is it very likely that in a situation this important, *every single one* of the guards would have become careless and neglected the duty that their very lives depended upon:

“If anything were needed to complete the proof of the reality of Christ's resurrection, it would be the silliness of the explanation which the guards were bribed to give it. That a whole guard should go to sleep on their watch at all, was not very likely; that they should do it in a case like this, where there was such anxiety on the part of the authorities that the grave should remain undisturbed, was in the last degree improbable.” (Jamieson, *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical on the Old and New Testaments*, p133)

The story which the soldiers spread to explain the empty tomb was an obvious lie:

“They gave the soldiers money and told them to explain that the disciples had come at night and stolen the body while they were asleep. That story is so obviously false that Matthew does not even bother to refute it! What judge would listen to you if you said that while you were asleep,

your neighbor came into your house and stole your television set? Who knows what goes on while he's asleep? Testimony like this would be laughed out of any court." (Little, *Know Why You Believe*, p63-64)

The fact that no one ever tried to prosecute the disciples for stealing the body is proof that even the Jewish authorities didn't believe their own story:

"That the Jewish rulers did not believe what they instructed and bribed the soldiers to say, is almost self-evident. If they did, why were not the disciples at once arrested and examined? For such an act was imputed to them involved a serious offense against the existent authorities. Why were they not compelled to give up the body? . . . why were they not punished for the crime? . . . It is nowhere intimated that the rulers even attempted to substantiate the charge." (Selwyn, as cited in Smith, *Therefore Stand*, p578-79)

Conclusion

Some have tried to argue that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a myth. However, the evidence doesn't support that argument:

"The most drastic way of dismissing the evidence would be to say that these stories were mere fabrications, that they were pure lies. But, so far as I know, not a single critic today would take such an attitude. In fact, it would be an impossible position. Think of the number of

witnesses, over 500. Think of the character of the witnesses, men and women who gave the world the highest ethical teaching it has ever known, and who even on the testimony of their enemies lived it out in their lives. Think of the psychological absurdity of picturing a little band of defeated cowards cowering in an upper room one day and a few days later transformed into a company that no persecution could silence – and then attempting to attribute this dramatic change to nothing more convincing than a miserable fabrication they were trying to foist upon the world. That simply wouldn't make sense.” (Anderson, “The Resurrection of Jesus Christ,” *Christianity Today*, March 29 1968, p5-6)

The message of the resurrection wasn't some strange teaching which appeared centuries after all of the eyewitnesses were dead, and long after any possible refuting evidence was lost. The truth is that the Church began just weeks after the death of Jesus, during the lives of people who were very familiar with what happened:

“Note that when the disciples of Jesus proclaimed the resurrection, they did so as eyewitnesses and they did so while people were still alive who had had contact with the events they spoke of. In 56 AD Paul wrote that over 500 people had seen the risen Jesus and that most of them were still alive (1 Corinthians 15:6 ff.) It passes the bounds of credibility that the early Christians could have manufactured such a tale and then preached it among those who might easily have refuted it simply by producing the body of Jesus.” (Montgomery, *History and Christianity*, p78)

All of this points to the fact that the resurrection really did take place. If the resurrection is a real historical event then that's solid evidence Jesus was truly who He claimed to be:

“Could the Man who predicted His death and resurrection, only to have it come to pass exactly as He had said, be anything but God?” (Corduan, *No Doubt About It*, p227)

Jesus said that He would prove His identity by dying and then coming back to life – and that's exactly what He did.