

Resurrection: Vicious Hoax or Fantastic Fact?

Written by Bob Stone

How important is the resurrection to us? Josh McDowell has said, "The resurrection of Jesus Christ is one of the most wicked, vicious, heartless hoaxes ever foisted upon the minds of men and women, or it is the most fantastic fact of history."

Three credentials set Jesus apart from all men:

- the impact of His life upon history and individuals
- the fulfillment of the prophecies concerning His life
- His resurrection

What did Jesus say about His resurrection?

On one occasion He said, *"Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." The Jews replied, 'It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?' But the temple He had spoken of was His body. After He was raised from the dead, His disciples recalled what He had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken"*
—John 2:19-25.

Jesus placed a lot of emphasis on the resurrection. He told His disciples often that it would happen—Matt. 16:21-23; 17:8-9,22-23; 20:17-19; 26:32. In fact, everything He taught, lived and died for *depended* upon only one thing—His resurrection. Paul said: *"...if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith...if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins...we are to be pitied more than all men"*—1 Cor. 15:14,16-18.

Truly, the resurrection of Jesus Christ and Christianity stand or fall together. If you want to refute Christianity, all you have to do is refute the resurrection and it totally crumbles. Christianity is diametrically opposed to other religions which are based upon philosophical propositions or theological ideologies. It is based upon an event in history—an empty tomb and the person of Jesus Christ, who is alive.

There are many ways to approach the resurrection, but ours here will be to concentrate on some (not all) of the evidence of that first Easter morning. A study of the evidence has absolutely changed many people's lives.

The Skeptics' Evidence

Dr. Simon Greenleaf was a skeptic from Harvard law school who wrote three volumes on the laws of legal evidence, and mocked Christians in his law classes. But he was challenged by Christian students to apply his own book to the resurrection of Jesus. Taking the challenge, he concluded that the evidence was so convincing, he became a believer.

He later wrote, "The resurrection of Jesus is one of the best established facts of history."

Dr. Benjamin Gilbert-West and Lord Littleton were from Cambridge. So fed up with Christianity they wanted to destroy it, they took a leave of absence to study and write a book to refute both the resurrection and the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. As a result of their study, they too became ardent believers and wrote: "Reject not, until you have examined the evidence."

Dr. Frank Morrison, a lawyer and engineer, was brought up in a rationalistic background. He liked Jesus, but thought the resurrection was a myth that was tacked on. He, too, wanted to write a book to refute it, but in the process of writing, he like the others committed his life to Christ. His findings are in the book "Who Moved the Stone"?

What did these men and others who have taken a similar course find? What changed their thinking and their lifestyles?

A Study of the Evidence

A look at some of the evidence, especially the security precautions taken at the death of Jesus, is very convincing. (Information obtained from the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and extra-biblical sources.)

The First Precaution

The body was placed in a **new, solid rock tomb**—John 19:41-42; Mk.15:46b—with an entrance of four-and-a-half to five feet tall. That's why Peter leaned over to look in (John 20:5). The only way to get the body in or out was through the entrance, sealed with a stone.

The Second Precaution

The **body was prepared** according to the burial practices of the day—John 19:39b-40. They wrapped the entire body and head with 11-inch strips, and between them they put aromatic spices—which were mixed with a gummy substance known as myrrh. The linen and spices made a 75 to 100 pound encasement.

The Third Precaution

A **large stone** was rolled in front of the tomb—Mk. 15:46; 16:4. The Greek language reveals that this was an extremely large stone. One manuscript of Mark has this in parenthesis: "a stone which cannot be moved by 20 men." Frank Morrison calculated the size of stone needed to roll in front of a four-and-a-half to five-foot doorway would be approximately one-and-a-half to two tons. Professors at Georgia Tech estimated two tons. Joseph moved the stone into place by holding it in place by a wedge, and set in a groove that sloped down. Once the wedge was removed, the circular rock rolled into place.

The Fourth Precaution

A **guard** contingency was placed around the tomb—Matt. 27:62-66; 28:11-15. Some have wondered whether this was the Jewish Temple Guard or the Roman Guard. Let's look at both.

Jewish Temple Guard. They were placed in 10-man units. The discipline of the guard was quite good. For instance, if a man was caught asleep, he was beaten and burned right on the spot with his own clothes. If they had been guarding the tomb, they certainly wouldn't have fallen asleep.

Roman Guard. The Greek terms used in Matt. 27:65 can refer only to the Roman Guard. What were they like? T.L. Tucker says they carried five different weapons; certainly not the traditional picture of men with spears in mini skirts. They were a four-to-16-man, highly-trained and disciplined unit. Each man was able to protect six feet of ground against an entire invading army. Any disappearance of the body would have meant death to the guard. Do you think the disciples could have stolen the body against these men? Never!

The Fifth Precaution

A **Roman seal** was put on the grave—Matthew 27:66. The seal stood for the power and authority of the Roman Empire, as well as authentication that the body was there. A Roman

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guard examined the premise and sealed it. Therefore, anyone who attempted to move the stone from the entrance would have broken the seal and incurred the wrath of the Roman law and of the guard.

The Explanations For What Happened

Whatever happened that night 2,000 years ago certainly turned 11 Jews upside down. All but one died a martyr's death, and some were the most heinous deaths imaginable. Why? All for one thing—the empty tomb of the man called Jesus of Nazareth. He's alive! But not all believed it. Let's look at their theories.

Theory #1: The disciples stole the body.

Matthew 28:11-15.

This explanation leaves us with a lot of questions.

- **Who broke the seal?** If a person broke the seal, the full force of the Roman law and soldiers went to find the culprit. Did the disciples appear to be brave enough to do this? (See Matt. 26:56b,69-75.) If they did it, why weren't they arrested?

- **Who moved the stone?** This was a two-ton stone that had to be moved up an incline. In addition, the Greek language reveals something else; the stone was not only removed from the entrance, but away from the whole sepulchre by some distance.

- **Where was the guard?** The soldiers would have had to be deaf not to have heard the more than 20 men needed to break the seal and remove the stone some distance from the entrance to the tomb. On the other hand, if they were asleep, how did they know who stole the body? Or if they were awake, could the disciples have overcome them? Is there any record of injury/battle? And besides, why would the guards make up a story like this? It made them look bad, and made them subject to death.

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- **Who took the body?** Was it His friends or His enemies?

His *enemies* set a guard to keep Him from disappearing. They could also have produced the body at any time to squelch the reports of the risen Christ ("Here's the body; He is not risen"). But they didn't!

His *friends* had neither the inclination, courage, or the power to do this. They were in no mood to do it! Furthermore, would they want to perpetuate the lies of an imposter? Would they die for a lie? A known lie would not have caused the transformation of these men.

- **Where was His family after the resurrection?** If they had known the body was stolen, would they have followed Jesus? Check out how they felt about Jesus *before* the resurrection—Mk. 3:21,31-34. Did they change their minds? Notice what happened after He was risen—1 Cor. 15:7; Acts 1:14; James 1:1.

Theory #2: The women went to the wrong tomb. They were frustrated and emotional. It was dark and they couldn't find it.

Could this be true? If so, everyone went to the wrong tomb—the soldiers, the disciples, other Jews, the angel. Even today, people are going to the wrong tomb. Do you think Joseph, the tomb's owner, also forgot and went to the wrong tomb? Wouldn't he verify his empty tomb? The evidence is that the disciples and the women knew where the tomb was located (Matt. 27:61).

Theory #3: He Swooooooned.

This theory proposes that Jesus didn't really die; He swooned. He lost a lot of blood and then fainted. After going through the torment of His trial and the cross, He didn't die. The damp tomb healed Him. Is there a rebuttal to this theory?

- This means the three professional executioners who signed the death warrant (Mk. 15: 44) were all mistaken.

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- This means Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, as they wrapped the body of Jesus in a 75 to 100-pound encasement of cloth and burial spices, were mistaken.
- This means He breathed through the burial clothes.
- This means He knocked down the two-ton solid rock stone, overpowered the guards, then appeared to His disciples without any physical impairments remaining, except the nail prints in His hands and feet.
- This means He was a magician who could walk through walls, disappear, and be raised in the clouds.

Theory #4: The Passover Plot

This is proposed by Hugh Schoenfield in his book, *The Passover Plot*. The theory states that Jesus plotted a very timely and detailed plan to arrange what appeared to be His resurrection. Here's how Schoenfield outlines the plot.

Jesus took into His confidence a young Joseph of Arimathea. Knowing the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah, Jesus ordered His life in such a way as to fulfill them. For example, Jesus arranged a feigned death on the cross by being administered a drug when the vinegar was offered. Then after He passed out from the drug, Joseph took His body to one of his tombs. When the effects of the drug wore off, Jesus appeared alive and revealed himself as the Messiah.

The problem with Schoenfield's theory is the selective distortion of the facts. Why did he select some segments of the biblical account as true, but not all? For example, he accepts the story of the spear, but notice what he rejects, ignores and is ignorant of:

1. He rejects the guard at the tomb, the Roman seal, and the testimony of the disciples after the cross.
2. He ignores the testimony of 500 witnesses, most of whom were alive and could confirm or deny the reports.
3. He is ignorant of the 300+ prophecies that were made about the Christ, some of which Jesus had no control over: the geological location of His birth (Micah 5:2); the prophecies concerning 30 pieces of silver (Zechariah 11:12-13; Matt. 26:14-15); and the prophecies concerning His crucifixion (Psalm 22).

How probable is it that one person could fulfill within his lifetime, 300+ specific events, all of which were written before he was born? **Fulfilling the prophecies Jesus did was statistically improbable—one chance in "2 with 110 zeros after it".**

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A doctoral student from Ohio University, doing his dissertation in mathematics, calculated the probability that all the monkeys in Africa could run over a single typewriter and, without error, retype all the books in the English language. The probability this could happen is one chance in "2 with 110 zeros after it" In other words, it is more probable that all the monkeys in Africa could perform the above feat, than it is that Christ within His lifetime could fulfill 333 specific events prophesied before He was born.

A Study of the Circumstantial Evidence of the Resurrection

In addition to the direct evidence of the resurrection, it's important to consider a few pieces of "circumstantial evidence".

The Church

The success of the church can be traced back to the city of Jerusalem. It thrived in the very city where Jesus was crucified and buried. Thousands believed the first sermons which were preached a few minutes' walk from the tomb (Acts 2:41; 4:4).

Sunday Worship

The Christian Sunday is a phenomenon. The decision to change "the day of worship" is very significant! The early church was made up of devout Jews, fanatical about observing the Sabbath. They believed they would incur the wrath of God if they broke it, yet they changed all those years of training and began to worship on Sunday—to honor the anniversary of Jesus' resurrection 52 times a year. The only explanation for this is that they saw the risen Lord.

Baptism and Communion

These ordinances are all circumstantial evidences of the resurrection, because they too find their meaning in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Baptism pictures salvation (Rom. 6:1-10); particularly our identification, in a positive way, with Christ's death and resurrection.

Likewise, communion symbolizes Christ's death and resurrection. "How can a great joy accompany the acknowledgment of the horrifying death of his religion's founder, save the

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redeeming fact of a subsequent resurrection?" Josh McDowell, *Ibid.*, page 108.

Changed Lives

Consider the phenomenon of transformed lives.

The early Christians had no visible (earthly) benefits from their wholehearted and total allegiance to Jesus.

Jesus' family members were the hardest to convince, but became followers—Acts 1:14b.

The disciples no longer denied or ran, but became fearless followers, leaders, and martyrs.

Saul of Tarsus, a fanatical persecutor of Christians, became an apostle and missionary.

Your life. Has He changed and transformed you?

- You can know your sins are forgiven—1 Cor. 15:3.
- You can be assured of eternal life and your own resurrection from the grave—1 Cor. 15:19-26.
- You can be transformed into a new creature—John 10:10.

Application Questions

1. As you look at the crucifixion and the resurrection, how does it affect you? Why?
2. Why do you believe the resurrection is important to a Christian's faith? How would you explain its importance to a person who doesn't understand?

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3. Why is it important for Christians to be able to defend their faith and give an answer for the hope that lies within them (1 Pet. 3:15-16)? Why must good behavior and character accompany our testimony and the defense of our faith?

4. Was there any testimony or argument that the Holy Spirit is using, or has already used, to draw you to Jesus? Explain. If you are a Christian, what argument or testimony do you find to be the most effective in your witnessing?

- Is fulfilled prophecy an effective means to show who Jesus is? Think about pros and cons.

- How important/effective can a person's personal testimony be?

- Are you prepared to share yours?

- If you meet with a small group, have a few in your small group share a three-minute version of their testimony.

Bibliography:

Evidence That Demands A Verdict, by Josh McDowell, Vol. 1, Here's Life Publishers, 1986.

The Resurrection Factor, by Josh McDowell, Here's Life Publishers, 1981. *Note:* Much of this material was taken from these books. They are an excellent source for a defense of our faith.