

Proofs of the Resurrection: Fact or Fiction?¹

Introduction: The Importance of the Resurrection

The Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ is either one of the greatest hoaxes ever or the most important fact of history.

Without the Resurrection, Christianity has no base and no foundation on which its faith rests. Without the Resurrection, we are simply left with the story of a great man who performed miracles and healed the sick, but never conquered sin or death. The Resurrection gives us this hope, but those who deny that the Resurrection ever happened deny themselves of the possibility that there is eternal life after death.

The Resurrection of our Lord is the cornerstone of the Orthodox Faith and the life of the Church. Saint Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “*Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up – if in fact the dead do not rise. For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep (1 Cor. 15:12-20).*

In this lesson, we look at some of the historical proofs of the Resurrection as a way to defend against those who say that the Resurrection is impossible. We first look at the Security Precautions taken at the trial, crucifixion, death, and burial of the Lord. Then we look at the Facts at the time of Resurrection.

** In this lesson, we make the basic assumption that the account of the Resurrection recorded in the four Gospels is true. We reserve the topic of the validity and reliability of the Bible for another lesson.*

¹ Based on The Best of Josh McDowell: A Ready Defense, compiled by Bill Wilson (pages 215 – 240)

Security Precautions

1. The Trial

- a. Pontius Pilate was an extremely cruel and merciless ruler, whom Philo records as being responsible “for countless atrocities and numerous executions without any previous trial.”
- b. Our Lord Jesus Christ went through six distinct trials
 - i. Before Annas, the high priest (John 18:13)
 - ii. Before Caiaphas (Matthew 26:57)
 - iii. Before the Sanhedrin (Matthew 26:59)
 - iv. Before Pontius Pilate (Matthew 27:2)
 - v. Before Herod (Luke 23:7)
 - vi. Back Before Pontius Pilate (Luke 23:11-25).
- c. Therefore, there were three Jewish trials and three Roman trials
- d. Various security precautions were taken to make sure that our Lord Jesus was dead and that He would remain dead and buried.

2. Death by Crucifixion

- a. A cruel death – Flavius Josephus, the Jewish historian, called it “the most wretched death”
- b. The Custom of Whipping – 39 lashes
- c. A Crown of Thorns
- d. The Crossbar Burden – approx. 110 pounds strapped to the victim’s shoulders
- e. Crucifixion with Nails
- f. The Breaking of Legs – the executioners did not break the legs of Christ because they already observed that He was dead
- g. Spilling of Blood and Water – a death by heart failure

3. The Solid Rock Tomb

- a. The body of Christ was placed in a new tomb, hewn out of a solid rock, in a private burial area
- b. Tombs usually had an entrance of only 4 ½ to 5 feet high

4. Jewish Burial

- a. Our Lord Jesus Christ was buried according to the custom of the Jews
- b. About 75 pounds of spices were used
 - i. This was not unusual
 - ii. Gamaliel, a contemporary of our Lord and teacher of Saint Paul (Saul of Tarsus), was buried with 86 pounds of spices
 - iii. When Herod died, Josephus records that it required 500 servants to carry the spices for his body.
- c. At least three separate garments were wrapped around the corpse
 - i. Starting at the feet, they would wrap to the armpits, put the arms down, then wrap to the neck

- ii. A separate piece was wrapped around the head.
- d. Total weight was probably about 92 to 95 pounds
- e. Saint John Chrysostom also comments that “the myrrh used was a drug which adheres so closely to the body that the graveclothes could not easily be removed.”

5. Very Large Stone

- a. Recorded in the Gospel
 - i. “...and he [Joseph of Arimathea] rolled a large stone against the door of the tomb...” (Matthew 27:60)
 - ii. “And they [the women] said among themselves, ‘Who will roll away the stone from the door of the tomb for us?’ But when they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away – for it was very large” (Mark 16:3-4).
- b. Manuscript of Mark 16:4
 - i. “And when He was laid there, he (Joseph) put against the tomb a stone which *20 men could not roll away.*”
- c. One and a Half to Two tons
 - i. Calculated by engineers at Georgia Tech based on the type of stone that would have been used at the time of Christ as well as the size of the doorway.
- d. If it was so large, how did Joseph move it into position in the first place?
 - i. The tomb would have been located at the bottom of an incline.
 - ii. The stone had been held in place with a wedge as it sat in a groove or trench that sloped down to the front of the tomb.
 - iii. Remove the wedge, and the stone rolls into position

6. Roman Security

- a. The request of the Jewish officials
 - i. The Jewish officials panicked when they remembered Christ’s words that He would rise again.
 - ii. So they went to Pilate and made the following request:
 - 1. “Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night and steal Him away, and say to the people, ‘He has risen from the dead.’ So the last deception will be worse than the first” (Matthew 27:64).
 - iii. Pilate’s response
 - 1. “You have a guard; go your way, make *it* as secure as you know how” (Matthew 27:66)
 - iv. Two interpretations of Pilate’s response
 - 1. “You have a guard...” refers to the Temple Police
 - a. The Temple guard consisted of a group of 10 Levites who were placed on duty at different places at the Temple.
 - b. Total number of men on duty was 270 (27 units of 10 each).
 - c. Military discipline was quite good
 - d. At night, if the captain approached a guard member who was asleep, he was beaten and burned with his own clothes
 - e. Member of the guard was forbidden to sit down or lean against something when he was on duty.

2. “You have a guard...” means “Have a guard”, i.e. Pilate gave them the Roman guard
 - a. The Force of the Roman Guard
 - i. A guard unit was a 4- to 16-man security force
 - ii. Each man trained to protect 6 feet of ground
 - iii. The 16 men in a square of 4 on each side were supposed to be able to protect 36 yards against an entire battalion and hold it.
 - b. The Arrangement
 - i. 4 men placed immediately in front of whatever they needed to protect
 - ii. 12 asleep in a semi-circle in front of them with their heads pointing in
 - iii. So, a thief would have to walk over those who were asleep
 - iv. Every four hours, another unit of four was awakened, and those who had been awake went to sleep
 - v. They would rotate this way around the clock
- b. High Priest Offers Bribe
 - i. Some would say that it was the Temple Police that came, but the high priest had influence with roman authority.
 - ii. It must have been the Romans, for the high priest to bribe the Temple guard would have been a mockery
 - iii. Normally the guards would have received the death penalty because the story was to be that they had fallen asleep while guarding the tomb
- c. A Fighting Machine
 - i. Historians describe the adornment of a soldier as well as their massive weapons that they carried.
 - ii. The appearance would have been “striking and terrifying to the enemy” (Polybius, the Greek historian of the second century B.C.)

7. The Roman Seal

- a. A seal was set on the stone (Matthew 27:66)
- b. Could only be placed in the presence of the Roman guards left in charge
- c. Prevents anyone from tampering with the grave’s contents
- d. The seal was a cord that stretched across the rock and fastened at either end with sealing clay.
- e. The clay packs were stamped with the official signet of the Roman governor
- f. The Purpose of the Seal
 - i. Authentication that the body of Jesus was actually there
 - ii. To show that His body was protected by the power and authority of the Roman Empire – anyone who tried to steal it would have to answer to the Romans
- g. Grave Robbers Warned

- i. A grave robber could be sentenced to capital punishment if accused and convicted

Facts to Be Reckoned With

Here, we basically look at the fact of the empty tomb. Two thousand years later mankind has not forgotten the empty tomb that changed the whole course of history and the lives of millions. Let us consider seven facts to prove that an empty tomb meant the Resurrection of Christ

1. The Broken Roman Seal

- a. Consequences of breaking the seal would be severe
- b. Anyone who did so could face execution
- c. Even the disciples were afraid and hid themselves

2. The Empty Tomb

- a. Unless the tomb were empty, the disciples would never have been believed in Jerusalem
- b. The disciples did not go off to some distant land to preach the empty tomb. They went right back to Jerusalem, where, if their teaching could be disproved by a simple visit to the tomb.
- c. If the tomb remained occupied, why would the apostles try to tell people that Christ had risen from the dead in the city where the tomb was?
- d. There have been positive evidence of an empty tomb from Jewish and Roman historical sources.
- e. Even Gamaliel, a Sanhedrin member, put forth the suggestion that the Christian movement was of God (Acts 5:34-42); he would not have done this if the tomb had been occupied or if the Sanhedrin knew where the body was.
- f. Why would the Jewish authorities bribe the Roman guard and spread the “stolen body” rumor/theory, if the tomb were still occupied?
- g. The empty tomb is therefore a historical fact

3. The Large Stone Moved

- a. Up an incline
 - i. Saint Mark, in the Greek, adds a preposition to explain the position of the stone after the resurrection
 - ii. He added *ana*, which means “up or upward”, so there was an incline (*kulio* means to roll; *anakulio*, to roll upward)
- b. Away From
 - i. Saint Luke uses *apo* meaning a “a separation from” in the sense of a “distance from.”
 - ii. Why were the women coming to the tomb?
 - 1. To anoint the body
 - 2. But didn't they know the Roman guard was guarding the grave?
 - a. No, they left Friday afternoon; but the Roman guard didn't come until Saturday afternoon.

- iii. When the women were on the way they said “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?” (Mark 16:3)
- iv. When they arrived, they said, “Who rolled the stone away...?” not from the entrance, but from the entire sepulcher – a distance from the entire sepulcher
- c. Picked Up and Carried
 - i. Saint John used a different verb – *airo* – means “to pick something up and carry it away.”
 - ii. Now, could the disciples have carried such a large stone away from the sepulcher without the Roman guard hearing them, even if they were asleep?
 - iii. And why would the disciples want to move it so far anyway, just to enter the tomb?

4. Roman Guard Goes AWOL

- a. The Roman guard fled and left their place of responsibility
- b. To abandon one’s position or to fall asleep on the job meant punishment
- c. Fear of Punishment
 - i. There was a serious threat of being stripped of clothes and being burned alive as punishment hanging over the heads of these soldiers
 - ii. If the tomb had not been empty, the guards would never have left their position, nor have gone to the high priest
 - iii. The chief priest could also not make any valid charge against for what they saw – they must have seen the empty tomb and the location of the rock to determine that nothing human could have done this

5. Graveclothes Tell a Tale

- a. The graveclothes were left behind in the form of a body like the empty chrysalis of a caterpillar’s cocoon
- b. The graveclothes were in order
- c. Also shows that thieves did not come in, stole the body, and left things in disarray

6. Appearances of Christ Confirmed

- a. A Principle to Remember
 - i. Enough participants and eyewitnesses to the event
 - ii. The number should be substantial
- b. Fifty Hours of Eyewitnesses
 - i. According to Saint Paul, Christ had been seen by more than 500 people at one time and that the majority of these people were still alive at the time of writing the epistle to the Corinthians and could be questioned
 - ii. If you examined all of them for about 6 minutes each in court, you would have nearly 50 hours of eyewitness testimony
- c. Variety of People
 - i. Variety of locations and people involved
 - 1. Saint Mary Magdalene
 - 2. Two disciples on the road to Emmaus
 - 3. 500 men at one time
 - ii. Reactions also varied

1. Saint Mary Magdalene overwhelmed with emotion
2. Disciples frightened
3. Saint Thomas doubtful
- iii. This all means that the appearances were not stereotyped
- d. Hostile Viewers
 - i. He appeared to those who were hostile or unconvinced
 - ii. He wasn't just seen by friends and followers
 - iii. For instance, Saul of Tarsus (Saint Paul) was by no means a follower of Christ – he was the exact opposite
 - iv. Saint Paul became one of the greatest witnesses for the truth of the resurrection

7. Women saw Him first

- a. The disciples did NOT see Him first and they were Christ's inner circle – it would seem illogical to write an account where the women saw Him first
- b. Furthermore, the Jewish principles of legal evidence state that women at the time are invalid witnesses and did not have a right to give testimony in a court of law.
- c. Even the disciples doubted their witness
- d. But if the resurrection accounts had been manufactured...women would *never* have been included in the story, at least, not as first witnesses.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that the Resurrection changed lives. Why would so many people be ready to die rather than deny their faith over a hoax or over the stolen body of a great teacher? Saint Athanasius basically writes that the Disciples of Christ no longer despise death and don't see it as something terrible since the glorious resurrection.

The disciples who were afraid in the days after the Resurrection, hiding in the upper room, no longer had any fear on the Day of Pentecost, and were ready to suffer for the sake of Christ.

This is the hope and confidence we receive from the Resurrection and we are convinced wholeheartedly that the Resurrection is a historical fact and the most important event in history and in our spiritual lives; an event that we live daily when we die to sin and rise up with the Lord.

Glory is due to our God unto the ages of all ages. Amen.