

THE EVIDENCE FOR EASTER 1 Corinthians 15:3-7

I recently received an email from someone who had visited our Sunday morning service. In fact, he came two or three times, thanks to the witness of one of our seminary students, Laura Oksol. In his email, Jayson claims to be an atheist. He also describes himself as belonging to a Satanist cult here in Portland.

Jayson mentions in his email that if he could just come to grips with the problem of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, then maybe he could believe. In fact, in his most recent email to me, he said asked if I had any books on the resurrection that I could loan him.

I suspect that there are a lot of “Jaysons” out there, people who have not really given the resurrection of Jesus Christ much serious thought. Even today, at this time of the year, the pressing question for many is not what you believe about Easter, but whether or not you’ve finished filing your income tax!

If you’re here today and are not a practicing Christ follower, have you seriously considered the evidence for the literal, bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ? And if you are a believer – as so many of us are – are you able to defend what you believe about the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 3:15)? And for believer and unbeliever, do you recognize just how crucial the resurrection of Jesus Christ is to the Christian faith? Bottom line, Christianity stands or falls on the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

While the Gospel accounts give us the historical record of Jesus’ resurrection, Paul gives us a commentary on the significance of that event for our own lives in 1 Corinthians 15. Let’s read together this important passage in 1 Corinthians 15:1-7.

15:1 Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. 2 By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. 3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. 6 After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, 8 and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. 1 Corinthians 15:1-7

JESUS DID DIE

These verses give us several insights into the evidence for that first Easter. The first thing this verse tells us is this – JESUS DID DIE. For there to be a true resurrection, there had to be actual death. Notice what Paul says in verse 3: “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: *that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures...*”

Some years ago I read a paperback that was quite popular at the time entitled *The Passover Plot* by Hugh Schonfield. His theory is that Jesus masterminded a grand plot in which he convinced himself and others that he was indeed the “man of the hour,” the long-awaited Messiah. According to Schonfield, Jesus did not actually die – but merely, as he puts it “swooned” on the cross. His resurrection was then not so much a resurrection as a “resuscitation” brought about by the dampness of the cold tomb.

Interesting theory...and still often mentioned by people today. But no reputable scholar believes it. One of the best replies to this far-fetched idea comes from a lady who wrote into a question and answer forum. She said:

Dear Sirs:

Our preacher said on Easter that Jesus just swooned on the cross and that the disciples nursed him back to health. What do you think?

Sincerely,
Bewildered

Dear Bewildered,

Beat your preacher with a cat-of-nine-tails with 39 heavy strokes, nail him to a cross; hang him in the sun for 6 hours; run a spear through his side...put him in an airless tomb for 36 hours and see what happens.

Sincerely,
Your answer man

Please don't follow the advice of the “answer man!” In fact, think about this. Even if Jesus wanted to go against everything he had taught by intentionally deceiving people, and even if he had somehow survived the cross and was able to escape the cocoon of linen wrappings soaked with 75 pounds of spices, and even if he could have somehow managed to roll away the bolder from the mouth of his tomb – a boulder so big that one ancient account says 20 men couldn't budge it – and even if he was able to get past the elite Roman guard, think of the condition it would have been in when he appeared to his disciples! He would not have exactly inspired his disciples with confidence and enthusiasm! They would not have exactly been motivated to sacrifice their lives in launching a world-wide movement. No, they would have pitied him and tried to get him to a doctor. Jesus was certainly dead. Nobody came down from a cross alive.ⁱ

JESUS DID RISE FROM THE DEAD

But notice, Paul also says, “...that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (v. 4). Did Jesus rise from the dead as the Bible says? Our everyday experience tells us that pigs don't talk (except in the movie *Babe*), that Santa Claus doesn't slide down chimneys, and that dead people don't spring back from the dead. And while the Bible doesn't refer to talking pigs or Santa Claus, it sure has a lot to say about resurrection.

Did you know that there is so much evidence for Easter – the literal, bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ that it is hard *not* to believe? Let me summarize this evidence with three words. The first is the word **EARLY**. It's important to understand that the account of Christ's death, burial and

resurrection dates back very *early*. In fact, we see this in these very verses. Notice what Paul says in verses 3-4:

“For *what I received I passed on to you* as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins ...that he was buried...that he was raised on the third day...”

What we have here is a creed recited in the early church and preserved for us by the apostle Paul. This creed was first passed onto Paul and then, by Paul, on to the Corinthian believers. Paul wrote these words as early as 57 AD to the Corinthians. But the creed itself has been dated back to as early as only two or three years after the crucifixion. And the beliefs that underlie it go back right back to the cross itself!

There is a popular seminar going around these days called *The Jesus Seminar*. One of its basic teachings is that all the talk about Jesus being the Son of God and rising from the dead is simply a fabrication of the early church. In other words, Jesus didn't really found the church; the church simply concocted a Jesus who never really existed! These legends (so they say) developed over the decades after Jesus' death. But what we see here in 1 Corinthians refutes that idea. Studies have concluded that there was nowhere near enough time for such an “evolution of legend” to occur. In fact, when Paul mentions in the next verses that Jesus appeared to more than 500 witnesses at one time, he specifically implies that many of them were still alive. In effect, he was saying, “*Hey, these people are still around – ask them yourselves if you don't believe me, and they'll tell you it's true!*” That's how confident he was.

The second word that lends credence to the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the word **EMPTY** – the empty tomb. During his trial, Jesus' chief accuser was the Jewish high priest Caiaphas, who served in that position from 18 to 37 AD. It was Caiaphas who accused Jesus of blasphemy for claiming to be God and then handed him over to Pilate to be killed. Just about 10 years ago, archaeologists were digging in Jerusalem, and they managed to uncover the burial grounds of Caiaphas and his family. Isn't it interesting that while the grave of the one who accused Jesus has been found, nobody to this day has ever uncovered the body of Jesus himself.

Jesus' body was laid to rest in a tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Jewish council, and the tomb was sealed and placed under heavy guard. But it was discovered empty on Easter morning by – *and this is very significant* – several women! You see, contrary to the opinion of some, the fact that the ancient documents say women discovered the tomb empty lends even more credibility to these accounts. That's because women had such a low status in Jewish society at the time; they didn't even legally qualify as witnesses. So if the disciples were making up this story, surely they would have claimed that men discovered the empty tomb because their testimony would have been far more credible. This is just one more indication that the writers of the New Testament were committed to accurately recording what actually happened.

But here's the most awesome fact concerning Jesus' tomb: *nobody ever claimed it was anything but empty!* Even His opponents admitted it was vacant on that first Easter morning! They tried to bribe the guards to say that the disciples stole the body while they were asleep. But that's ridiculous. How could sleeping guards have known that the disciples stole the body? And when the disciples declared the tomb was empty, why didn't Jesus' opponents respond by saying, “No,

it's not," or "You've got the wrong tomb – His body is over there?" Instead, they admitted it was true – the tomb was vacant!

Now, the question is, "*How* did it get empty?" Would the Romans have taken the body? Well, no, they wanted Jesus dead. Would the Jewish leaders have taken the body? No, they wanted Jesus to *stay* dead. Either the Jews or the Romans would have loved to have paraded Jesus' lifeless body through the streets of Jerusalem. What better way to put an abrupt stop to the growing Christian movement that they were trying so hard to destroy? But they didn't do this because they couldn't do this. Why? They didn't have the body!

Or maybe the women went to the wrong tomb that first Easter morning! Maybe they lost their way. But that doesn't withstand scrutiny either. Not only did Mary Magdalene and the other women find the empty tomb, but Peter and John came and checked it out. What are the odds that they all would have made the same mistake? Besides, their friend, Joseph of Arimathea, knew where his own tomb was located. And if somehow they all came down with amnesia, don't you think the Roman and Jewish authorities would have gladly pointed out the real tomb to show Jesus was still in it?

As for the disciples, they had nothing to gain and everything to lose by stealing the body. Why would they want to live a life of deprivation and suffering and then be tortured to death for a lie? If this had been a charade, certainly one of them would have broken ranks under torture and told the truth. Sure, today people die all the time for something they *think* is true. But would these disciples die the death of martyrdom for something they knew was false? Take a look at this (VIDEO).

No, the unanimous testimony of history is that the tomb was empty that first Easter Sunday. The only explanation that fits the facts is that Jesus really did return from the dead.

In 1981 there was a devastating flood in central China. During the flood an ancient pagoda collapsed at Famen Temple. A few years later, archaeologists were digging through the rubble when they made a startling discovery. Sealed in a miniature stone casket, they found what they believed to be part of one of the Buddha's fingers. It is now touring Taiwan, and was for a while on display at a mountain-top monastery. The finger was housed in a miniature golden pagoda as tens of thousands people came to pay homage to it. They burned incense and placed flowers all around the relic. One visitor said, "I was born more than 2,000 years after the Buddha, but I feel moved and touched to have seen the finger." Some said they felt as though the Buddha was actually sitting in front of them. One Chinese monk said, "Looking at the bone is like seeing the Buddha himself. We hope Buddha's finger could inspire friendly love and peace across the Taiwan Strait" to China.

Christians would react quite differently if someone claimed to have a preserved finger of Jesus. They would not revere it at all. In fact, if someone could find a finger of Jesus it would literally destroy the Christian faith per se. The whole Christian faith rests on the fact that there is no such finger to be found. There is no finger, no hand, no body - for Jesus rose from the dead and his body is gone and his tomb is empty. There are no relics because Jesus was bodily resurrected from the grave.ⁱⁱ

This brings us to the third word, which is **EYEWITNESSES**. Not only was Jesus' tomb empty, but over a period of 40 days Jesus appeared alive a dozen different times to more than 515 individuals. That's what Paul says in verses 5-8:

“...and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.”

Think of it – 515 people! That's a lot of witnesses! Let's put that in context. Think about it this way: if we were holding a trial to determine the facts concerning the resurrection, and if we were to call to the witness stand every eyewitness who personally encountered the resurrected Jesus and we cross-examined each of them for only 15 minutes, and if we went around the clock without a break, how long do you think we'd be sitting here? This first-hand, eyewitness testimony would continue through tonight, through all day Sunday and Sunday night, through all day Monday and Monday night, through all day Tuesday and Tuesday night, through all day Wednesday and Wednesday night, through all day Thursday – and we'd be listening to the last eyewitness account at about noon next Friday! After listening to witnesses for more than 128 straight hours, who could possibly walk away unconvinced? I've never heard of a case anywhere with nearly as much eyewitness testimony as that!

But maybe these encounters with the resurrected Jesus were nothing but an hallucination. They wanted so bad to see Jesus alive and they believed that he would come back, so they all had an hallucination and just *thought* they saw Jesus. And yet psychologists tell us this really isn't likely for two reasons. First, you hallucinate about that which you are anticipating. But the disciples really weren't anticipating the resurrection. They were rather confused and disillusioned. Furthermore, hallucinations are like dreams – they're individual events that can't be shared between people. It would be like me asking you, “*Did you enjoy my dream last night?*” In fact, for 500 people to have the same hallucination would be a bigger miracle than the resurrection.

You see, the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is a thoroughly historical event. The criteria for determining how the Goths sacked Rome, what happened at Waterloo or the date of our first American President is the same by which we determine what happened that first Easter morning. These three considerations – **EARLY ACCOUNTS + EMPTY TOMB + EYEWITNESSES** = certainty that Jesus was raised from the dead. But there is more here than just historical curiosity. The resurrection has profound implications for you and me.

WILL YOU BE RESURRECTED TO LIFE OR DEATH?

The question is: will *you* be resurrected to life or to death? The Bible says,

“Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.” Daniel 12:2

Will you be resurrected to life or to death and shame? Contrary to popular opinion, the answer to that question is *not* based on how many good works you can do in this life. It is based rather on the *one good work* that Jesus Christ has already done for you when he died for your sin and rose

on the third day. That's why Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me will live, even though he dies" (John 11:25).

The choice is left up to each one of us. God has already done everything necessary for you to experience resurrection life with him. He sent his Son to die as the substitute offering for your sin. And on that basis he offers complete forgiveness and assurance of eternal life to any who believe.

I told you about Jayson, who visited our church and inquired about the resurrection. Friday night a week ago...Jayson died. For two days before his death, as he lay in a hospital bed, two friends read through the New Testament with him. They read these very verses. Before leaving this earth, Jayson, not able to speak, took his friends Bible and wrote these words on a page in the book of Revelation: "It is true!"

Is that your response today? Do you remember what Jesus said to doubting Thomas?

"Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Stop doubting and believe." Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

You can't see Jesus, but you have heard the evidence. You can't see Jesus, but you can believe. Will you place you trust in him today? You can express that faith by saying this to God:

God, thank you for what you have done for me. I believe you sent Jesus to die for my sins. I believe Jesus rose from the dead to give me everlasting life. Please forgive me for the wrong things I have done. Please give me a clean heart. I invite you into my life. I pray this believing that Jesus died and rose from the dead for me. Amen."

ⁱ Lee Strobel in message "Jesus is Alive – True or False?" An authoritative article in the prestigious Journal of the American Medical Society concluded: "Clearly, the weight of historical and medical evidence indicates that Jesus was dead (even) before the wound to His side was inflicted ...Accordingly, interpretations based on the assumption that Jesus did not die on the cross appear to be at odds with modern medical knowledge."

ⁱⁱ Story contributed by Rodney Buchanan to www.preachingtoday.com. Compare the more recent article at <http://archives.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/asiapcf/east/02/23/taiwan.buddha/index.html>