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Dr. (Ps.) Craig Mobey

Jesus of Nazareth claimed to be the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament Scriptures. He was arrested and was judged a criminal for which He was crucified. Three days after His death and burial, some women who went to His tomb found His body gone.

In the weeks that followed, His disciples claimed that God had raised Him from the dead and that He appeared to them various times before ascending, before their very eyes, into heaven.

This morning, I stand on the shoulders of Paul, who reasoned, explained, and proved (Acts 2:17-24) that Jesus Christ is the Messiah.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:12-17 (CEV)

¹² *“If we preach that Christ was raised from death, how can some of you say that the dead will not be raised to life?”*

¹³ *If they won't be raised to life, Christ himself wasn't raised to life.*

¹⁴ *And if Christ wasn't raised to life, our message is worthless, and so is your faith.*

¹⁵ *If the dead won't be raised to life, we have told lies about God by saying that he raised Christ to life, when he really did not.*

¹⁶ *So if the dead won't be raised to life, Christ wasn't raised to life.*

¹⁷ *Unless Christ was raised to life, your faith is useless, and you are still living in your sins.”*

Introduction

Professor Charlie Moule, a well-known theologian once said, *“The birth and rapid rise of the Christian Church ... remains an unsolved enigma for any historian who refuses to take seriously the only explanation offered by the church itself – the resurrection.”* In other words, if you do not take seriously the resurrection of Christ, you have instead, an unsolvable problem, when you search for answers as to how Christianity came to be and how Christianity has spread.

Many have tried to explain this without relying on the resurrection, but every single theory – among them, a stolen body, swooning, hallucinating, and the wrong tomb – has failed to coincide with historical records, philosophical reasoning, and the known facts of the matter.

Body

A law student – an agnostic – was challenged to intellectually examine the claim that Jesus Christ is God’s son. He set out to write a book that would make an intellectual joke of Christianity. He travelled across America and Europe to gather evidence. After a while, he realized that he was being intellectually dishonest with himself and converted to Christianity. Since 1960, he has reached over 25 million people through 27 thousand talks in 125 countries. He has authored/co-authored 138 books, and his book, “*New Evidence that Demands a Verdict*” was declared one of the century’s top 40 books and one of the 13 most influential books of the last 50 years. I am speaking of Professor Josh McDowell, who is now 82 years old.

A student at the University of Uruguay asked, “*Professor McDowell, why can't you refute Christianity?*” He answered, “*For a very simple reason ... I am not able to explain away an event in history—the resurrection of Jesus Christ.*”

Christ’s death and resurrection are critical doctrines of the Christian faith. Without Christ’s death and resurrection, Christianity – in essence – is no different to any other religion.

People from other religions, from time to time, undertake a pilgrimage to the remains of the leader, god, or prophet. Christians can’t do that. Sure, you can visit His tomb, I have done that, but you can’t visit His remains. His tomb is empty.

At the end of the day, the historical fact of an empty tomb, demands an explanation. It is critical, as Paul says in verse 17, “*Unless Christ was raised to life, your faith is useless, and you are still living in your sins.*”

There are only two explanations for the historical fact of an empty tomb:

1. Human work, in the case of enemies, there is no motive or power, and in the case of friends, there is no power to resurrect the dead.
2. Divine work.

If the historical fact of an empty tomb is a result of divine work, then there should be ample credible evidence in support of the same.

“Secular” Evidence

The historian Tacitus strongly indicates the resurrection in a report on Nero’s decision to blame

Christians for a fire that destroyed Rome in 64 A.D.

Pliny the Younger was the Roman governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor. In one of his letters, to the emperor dated around 112 A.D., he acknowledged the divinity of Christ and the size of His followers.

Josephus was a respected first-century Jewish historian, wrote the following, “*About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he ... wrought surprising feats ... He was the Christ. When Pilate ...condemned him to be crucified, those who had . . . come to love him did not give up their affection for him. On the third day he appeared ... restored to life ... And the tribe of Christians ... has ... not disappeared.*”

And we can continue through the writings of Ignatius, Martyr, the Babylonian Talmud, Lucian of Samosata, and the conclusions of notable modern historians and more.

From the Bible

The authenticity and reliability of the New Testament are beyond question. It passes the bibliographical test, the attestation of at least 24 970 manuscripts, old Syriac writings and supporting evidence of early Christian writers outside the Bible, the early non-Christian confirmation of New Testament history and even archaeology which provides evidence of the reliability of the New Testament.

Therefore, our focus shifts from the reliability of the New Testament, to what it has to say about some of the events surrounding the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

1. The Roman seal on the tomb, which had to be broken to access the tomb, was broken. To break Rome’s seal – a seal that stood for the power and authority of Rome – carried severe consequences, including death.
2. The large stone, which was being guarded, which weighed between one and two tons, had been moved away by the Lord’s angel who was now seated on the stone.
3. As we know, the sealed tomb was guarded by soldiers, who were missing. Matthew speaks of the guards shaking from fear and falling down as though they were dead. Back in the day, the fear of punishment (which included death) resulted in an impeccable attention to duty. Typically, the guilty guard would be stripped of his garments and burned alive in a fire started with his garments. For soldiers to leave

their place of responsibility is not an occurrence that we should take lightly.

4. The empty tomb was too notorious to be denied – both Jewish and Roman sources admit an empty tomb. Dr Paul Maier writes of this, “...*positive evidence from a hostile source, which is the strongest kind of historical evidence.*”
5. Jesus’ appearances were confirmed. If the number of eyewitnesses to something that happened is large, then the fact of that something happening can be regarded as well-established. Jesus appeared to:
 - Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:9; John 20:14).
 - To the women returning from the tomb (Matthew 28:9-10).
 - To Peter later in the day (Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5).
 - To the Emmaus disciples (Luke 24:13-33).
 - To the apostles without Thomas (Luke 24:36-43; John 20:19-24).
 - To the apostles with Thomas (John 20:26-29).
 - To the seven by the Lake of Tiberius (John 21:1-23).
 - To a multitude of 500+ people on a Galilean mountain (1 Corinthians 15:6).
 - To James (1 Corinthians 15:7).
 - To the eleven (Matthew 28:16-20; Mark 16:14-20; Luke 24:33-52).
 - At the Ascension (Acts 1:3-12).
 - To Paul (Acts 9:3-6; 1 Corinthians 15:8).
 - To Stephen (Acts 7:55).
 - To Paul in the Temple (Acts 22:17-21, 23:11).
 - To John on Patmos (Revelation 1:10-19).
6. If each of the 500 witnesses spent 6 minutes telling what they saw, it adds up to 50 hours of testimony. Then we must not forget that when Christ appeared to Paul, he

was Saul: someone who despised Christ and was persecuting His followers. Something to think about.

What Does the Resurrection Mean?

Calvin wrote, “*Adam did not die for himself alone, but for us all, it follows, that Christ in like manner, who is the antitype, did not rise for himself alone; for he came, that he might restore everything that had been ruined in Adam.*”

Without His resurrection, Jesus’ death would have been no more significant than the death of any other person who still occupies their grave or tomb. If Jesus did not rise, it would have meant that He was a sinner – an imposter and not the redeemer: the Son of God, our Saviour.

However, the fact of the Resurrection of Christ means that His life and death were acceptable to God. The resurrection of Jesus Christ secures our justification and sanctification. It is our assurance that we too can look forward to our blessed resurrection.

Easter is the time of year when Jesus rose from the dead, and there is good ground on which to celebrate Easter. Early Christians chose to celebrate the resurrection on a Sunday because the resurrection occurred on a Sunday at dawn. Christ’s resurrection is a “dawn” also in a spiritual sense because that is when the light of salvation rose (resurrected) from the darkness of death.

I am reminded that Paul did not preach about the resurrection because it was a popular topic. He preached about it because it is true. People then and now, need to understand that Jesus is very much alive, He is coming again, there is a coming judgment and trusting in Jesus alone is all that will save us.

Conclusion

When we, as ministers, teach about the resurrected Christ, we note two different responses. The first group laugh at you. The second group put their faith in Jesus.

However, the concept of life after death is firstly no laughing matter and secondly not unique to Christianity. Islam and Hinduism, for example, also believe that life continues in one form or another after the grave which awaits us all.

Speaking of graves, we need to look at a few facts after re-vesting verse 14 of this morning’s Scripture reading, “*And if Christ wasn’t raised to life, our message is worthless, and so is your faith.*”

- Confucius' tomb: occupied.
- Buddha's tomb: occupied.
- Mohammed's tomb: occupied.
- Jesus' tomb: empty.

The verdict is in. The decision is clear. The evidence speaks for itself, and it says very clearly: Jesus Christ is risen indeed. The message of salvation and eternal life through Christ is Jesus is true and so is our faith in Him.

All that remains is to leave with you, something to think about now that you have heard of the empty tomb. Will you:

- Laugh and move on?
- Trust Jesus?

Amen.