

Why Did Jesus Rise?

Now, I know that on Easter, we'll have a fair number of people here who don't consider yourself a Christian and you're here largely because some family member dragged you here and you want to keep the peace. I just want to say, "good choice!" Keep the family together. We're thrilled to have you!

Today is a great day for Christians all around the world. In fact, as much as we love Christmas because we get presents and Christmas parties and Christmas break—the central holiday of Christianity has always been Easter, because the centerpiece of Christianity is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Now, I know there are people today—probably some of you here who would say something like, "I like Jesus, but I don't see why it's necessary to believe that Jesus literally rose from the dead. It doesn't seem likely and I've never really understood why it matters anyway. Why I can't I just have a religion where I try to be good to people and not have to buy into all this supernatural stuff?"

Well, first of all, I think that's a great, insightful question—that's for asking because it just so happens to be what I want to talk about today in the few minutes we have here. Basically, at the end today, I want you to see that the Resurrection of Jesus is more *likely* than you think and more *important* than you think.

So, first, let's talk about why the Resurrection of Jesus is more likely than you might think. There are some people who say that our modern scientific worldview, people today just can't believe that dead people rise again. The primitive, gullible people back then believed all that stuff, but modern science has disproved it all.

The only thing is, people in Jesus' day weren't as gullible as you might think. In fact, in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul devotes part of his letter to the Corinthian church to combat the idea that resurrection is impossible. That, of course, doesn't prove it happened, but it does show that ancient people weren't so naïve.

Not only that, but there's been a lot made of the fact that an increasing number of people in the U.S. claim no religious affiliation. And yet still, the vast majority of people believe in life-after-death. Now, you might think that the "dreaded millennials"—the least religious and most scientifically-minded group would be least likely to believe in life-after death. But actually, the opposite is true—they're most likely to believe it.

Polls also show that the vast majority of people who believe in heaven, believe *they* will go there. (They're less sure about their neighbor, but that's another topic) So, most likely, you believe in something like heaven and you believe you will go there. But my question is, "*why?*" What's your proof? The truth is that most people believe it because it sounds good or, if we're honest, it's wishful thinking. The truth is, even with modern science, people today aren't really that different than people back then.

But also, don't misunderstand; the claim of Christianity isn't that people are rising from the dead is a normal thing. The claim of Christianity is that Jesus as the Son of God rose one time. Now, we do believe there's a thing called life after death, and that's where resurrection will happen for *everyone*. But we don't believe in Jesus' Resurrection because we think it's a common thing right now. So far, it's only happened *once*. //

The question is, what reason would we have to believe it. Now, of course, no historical evidence is ever 100% certain. That's just not the nature of history. But I there is good historical *evidence* to believe the resurrection stories. I'll quickly mention a few...

Almost everyone who studies the gospel stories believe *something significant happened* that caused the incredible, immediate, transformation of Jesus' disciples from a group of bumbling, fearful ordinary guys into a powerful missionary force. You see, the exponential growth of Christianity didn't happen during Jesus' lifetime. At the end of his life, he only had around 120 followers. But something happened and the church immediately grew exponentially even under severe persecution.

That event was an empty tomb. People don't argue that there wasn't an empty tomb—they try to find other explanations for it because everyone acknowledges that something so powerful happened that not only did it change Jesus' followers, it changed the world. The empty tomb explains that change. The question is, "what explains the empty tomb?" Of course, for Christians, the answer is that Christ really is Risen, but those who don't believe seek other answers.

One theory is that the tomb was empty, but since no one, including the disciples knew what happened to the body, they assumed Jesus was resurrected and made up the stories to justify their belief.

The problem is that while an empty tomb might have been *puzzling* to the disciples, it was hardly evidence for resurrection. They weren't expecting resurrection. They didn't go back to the tomb to check and see if he was resurrected, they went back to complete the burial process. In fact, the Gospel of John says that when Mary found the empty tomb, her first reaction wasn't, "He is Risen!" It was, "someone took the body!" For the Jews, resurrection happened at the end of time, not now and not to only one person. So, it's highly unlikely they would believe something they didn't expect. //

Now, some have suggested that disciples didn't make it up. They really did *believe* they saw Jesus, but it was a hallucination. Now, it's common—then or now—for people to see a dead loved one in a dream or vision. The scholar N.T. Wright has a relative who knew about the death of his wife before he was told because even though at the time, she was half-way around the world she appeared to him. After she appeared to him, he called and found out she had been killed. So, this isn't unheard of.

But this theory doesn't apply to Jesus because even when people see their dead loved-one, they don't believe they've been *resurrected*. They think they've seen a ghost or know it was a hallucination.

The second problem is that there are no group hallucinations, but Jesus didn't just appear to one person but to multiple people on a number of occasions who then—all except one, gave their lives, not just for believing in Jesus' teachings, but that Jesus was raised. //

But why should we trust the stories themselves? I mean, all the evidence so far comes right from the gospels. What if the stories were myths or legends about Jesus developed hundreds of years later? Or what if the stories are just unreliable because they're written by biased authors who want people to believe in Jesus. Well, set aside the fact that all history is biased, there are some details that suggest the stories are reliable.

The first is that the stories are too early to be myths. The earliest gospel stories are written within a few years of the events themselves. And we have exponentially more evidence for their reliability than any other ancient document.

Second is the fact that the stories don't have theology attached to them. No one in the gospels says, *"I see now that since Jesus is raised, I will also be raised."* Now, the Apostle Paul gets into the theology in his early books, but the gospel stories themselves contain no theologizing about what the Resurrection means beyond, "Jesus is risen therefore, he's the Messiah." They just reported what they witnessed. //

In fact, they even contain some embarrassing details. For instance, the first ones to see Jesus were women. Well, in that day, women weren't considered to be reliable, so if you were making it up, you would never choose women as the first witnesses. //

Also, each of the stories are a little bit different. Now, some people would say that's proof they were making it up. But if the four Gospel writers were conspiring together to make up the story, certainly they would have made sure they got their stories straight. So, even the fact that there are some varying details in the stories, the broad strokes of the story show *something* happened that changed everything. And regardless of the details, that stroke for all the writers is resurrection. //

Another fact that points to their reliability is that they contain the names of real, live people. For instance, in Luke 24, Jesus appears to two stunned followers on the road to Emmaus and it says one of them is named Cleopas. Why? So they could go and check it out with Cleopas. Why didn't they name the other person? Maybe because they didn't know his name. Myths and legends always contain fanciful details, but not the names of people still alive. But the Gospels have regular, everyday details. //

Something happened that day that changed the world forever. Jesus' followers gave their lives, not just for belief that he was a good teacher, but that he rose again. And I believe the best explanation for this is that after Jesus was crucified, he rose again.

Of course, what we've talked about today won't answer every question. There are have been 1200-page books devoted to this topic—and I've listed a few in your notes if you're interested in exploring more. But my hope is that maybe you're more open to the idea that Jesus' resurrection is more likely than you thought.

But the next question is, “What does this have to do with me?” OK, maybe someone came back to life 2000 years ago. That’s a fun fact. But what does it have to do with people living in 2019? Why should we care that Jesus actually rose?

Well, I mentioned that there isn’t a lot of theology attached to the gospel stories, but there was one meaning that Christians immediately attached to Jesus’ resurrection—it was that the Resurrection *validated Jesus*. What does that mean?

Think of a *receipt*. Let’s say you go into a store and buy some stuff and put it in a bag and walk out of the store. But as you walk out the door, the security gates start going crazy. Then what happens? The SWAT team comes out of nowhere and tackles you and puts you in handcuff. But as they’re hauling you off, you make up an inspirational story about how you’re buying the clothes for a homeless man so he can go to a job interview.

What would they say? They would say, “Why didn’t you say you were such a great guy? Of course, you’re free to go!” That would never happen! What would they say? “Yeah right!” But instead, what if you pull out your receipt and said, “Hey, I paid for this stuff.” Then they would let you go because your receipt proves what you’re saying is true.

Think about it this way...Jesus said some crazy things about himself. Things like, **“Whoever believes in me will...have eternal life.”** (John 3:16) **“I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me.”** (John 14:6) **“If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the father.”** (John 14:7) What would you do if I stood up here and said those things about myself? You’d say, likely story and you’d never come here again.

Why do we believe Jesus? The resurrection. If the resurrection didn't happen, it we could dismiss those teachings. If the resurrection didn't happen then Jesus is just another failed would-be Messiah. If the resurrection didn't happen, there's no reason we should listen to Jesus more than any other teacher. But if the tomb really was empty and Jesus really did appear to people in a resurrected body, it *validates* him.

Now, the point is not to be argumentative. If you don't want to believe you don't have to. But I say it because the claim of Christianity is not just that Jesus taught good things; but that the resurrection is proof that what Jesus taught is true for all of us. And it's not just a historical curiosity, but it matters to you. Let me mention three ways.

First, if the resurrection is true, it tells us that *we can be free from our past*. My mentor, Norman, once told me the story of a young man who wanted to be mentored. He told him he would have to be willing to be totally honest or it won't work. The guy said he could never do that. He's done things he could never share with anyone. He was too ashamed and no one in the world had ever done what he did. Norman said, "Try me."

It took a while, but the guy finally opened up and told him what he did, and his sin that no one had ever committed turned out to be something that most every young man struggles with. I don't know what it is, but there's something inside us that makes us think we're unique; I'm the only one in the world who has these struggles; I'm the only one who has skeletons in my closet and I don't know how God could ever forgive me.

I've seen person after person sabotage their future because they can't get over their past. One psychologist said, *"I could dismiss half of my patients tomorrow if they could be assured of their forgiveness."* That's been true in my experience.

I know many people reject faith or God or church because they went to church when they were young and their church always made them feel guilty. So, now they associate Jesus with guilt and say, "no thanks." Now, guilt can be useful for a time. There are some things you should feel guilty about—racism, murder, being Packers fan.

But Jesus didn't intend for us to live with guilt forever. The purpose of guilt is to repentance and a new way of life. We should feel it initially, but if it's not taken care of, it will keep us stuck. That's why Jesus died—to forgive our sin and release us from guilt.

Jesus said things like, **"¹⁷ God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but to save it through him."** (John 3:17) He says God wants to give us good things. He says **"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest for your soul."** Do you need rest? In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul writes **"anyone who is in Christ is a new creation, the old is gone, the new is here."**

If not for the resurrection, we might be able to doubt whether God really does forgive us. Maybe someone is just making this stuff up. But when Jesus tells us that God isn't just keeping his eye on us so that when we mess up so he can send us to hell—we can believe him because if God raised him from the dead, that's validation. The resurrection lets us leave our past in the past.

Second, the Resurrection shows us that *Jesus can be trusted with our present life.*

Let's just all admit that while Jesus is considered a good teacher, he said some stuff that's pretty out of step with life today. In fact, they were out of step with life in his day.

Listen to a few: From Matthew 5, **“Do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.”** Sure, we all do that! Matthew 6, **“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. Oh, and don't worry about tomorrow...”** Piece of cake. Matthew 20, **“whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷and whoever wants to be first must be your slave...”**

Maybe you've noticed that this is not how our world thinks. Our world says if someone slaps you on the right cheek, what should you do? (sue him) Our world says that if you want to be great then you need to do what? (win the lottery, follow your dreams, or promote yourself) Our world says that the solution to just about everything is money. But Jesus turns the world on its head because he tells us there's an alternate reality he calls the Kingdom of God, where when people are willing to give up their rights and die to themselves, God will give them life.

It's hard to live that way. It works against our natural tendencies. Not only that, but it's risky because sometimes it doesn't seem like it “works,” because there's not always an immediate payoff. So, people will sometimes think, *“Well, all I have is right now. I don't know if there's anything like life after death so why would I give up earthly*

pleasures? Why would I focus on others hoping for some eternal reward? I say, 'eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die!'"

But listen to Romans 8:11, **"¹¹If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you."** The Apostle Peter writes something similar, **"²¹Through Christ you have come to trust in God. And you have placed your faith and hope in God because he raised Christ from the dead..."** The resurrection validates what Jesus taught us about how to live because this life because this life is not the end.

Finally, if the resurrection is true, you can know *your future is secure*. The Bible calls Jesus' resurrection the firstfruits of those who are falling asleep. We don't really use the word firstfruits like they did at that time, but we might use a word like "prototype." The Bible tells us that Christ's resurrected body is the prototype for our resurrected body. Our brokenness will be healed and we'll be restored to what God created us to be at the beginning.

Now, not everyone longs for this, because if we're honest, a lot of us are pretty OK with our lives right now. We have enough to eat. We're not rich, but we do OK. We're pretty healthy and while our family might have some issues, overall we can't really complain too much. If something goes wrong, we can often fix it with a little hard work. We kind of like that.

But this is why Christianity grows so fast among the poor and it grows among the people who can no longer pretend they've got their stuff together. The fact of the matter is, no matter how good we look on the outside, we're all broken in some way. Some of us can just hide it better than others. But maybe today is the time to be honest with yourself. In the time we have left today, I'd like you to do that. I know some of you didn't come prepared to do business with God, but you're here, so you might as well take advantage of the time. I'm just going to ask you to be honest about your life. *Do you need resurrection for your past, present or future?* Bow—between you and God.

Some of you need forgiveness for your broken past. I believe most of us have good intentions, but we're all weak. Not only can't we live up to God's standard, but we can't even live up to our own standard and the result is guilt and brokenness.

I know people don't like the word "sin" these days, but we have to come to grips with the fact that sometimes our lives are broken and we have no one to blame but ourselves. Your sin might be obvious, or it might be something no one but God know about, but it's eating you up and sabotaging your future. I want you to know that you can receive forgiveness today and be set free from your sin by trusting Jesus. How many of you would say that what you need today is forgiveness for past sin? (Prayer of repentance.)

There are some here today who need a guide for your present. You're in a situation today and don't know where to turn. Maybe you have a big decision to make and don't

know what to do. Maybe you're currently living a life you know you shouldn't be living—financially, sexually, ethically and you know today that doing things your own way isn't working and you need to learn to do things God's way rather than your own. (Prayer of surrender)

And finally, there are those of you who desperately need *hope* for your future. It may be that while you would check the box that you believe you'll spend eternity with God, the truth is, you don't really know why you believe that and deep down, you might even be doubting it.

In Romans 8, the Apostle Paul writes this, **³⁸I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."**

I believe that's true and it just starts with one step. The step is a leap of faith to say, "Jesus, I believe you are who you said you are because you proved it through your death and resurrection." And now, I want to give my life to you—maybe past, present and future and ask that you would make me new.