



1. A Public Execution Assured That He Actually Died

Did Jesus actually die? During the Jewish Feast of Passover, Jesus was swept away by an angry crowd into a Roman hall of justice. As He stood before Pilate, the governor of Judea, religious leaders accused Jesus of claiming to be the king of the Jews. The crowd demanded His death. Jesus was beaten, whipped, and sentenced to a public execution. On a hill outside of Jerusalem along a public road, He was crucified between two criminals. Brokenhearted friends and mocking enemies shared in watching His death. In the four gospel accounts of Jesus' crucifixion, Jesus' death is clearly stated. In Matthew 27:50 and in John 19:30, the writers said He "yielded" or "gave up" His spirit. The other two accounts record that He "breathed His last" (Mark 15:37; Luke 23:46).

As the Sabbath evening neared, Roman soldiers who were experts in crucifixion were sent to finish the execution. To quicken death, they broke the legs of the two criminals.

But when they came to Jesus they did not break His legs, because they "saw that He was already dead" (John 19:33). As a final precaution, however, they thrust a spear into His side. The soldiers plunged a spear into Jesus' side, and from it came both water and blood (John 19:34). Medical experts say that if He were not already dead, this in itself would have killed Him. Others have concluded that the pouring out of water and blood from His side was proof that Jesus was no longer alive.

When Joseph of Arimathea asked for the body of Christ so he and Nicodemus could bury Him, Pontius Pilate ordered a centurion to verify that Jesus was dead (Mark 15:43-45). The Roman governor would not release the body to Joseph until the centurion was certain that all signs of life were gone. You can be sure that an officer in the Roman army would not make a mistake about an important matter like this in his report to such a high official as Pilate.

As a matter of fact, Justin Martyr, a Christian debater in the second century, said that the record of Jesus' crucifixion was sent to Rome and stored in the Roman archives and was available for anyone to see as a matter of public record. Jesus was killed by the Romans. It would take more than resuscitation for Jesus to ever trouble them again.

2. High Officials Secured the Gravesite

The next day, religious leaders again met with Pilate. They said Jesus had predicted He would rise in three days. To assure that the disciples could not conspire in a resurrection hoax, Pilate ordered the official seal of Rome to be attached to the tomb to put grave robbers on notice. To enforce the order, soldiers stood guard (Matthew 27:62-66). Any disciple who wanted to tamper with the body would have had to get by them, which wouldn't have been easy. The Roman guards had good reason for staying alert--the penalty for falling asleep while on watch was death.

3. The Grave Was Found Empty

Surely the authorities of Jesus' day wanted nothing more than to have Jesus stay where Joseph had put Him. The mere fact that they sealed the tomb and placed guards to protect it--a highly unusual act--indicated that they were determined to keep the body behind that stone barrier. Suppose they had been able to do that. You can be sure the Sanhedrin and other officials would have been the first to use the knowledge of an occupied tomb as evidence when the disciples began to announce to everyone that they had seen Jesus alive. Yet no historical evidence exists to suggest that those officials knew where the body was. "The resurrection proclamation could not have been maintained in Jerusalem for a single day, for a single hour, if the emptiness of the tomb had not been established as a fact" --Paul Althus.

Second, there is something even more conclusive than the officials' inaction--the actions of several eyewitnesses. The first to see and report the empty tomb were the women with the spices (Mark 16:5-6). John and Peter were the next to see that Jesus was gone. When they heard the unbelievably good news from Mary and the other women, they raced to the gravesite. John, it should be noted, is the one who wrote this account as recorded in chapter 20 of his Gospel. If you need an eyewitness to convince you that the tomb was empty, you have one in the apostle John. He was there, and he wrote down what he saw. That is solid historical evidence in anyone's book.

A third strong piece of evidence that the tomb was empty is the reaction of the authorities when the guards reported the events in the garden. They wanted to destroy the credibility and influence of Jesus. Therefore, they would surely have been foolish to spread the rumor that the disciples had stolen the body--if Jesus were still in the tomb. Their collusion with the guards is solid proof that there was no body in the tomb.

We are faced with two facts. (1) Jesus died and was buried. (2) In a short time, His tomb became empty.

4. Many People Claimed to Have Seen Him Alive

About AD 55, the apostle Paul wrote that the resurrected Christ had been seen by Peter, the 12 apostles, more than 500 people (many of whom were still alive at the time of his writing), James, and himself (1 Corinthians 15:5-8). By making such a public statement, he gave critics a chance to check out his claims for themselves. In addition, the New Testament in other places records the following witnesses to the resurrection: Mary Magdalene (John 20:11-18), several women near the tomb (Matthew 28:9-10), two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-32), Peter (Luke 24:33-35), ten disciples in the upper room (Luke 24:36-43), eleven disciples in the upper room (John 20:26-31), seven men at the Sea of Galilee (John 21:1-25), eleven disciples on a mountain (Matthew 28:16-20), and an undisclosed amount of disciples near Bethany (Acts 1:9-12; Luke 24:52). The book of Acts begins its history of the followers of Christ by saying that Jesus "presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by [the apostles] during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3).

5. His Apostles Were Dramatically Changed

When one of Jesus' inner circle defected and betrayed Him, the other apostles ran for their lives. Even Peter, who earlier had insisted that he was ready to die for his teacher, lost heart and denied that he even knew Jesus. But the apostles went through a dramatic change. Within a few weeks,

they were standing face to face with the ones who had crucified their leader. Their spirit was like iron. They became unstoppable in their determination to sacrifice everything for the one they called Savior and Lord. Even after they were imprisoned, threatened, and forbidden to speak in the name of Jesus, the apostles said to the Jewish leaders, "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). After they were beaten for disobeying the orders of the Jewish council, these once-cowardly apostles "did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ" (Acts 5:42).

Some would say that the disciples had nothing stronger to spur them on than a story they had made up. But can you imagine what it would take to believe this? Just picture Peter standing up before the disciples, who had remained safely hidden behind locked doors after Jesus' death for fear of their lives, and saying, "Well, the entire weight of the Jewish religious community and the Roman government was just used to put Jesus to death by crucifixion. Even though we know that He is still dead, we are going to start a rumor that He isn't. We are going to say that He rose from the tomb and that we all saw Him."

"Nothing less than a witness as awesome as the resurrected Christ could have caused those men to maintain to their dying whispers that Jesus is alive." --
Charles Colson

A fictional story can't possibly account for the changes in the disciples.

6. Witnesses Were Willing to Die For Their Claims

While many will die for what they believe to be the truth, few if any will die for what they know to be a lie. That psychological fact is important because the disciples of Christ did not die for deeply held beliefs about which they could have been honestly mistaken. They died for their claims to have seen Jesus alive and well after His resurrection. They died for their claim that Jesus Christ had not only died for their sins but that He had risen bodily from the dead to show that He was like no other spiritual leader who had ever lived.

Peter would never have been hanged upside down for a trumped-up story. Mark would not have been dragged through the streets to his death if he had been defending fiction. James would not have been beheaded for a falsehood. Thomas wouldn't have been pierced with a lance for a lie. Yet tradition says that these men died the horrible deaths just described. What a testimony to the truth of their claims! They were willing to die for the One who overcame death for them--and for us!

7. Jesus' Death and Resurrection was Clearly Predicted

The Messiah's death and resurrection was predicted in the Old Testament and by Jesus Himself. Isaiah predicted a suffering servant who would be rejected by his people (Isaiah 53:3), crucified with thieves (Isaiah 53:12), bear the sins of Israel (Isaiah 53:4-6), die between thieves (Isaiah 53:12), before God "prolonged His days" (Isaiah 53:10). Psalm 22 predicted an afflicted one who would die a humiliating death by piercing of his hands and feet (Psalm 22:16; also Zechariah 12:10).

Jesus Himself kept saying over and over that it was necessary for Him to go to Jerusalem to die and be resurrected from the dead on the third day (Matthew 9:15; 12:40; 16:21-23; 17:22-23; 20:17-19). Of course, the apostles minds were so fixed on the coming of a messianic political kingdom that

they didn't believe Jesus would literally die. They probably thought Christ was speaking in symbolic language, since He was one who often spoke in parables. But Jesus clearly predicted His death -- which is not too difficult to do -- and Jesus clearly predicted His resurrection -- which is a VERY difficult thing to do unless the predictor is God Himself.

So Why Should You Believe That Jesus Rose from the Dead?

- Because His death is confirmed by many sources.
- Because a high official secured the gravesite.
- Because there was no body in the grave.
- Because many people claimed to see Him alive.
- Because the apostles changed from confused wimps to courageous proclaimers.
- Because witnesses of the resurrection were willing to die for their claims.
- Because the Bible and Jesus clearly predicted the resurrection of Christ.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of the Christian faith. Without it the believer has no hope for this life or for the life to come. The apostle Paul wrote, "And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is worthless" (1 Corinthians 15:17). Our belief in this great teaching is not based upon some religious feeling or upon an unfounded idea about what may have happened in the past. Nor are we talking about an isolated rumor, but about a historical fact with solid evidence to support it.

In the early part of this century, a group of lawyers met in England to discuss the biblical accounts of Jesus' resurrection. They wanted to see if sufficient information was available to make a case that would hold up in an English court of law. When their study was completed, they published the results of their investigation. They concluded that Christ's resurrection was "one of the most well-established facts of history!"

In his little book, *Countdown*, G. B. Hardy has given us some thought-provoking questions about how to choose a religion. He says: "There are but two essential requirements when evaluating religions: 1. Has anyone cheated death and proved it? 2. Is it available to me? Here is the complete record: Confucius' tomb -- occupied. Buddha's tomb -- occupied. Mohammed's tomb -- occupied. Jesus' tomb -- empty! Argue as you will, there is no point in following a loser."

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a reality. It's based on solid historical evidence. **Jesus is alive!** It's a fact -- not a fable! God dipped His finger into the pool of history and the ripples of Jesus' resurrection effect all of time and space, including your life.