

He is risen, indeed!

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Can you imagine what it must have been like for the followers of Jesus on Saturday, the day after Jesus had been crucified? All was lost. Jesus was dead. They had given up everything to follow Jesus. Everything in them had sensed that He was truly who He said He was. They believed with all of their hearts that He was the promised Messiah and Savior who had been prophesied about all the way back to the early chapters of Genesis.

Yes, they had run away when Jesus was arrested. Yes, they feared death as much as the next person, but they truly believed. Every verse of prophecy that had been foretold about the Messiah came true in the life of Jesus Christ.

For those who had ears to hear and eyes to see there was no mistaking that Jesus Christ was the promised Messiah. Truly the Savior had come . . . and now He was dead. Even though Jesus had warned them, it was as if they never saw it coming (John 2:18-22; Matthew 12:39-40; Matthew 16:21; Matthew 27:62-64).

They were familiar with the prophecies. They had heard Jesus' words about his upcoming death, burial and resurrection, but in the midst of the struggle and devastation they had "forgotten" the truth that they had built their lives upon.

So many times, we do the same. Life has suddenly become so difficult that we focus our attention on the storm that rages around us, and we forget the rock that is our ultimate security (Matthew 7:24-27). We forget the promises of Christ and the character of God. We begin to worry and doubt like one who has no God, but that is not who we are. That is not whose we are.

Saturday must have been so difficult for Jesus' disciples, but we must remember that we can never truly evaluate a situation until we can view it from Sunday's perspective. We can never know the truth about a situation until we have heard God's perspective.

We can read the story of Easter morning in Matthew 28:1-15:

Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.² And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow.⁴ And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men.⁵ But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified.⁶ He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay.⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you."⁸ So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.⁹ And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him.¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."

¹¹ While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place.¹² And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers¹³ and said, "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.'¹⁴ And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble."¹⁵ So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.

We are familiar with Easter, the celebration of Christ's resurrection, but theologically and practically speaking what is so significant about Christ's resurrection? Christ died on the cross to pay for our sin, so that we could be forgiven, but what did the resurrection accomplish?

In the book of Acts the primary responsibility of the Apostles was to be witnesses of what they had seen. Because of this Jesus gave them "many proofs appearing to them for 40 days" after his resurrection. Jesus then sent them out "to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the world." They were not sent out to establish a new systematic theology. They were not scholars or philosophers. They were common men who were supposed to tell what they had seen and explain what it meant. They had seen Jesus do many things, but their primary testimony was to that of His resurrection. This was one primary factor when the disciples looked for a replacement for Judas in Acts 1:21-22; it had to be one who had been with them since the beginning of Jesus' ministry. He had to join them in their task of being eyewitnesses to Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection.

They would testify to Jesus' coming to earth, to his sinlessness, to His miracles, to His being the Son of God, to His dying for the sins of man, but all of these would be proven by Christ's resurrection.

As we look to the writings of the early church, the resurrection of Christ is the proof that everything else about Christ is true. Romans 1:4 tells us how Jesus was declared to be the Son of God . . . by His resurrection from the dead. In 1 Corinthians 15:1-4, Paul notes that the death, burial and resurrection of Christ are the issues of "first importance" in the faith.

Jesus is the Savior, the Messiah, the King, the Christ, and it all hinges on the fact that he was raised from the dead. Throughout the book of Acts the Apostles defend themselves before the Sanhedrin, the priests, the government officials, and to non-believers by appealing to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, to which they were eyewitnesses (Acts 4.10-11). Even their sermons focused on Jesus and His resurrection. It was the key. We see this in Acts 2, 3, 4 and 5. Many had claimed to be great teachers. Many had proclaimed themselves the promised messiah. Thousands had been crucified by the Romans. But none had ever been raised from the dead.

The death of Jesus was essential because it paid the price for our sin, but crucifixion itself would not have been out of the ordinary for Jesus' day. Thousands were crucified by the Romans. Yes, it was savage and barbaric, but it alone did not bear testimony that sin had been forgiven and that death had been conquered. It was only through the resurrection of Christ that we know that penalty for sin had been paid in full and that death had been conquered. Romans 6:9 says, ***"We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him."***

How can we truly know that our sins had been forgiven and that sin has been conquered? The answer . . . Christ's resurrection. Because of this, the Gospel was preached focusing on Jesus Christ and his death, burial and resurrection.

In John 11:25-26 Jesus said, ***"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?"***

Our confidence is in that fact that our heavenly Father who raised Jesus from the dead is able to raise us from the dead. Christ's resurrection has proven his dominion over death and sin and promised salvation through Jesus Christ.

"If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you."
(Romans 8:11)

As followers of Jesus Christ we believe in Christ's resurrection, but many do not. As we seek to share our faith with others, we must find balance. From one side, 1 Peter 3:15-16 instructs us to ***"Honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you."*** If we just focus on this verse alone, it seems to say that we need to be prepared to prove the facts of Jesus Christ so that we can convince people that the gospel is true. With this mindset we then feel like we have failed if our arguments are not good enough to convince them. This just turns our evangelism into an academic exercise and places the burden of the unbeliever's salvation on our shoulders.

On the other hand, we see in scripture how faith is a gift that depends on God. Scripture shows us time and again that we cannot believe in Jesus on our own. Without the Spirit's leading, and the truth of God's Word, mankind will always view the gospel as foolishness. It is only through revelation that we come to believe.

Belief always starts with God. It is He who wills and acts in us according to His purposes (Philippians 2:13). John 6:44 tells us that ***"no one can come to Jesus unless the Father draws him."***

Matthew 16:15-17 are important verses as we seek to understand how one comes to salvation in Jesus Christ. At one-point Jesus asked His disciples, *“Who do you say that I am?”* Simon Peter replied, *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”* And Jesus answered him, *“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.”*

Only God can reveal Christ to mankind. We are to be prepared to give a reason for the hope that we have found in Jesus Christ, but we must understand that we are merely playing a small role in the larger story of salvation as God works to draw people to Himself. Sharing our faith is crucial, but it is the Holy Spirit who will in the end bring someone to faith in Christ.

While faith is granted us through scripture and the Spirit, Christ’s resurrection is not blind faith with no historical and scholastic support. Let’s now think back through the accounts of Christ’s resurrection and be prepared to give a reason for the faith that we profess.

Was Jesus really crucified?

The fact that Jesus Christ lived and was crucified is widely accepted as a historical fact. It is not just recorded by multiple writers in scripture; it was also documented by extra-biblical writers such as Tacitus, a Roman historian and senator, who lived early in the 2nd century. Tacitus wrote how, *“Christus, the founder of the name, was put to death by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea in the reign of Tiberius.”*

We can also look to the writings of Flavius Josephus, who was a well-known 1st century Jewish historian. Josephus began as a slave and was eventually employed by different Roman emperors (Vespasian, Titus and Domitian). He mentioned Jesus in his historical writings (and His brother James, cf. *Antiquities* 20.200).

“At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. And his conduct was good, and [he] was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die. And those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that he was alive. Accordingly, he was perhaps the Messiah concerning whom the prophets have recounted wonders.”¹

The biblical accounts of the existence of Christ and his crucifixion are well founded and are also in agreement with the historical context of the Romans and their practice of crucifixion.

Is the resurrection of Jesus Christ true?

A resurrection account is found in each of the gospels. Four different accounts are told from slightly different perspectives. When they are brought together, they give a fuller understanding of what happened Easter morning.

¹ A 10th century Arabic manuscript of Josephus that was cited by historian Schlomo Pines of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1972.

One reason that the gospel accounts are credible is that the first eyewitnesses were women. Women, in this time, were not seen as credible and were not taken seriously in regards to legal cases or testimonies. If the empty tomb and resurrection were merely a lie created to convince the Jews of the resurrection of Christ, the disciples would never have placed the women in the story as the main eyewitnesses. This would only have called the story into question.

Was the tomb really empty? When considering the possibility of Jesus' resurrection no one questions that the tomb was empty. If Jesus' tomb was not empty, the religious leaders could have just had the tomb opened and disprove the claim that Jesus was alive by parading Jesus' body through the streets in front of everyone, but we find no proof that the emptiness of the tomb was ever challenged. In Matthew 28:11-15, we see the opposite. The religious leaders who were against Jesus made up a reason to explain why the tomb was empty.

Did the disciples steal Jesus' body?

Matthew 28:11-15 says this: ***"¹¹ While they were going, behold, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had taken place. ¹² And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers ¹³ and said, 'Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' ¹⁴ And if this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." ¹⁵ So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story has been spread among the Jews to this day."***

Some claimed that the disciples had come by night and stole the body. This is very unlikely. The first issue is that, in Matthew 27:65-66, Pilate approved a guard of soldiers to secure the tomb by sealing the stone and by setting guard. For the disciples to remove the stone they would have to remove the seal and defy the guards. Both of these actions would have brought the wrath of the Roman Empire upon them.

A second reason to doubt that the disciples stole Jesus' body is the weight of the stone. The gospel accounts described that the stone that blocked the entrance of the tomb was rolled into place. It also told how the women wondered who could help them roll the stone out of the way. These stones were often disc shaped and could weigh 900-1800 kilos. That would be equivalent to 1-2 tons. They were usually set in a groove carved in the front of the tomb that sloped downwards. The stones could be rolled downhill into place by several strong men, but would be very difficult to roll uphill to reopen the tomb.

To think that several disciples would have been strong enough to move the stone, and quiet enough not to awaken the soldiers who were supposedly sleeping only a few meters from the tomb, is unthinkable. To make it even more unlikely, we must remember that the Roman soldiers were punished very strictly when they were guilty of even minor infractions.

A 1928 academic work, by Dr. George W. Currie, titled *The Military Discipline of the Romans from the Founding of the City to the Close of the Republic* described how in 390 BC the Citadel of Rome was attacked, when Roman guards were asleep on duty. The guard at fault was thrown from a cliff. In Acts 12, we read how 4 squads of soldiers were put in charge of guarding Peter when he was put in prison. After Peter's miraculous escape from prison, all 16 soldiers were examined and then put to death. With these and many more historical examples of strict penalties for minor infractions, the

punishment for sleeping while guarding Jesus' tomb would very likely have been death. To think that battle-hardened Roman soldiers would go to sleep while guarding Jesus's tomb is extremely improbable.

If the disciples didn't steal the body, how else do we explain the empty tomb?

Some have claimed that Jesus faked his death and later escaped from the tomb. Based on the facts of Jesus' trial and crucifixion, this is absurd. According to eyewitness accounts, Jesus was beaten, tortured, whipped, crucified and stabbed. He suffered massive blood loss, dehydration, asphyxiation, internal damage, laceration and a spear driven into his vital organs. It is unimaginable that Jesus would then be able to fake his death to war-hardened Roman soldiers, who were very familiar with what death looked like, and to also fake his death to Joseph of Arimathea and the other disciples, who took his body from the cross and placed it in the tomb. Jesus would then need to sit in the tomb for three days, without any medical attention to his wounds, without food and water, and then remove the heavy stone without his escape being detected. He, then, would immediately need to present Himself to His disciples with healed wounds and a glorified body. The claim that Jesus faked his death has no credence whatsoever.

Others have claimed that Jesus did not come back to life, but that His disciples saw His spirit, maybe in the form of a ghost or a vision. We see how Jesus guarded against this incorrect belief in Luke 24:36-43, in the days after His resurrection:

³⁶ As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, "Peace to you!" ³⁷ But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. ³⁸ And he said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹ See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." ⁴⁰ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹ And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" ⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and he took it and ate before them.

Jesus made it very clear to His disciples that He had truly conquered death and sin, and had been physically raised from the dead.

We must take note that the resurrection was prophesied by scripture. Psalm 16:9-10 talks of how Christ's soul will not be abandoned to *Sheol* (the place of death) or how He, the Holy One, will not see corruption. In Luke 24:13-27, we see a story of Jesus appearing to two men on the road to Emmaus after the resurrection. In verse 25-27 it says, ***"And he said to them, 'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself."*** Through Christ's words, in these verses we see that all of Old Testament was preparing the way for Christ's life, death and resurrection.

We also see Christ's prophecies of His own resurrection. Matthew 16:21 tells us that, ***"From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."***

In John 2:18-22, we read these words: *“So the Jews answered and said to him, 'What sign do you show to us, since you do these things?' Jesus answered and said to them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' Then the Jews said, 'It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking of the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he said this; and they believed the Scripture, and the word which Jesus had spoken.”*

In Matthew 27:62-64, we read: *“On the next day, which followed the Day of Preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees gathered together to Pilate saying, 'Sir, we remember, while he was still alive, how that deceiver said, "After three days I will rise." 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.”*

Through these verses we see that even the non-believing religious leaders were familiar with Jesus' claims of His resurrection after three days.

Another fact that must be considered is that of eyewitnesses. Jesus appeared numerous times to His followers. He comforted the women outside His tomb on that first Easter morning. He met the two men on the road to Emmaus and explained truths about Himself from the Old Testament. In 1 Corinthians 15:5-7, the Apostle Paul clearly tells, *“That he (Jesus) appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.”* While a couple of witnesses might be discounted, how can this many eyewitnesses be discarded as immaterial? Many of these witnesses were still alive when Paul wrote these words. They would have been able to refute his words and kept them out of the biblical canon if they had been false.

It was not just that there were many eyewitnesses, it is also what happened in the lives of those eyewitnesses. The lives of many of these eyewitnesses who saw Jesus after His resurrection were dramatically changed. We see the Apostle Peter go from cowardly, denying Christ on the night of Jesus' arrest, to standing and fearlessly preaching in front of crowds of Jews in Jerusalem at Pentecost. So much so that 3,000 people became believers of Jesus Christ. We see James, the brother of Jesus, who had yet to believe in Jesus as the messiah before the resurrection, believe and become one of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem after Jesus appeared to him after Jesus' resurrection. We see the Apostle Paul, who was completely against the followers of Jesus so much so that he had many arrested and some even killed. Once he had his encounter with the post-resurrection, Jesus Christ, Paul's life was so changed that he risked his life multiple times for the sake of the gospel, and eventually died a martyr's death because of the truth that he had found in Christ.

Paul was not the only one. This willingness to die a martyr's death, for the sake of Christ, was apparent in all the lives of the apostles. Many of the other eyewitnesses endured torture, imprisonment and death as well. It is not realistic to believe that all of these eyewitnesses would have gone through this suffering, to the point of death, for the sake of propping up a lie about a dead man. The transformation of their lives and their willingness to endure great suffering is just another testimony to the truth of Christ's resurrection.

Another proof of Jesus' resurrection is the growth of the church since then. Although they were small in number, lacking in resources, and simple people, Christianity, this outlawed religion, spread

across the entire Roman Empire. This growth has continued to this day. Followers of Christ now number in the millions and continue to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. It reminds us of the words of Gamaliel, the Pharisee who spoke on the disciples behalf in Acts 5. If you will remember, the apostles had been preaching about Christ in the temple and most of the Jewish council wanted to kill them. Gamaliel then spoke these words:

“Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. ³⁶ For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. ³⁷ After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered. ³⁸ So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; ³⁹ but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!”

This is exactly what has happened. Jesus is the Messiah who was crucified, was raised from the dead and who now has given his followers all authority on heaven and on earth to go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19-20). Nothing will stop the movement of Christ in our world.

He is our Savior and Lord, who not only proves His resurrection through the growth of the church, but also by the changed lives of His followers. This is our greatest tool as we engage a doubting world. Our changed lives are often the best tool that we have to help people be open to the claims of Christ. They may seek to debate or argue against the truth of Christ’s resurrection, but the change that He has made in our lives cannot be disputed.

With this in mind and the salvation of the world at stake, may we be prepared to give the reason for the hope that we have while living lives that give credibility to the Savior that we know.

Discussion questions:

1. From this lesson on “Resurrection”, what was most meaningful to you?
2. We are instructed to give a reason for the hope that we have, while at the same time knowing that only the Father can reveal the truth of Christ to people. How would you explain this balance in your own words?
3. As a group, list and explain the different points that support the belief of the resurrection.
4. Our changed lives are often the best tool that we have to help people be open to the claims of Christ. In what area of your life would you like God to help you change so that you can be a better “living testimony” for Christ?
5. What do you think God wants you to remember from this lesson?
6. What do you think God wants you to do because of that?