

How Do You Know Jesus Rose From the Dead?

by: Ron J. Lint

You Christian fundamentalists are all alike. If you weren't such a good neighbor, I wouldn't give you the time of day. I may go along with the existence of God, although I see no evidence that He is active or even particularly interested in our lives, but the personal God you talk about all the time is a stranger to me, and to most people I know. The fact is you have no way to prove the claims of Jesus, particularly His resurrection. If anything, the Apostles stole the body of Jesus, or He didn't die on the cross to begin with. Whatever happened, dead men don't come back to life. I'll tell you what; if you can give me a rational argument – not a bunch of religious “Christianees” – that Jesus rose from the dead, then I'll seriously consider becoming a Christian. Based on our previous discussions, I'll even grant you that the Scriptures are historically reliable documents. But, until you can offer a rational argument, I'm just not interested.

It is sad but true that many people feel this way. And to make matters worse, Christians often don't know exactly what they believe or exactly why they believe it. The answer to every question posed by a non-believer or a skeptic is: You just need to have faith, brother/sister. But upon what is our faith based? That is what our neighbors want to know. They want to know that the faith we so boldly proclaim is based on excellent evidence and rational thought, not religious polemics and fatuous arguments. Simply stated, our faith needs to make sense – to the Christian first, and then to our neighbor. So, to my neighbor I offer the following summary of why I believe that Jesus rose from the dead and is, therefore, my Lord and Savior.

I believe in the resurrection of Jesus the Christ because the evidence is overwhelming and no rational theory to disprove His resurrection has ever been posited, even though the enemies of Christianity would certainly like to do so. There are three astonishing facts that are accepted by Christians and skeptics alike: **The Empty Tomb**, the **Resurrection Appearances**, and the very existence of **Christianity** as a world religion.

The Empty Tomb: The most blatant challenge to the skeptic is the empty burial tomb of Jesus, a fact which is not disputed by historians, skeptics, theologians, the incredulous Jewish religious leaders, or even the Roman officials. On the third day, the tomb of Jesus was empty. How could that be? Several theories have been posited, but all have failed. The first failed theory is that the body of Jesus was purloined by the Apostles. To some it might seem plausible that the Apostles, seeing the desperate situation the Christian movement was in, would steal the body of Jesus from the tomb in hopes that the multitudes would then believe that He had been resurrected, as He had clearly predicted. However, the chief priests and Pharisees had gone to Pilot to request that a Guard be placed at the tomb to prevent the Apostles or anyone else from stealing the body of Jesus and proclaiming Him resurrected. Roman Guards, which consisted of several soldiers, were the best trained military in the world. No one, especially the bewildered, distraught, and frightened Apostles, could overwhelm a Roman Guard. Nor did Roman Guards fall asleep on duty, an act which was punishable by death. Even if they all did fall asleep, wouldn't they awake at the rustling and sound of several men moving the stone that covered the opening of the tomb, and which weighed one to two tones? Moreover, the tomb was sealed with a Roman Seal. Anyone breaking a Roman Seal would immediately be put to death.

Adding to the annihilation of this theory is the state of mind of the Apostles. They were frightened, beat down, disillusioned and in hiding from the chief priests, Pharisees, and the Roman officials. They feared for their lives and their entire hope for the future -- all they believed in and trusted -- had just been crucified and buried. These men were in no state of mind or body to overcome a Roman Guard, break the Seal of Rome and steal the body of their lifeless Messiah.

Furthermore, if the Roman officials really believed that the Apostles were responsible for the missing body, why were they never charged with the crime and arrested?

One additional question occurs: Why would the thieves take the time to remove the burial cloths from the body and leave them neatly folded in the tomb?

A second theory postulates that the Romans stole the body of Jesus. Due to the reasonable conclusion that no one could possibly overcome a Roman Guard, yet the body was nevertheless missing, it must have been the Romans who stole the body. Before this theory can be considered seriously, one must answer the question: Why would they have done such a thing? Stealing the body would only feed the very frenzy that the officials were trying to avoid: that Jesus was resurrected from the dead. Such an act would encourage the movement called “The Way” and cause further civil unrest. Such an act would also have played into the hands of the Apostles and other followers of Jesus. All of this is antithetical to the game plan of the Jewish and Roman leadership. And once again we must ask: Why would the thieves take the time to remove the burial cloths from the body and leave them neatly folded in the tomb? This argument is ridiculous on its face.

A third exercise in imagination, referred to as the Swoon Theory, postulates that Jesus did not actually die on the cross. Rather, He passed out and appeared to be dead. Upon being placed in the cool tomb, he later revived, extricated Himself from the tomb, and disappeared into the countryside. In consideration of this theory, one must remember that Jesus was spat upon, hit in the face, mocked and ridiculed – all as a warm-up to His flogging. The tool of choice for a flogging was a whip with several strands of leather attached to a base. Woven into the ends of the leather straps were splinter pieces of metal or bone. It was custom to administer 39 lashes to the back side of the prisoner. As each lash was administered, the leather strap would be brought down with great force on the back of the victim and then pulled back such that the sharp metal and bone would tear into the skin and literally rip it into shreds. If one were to survive such a torturous beating, he would be at the limits of life.

Following the beating, a crown of thorns was placed on His head, causing profuse bleeding from the head in addition to the bleeding from His back. Moreover, Jesus was then required

to carry his cross for a time, putting further strain on His body. Arriving at the place of his crucifixion, long metal spikes (perhaps 6" in length) were driven through Jesus' wrists and ankles. This caused excruciating pain and further bleeding. Hanging on the cross, He slowly suffocated, which is how death finally occurred as a result of crucifixion. A Roman soldier then thrust a sword into the side of Jesus, causing the spilling of blood and water, indicating that He was already dead. Finally, a Roman soldier well experienced in crucifixions and in knowing when a victim had expired, pronounced Jesus dead.

After being taken down off the cross, His body was prepared for burial. Custom required that about 75 lbs. of myrrh and aloes be applied to the body, after which the body was tightly wrapped with strips of linen. Jesus was then laid in the tomb and a stone weighing from one to two tons was rolled into place, sealing the tomb.

Now, are we to believe that Jesus then revived, extricated Himself from the now hardened linen wrappings, folded His wrappings neatly on the slab (as Scripture indicates), moved the stone from the entrance of the tomb, overcame or somehow slipped past the guards, and made His way into history. Such a theory is nonsense.

Another theory is that the women who discovered the empty tomb mistakenly went to the wrong tomb. This theory fails on at least three points. First, the women who were watching the crucifixion, and who witnessed the body being taken down from the cross by Joseph of Arimathea, and who witnessed his body being wrapped in burial cloths, also witnessed His body being placed in Joseph's own tomb. The women knew which tomb held the body of Jesus; Joseph of Arimathea certainly knew (it was his tomb); the Roman officials knew which tomb was used; the Jewish religious leaders knew which tomb was used; and the Apostles knew which tomb was used, although they were hiding in fear, with the exception of John, the beloved disciple. All interested parties knew where Jesus' body was laid to rest.

Second, notice that no one – not the Roman officials; not the Jewish religious leaders; not the Apostles; not the secular writers later reporting these events; not the women – even

hinted at confusion over which tomb held the body of Jesus. Not one; not once; not ever. Why? Because there was no confusion over the location of the tomb, and everyone knew that. This brings us to the next point.

Third, had the women gone to the wrong tomb, why then didn't someone later direct them to the right tomb, open it, and show the world that Jesus had not risen from the dead? This would be an easy and obvious counter to the claim of His resurrection. After all, the Roman officials, the Jewish religious leaders, and much of the population did not want a resurrection rumor spreading through out the region causing further civil unrest.

Failing in the above attempts to offer a rational explanation to the empty tomb, skeptics have come to offer two more subtle theories, created from their noticeably preconceived and critically untested opinions. The first of these is that the resurrection is in reality a symbolic event, which was somehow confused with historical events of the time. This theory postulates that the Apostles and other believers engaged in a type of wish fulfillment, inventing the resurrection to satisfy their need for a risen savior. But this theory fails on several points. First, it is often overlooked that the resurrection of Christ as related in detail in Scripture does not conform to any of the beliefs of the time concerning the resurrection. The Sadducees denied the concept of the resurrection out of hand. The Pharisees together with a majority of the population believed in a general resurrection on the last day – literally the end of the world.

Second, the resurrection of Christ on a specific date, at a specific place, with specific witnesses was unthinkable in Jewish culture. Jesus' resurrection contradicted every known belief of Jewish culture and religious heritage at the time.

Third, why would the Apostles invent such a story; one that they had to know would be rejected out of hand by the entire population? The Apostles themselves did not fully understand that Jesus would rise from the dead. They held the same beliefs that the majority of the population held – a general resurrection on the last day. The Apostles were astonished, incredulous, and dumbfounded at the news brought to them by the women who discovered the empty tomb.

Fourth, how is this theory consistent with the intrepid actions of the Apostles following the resurrection, to include preaching the resurrected Christ in public?

The final (for now, more will surely come) subtle theory invented by the skeptics is the assumed parallel between the resurrection of Christ and the ancient pagan myths of gods who died and then rose again to rule and take vengeance. But this theory, too, fails. First, the narrative of the resurrection of Jesus is careful to provide the date and place of His death, the exact manner of His death, the exact time of His death, the exact place of His burial tomb, the exact date of His resurrection, and the witnesses to all of these occasions. None of the pagan myths provide any of the above mentioned detail, particularly witnesses to the event.

Second, there is no known instance in pagan mythology where the resurrection story was applied to any specific historical figure in pagan literature.

Finally, as to the claim that the New Testament garnered the resurrection event from the clearly mythical Gnostic Gospels, someone failed miserably to do his homework. The so called Gnostic Gospels were written about three hundred years following the New Testament. If the story was borrowed, it was clearly the Gnostic writers who did the borrowing.

As the skeptics rapaciously grasp for an explanation to the empty tomb, with feckless theories and a decided lack of rationality, we are left with an empty tomb, no body, and no explanation. Clearly, the inference to the best conclusion is that Christ was resurrected from the dead and lives today.

Resurrection Appearances: We move now to the second astonishing fact – the resurrection appearances. Jesus appeared to believers and non-believers alike following His resurrection. He appeared to individuals, small groups of people, and at one point to a group of over 500 people. He appeared on several different occasions to the Apostles: He ate with them; they touched Him; they saw the wounds of crucifixion on His body; He talked with them. To say that these appearances were all the result of mass hysteria is patently ridiculous and unintelligible vis-à-vis the practice of psychiatry. Hundreds of people in diverse places at diverse times don't

have the same hysterical experience. At no time was there a claim of madness or hysteria concerning those who witnessed Christ resurrected. Even the secular Jewish and Roman historians writing in the first century A.D. made no such claim. Historically reliable documents and the claims of hundreds of eye-witnesses attest to a risen Christ.

The Existence of Christianity: Our third astonishing fact is the very existence of Christianity today, currently consisting of over a billion believers living on every continent of planet Earth. Following the resurrection appearances, the weak and pathetic Apostles, hiding for fear of their lives, eschewing all public contact, suddenly became ensconced in their beliefs, bold in their actions, and courageous in their presentation of the Gospel message of salvation by the atonement of Christ. One should ask, "Why the turnaround?" The Apostles and thousands of others were martyred for their beliefs. People will not knowingly die for a lie; they will only die for what they know or believe to be true.

The very fact of the existence of Christianity today, and the enormous affect it has had on civilization, speaks to the truth of the resurrection of Christ. The resurrection is the linchpin of the faith; the event upon which all else is dependent; the event upon which all else resulted. No resurrection; no Christianity. We have the rational arguments offered concerning the empty tomb. We have the eye-witness accounts of over 500 people of the resurrected Christ. And we have the fact of Christianity as a rational, faith-based belief for over 2,000 years.

Now, my dear neighbor, what is your position? What do you have to say?