

Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?

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One of the easiest parts of the resurrection data to establish is the fact that the tomb is empty. Because the location of Jesus' burial was known to those living in Jerusalem, it would have been unlikely that they would have believed the Apostolic preaching of the resurrection of Christ if there was not an empty tomb. Jesus' burial is widely attested in early, independent testimonies, both biblical and extra-biblical.

Furthermore, as is often noted, women were not considered reliable witnesses in first century Jewish culture, so it would have been foolish for the authors to have fictionally constructed an account involving women in order to gain credibility.

Matthew 28:11–15 speaks of a myth that was spread among the Jews concerning the body of Christ. Apparently the Jews were saying the disciples stole the body of Christ. This is significant because the Jews did not deny the tomb was empty, but instead sought an alternative explanation to the resurrection. The emptiness of the tomb is a widely attested historical fact.

Just because the tomb of Christ was empty does not necessarily mean the resurrection happened. Indeed, there have been four alternative hypotheses to resurrection that have been advanced over the years.

Conspiracy theory

First, some offer the conspiracy hypothesis, which says the disciples stole the body of Christ and continued to lie about his appearances to them. On this account, the resurrection was a hoax.

This hypothesis is not commonly held in modern scholarship for several reasons:

1. This hypothesis does not take into account that the disciples believed in the resurrection. It is highly unlikely that numerous disciples would have been willing to give their lives defending a fabrication.

2. It is unlikely that the idea of resurrection would have entered the minds of the disciples, as such an event was not connected to the Jewish idea of a Messiah. The scholar William Lane Craig writes, “If your favorite Messiah got himself crucified, then you either went home or else you got yourself a new Messiah. But the idea of stealing Jesus’ corpse and saying that God has raised him from the dead is hardly one that would have entered the minds of the disciples.”

3. This hypothesis cannot account for the post-resurrection appearances of Christ.

Apparent death

The second hypothesis attempting to explain away the resurrection is the apparent death hypothesis. This view says Jesus was not completely dead when he was removed from the cross. Once in the tomb, Jesus was revived and escaped, thus convincing the disciples of his resurrection.

This view is difficult to hold for a few reasons:

1. It is unlikely that a half-dead man would have been capable of even getting up to walk, much less moving the stone that sealed the tomb, overpowering Roman guards, and fleeing from sight.

2. This theory cannot account for the disciples’ attribution of resurrection to Christ, for if they had seen him after he was revived, they would have merely thought he had never died.

3. It is also foolish to think the Romans, who had perfected the art of killing people, would have let one slip by without ensuring he was dead.

4. Finally, given the physical torture described in the Gospel accounts, it is highly unlikely that Jesus could have survived.

Wrong tomb

Third, the wrong tomb hypothesis suggests the women had gotten lost on their way to the empty tomb and accidentally stumbled upon the caretaker of an empty tomb. When the caretaker said, “Jesus is not here,” the women were so disoriented they fled, their story later being developed into a resurrection myth.

Like the other theories, virtually no one holds to this view. There are at least three reasons:

1. First, this theory does not explain the post-resurrection appearances, and it is spurious to think that such a simple mistake would have led a first-century Jew to think a resurrection had happened.

2. In light of the early evidence that is available concerning the location of Jesus’ tomb, it is almost impossible that the women would have confused its location.

3. This hypothesis emphasizes that the caretaker of the tomb said that Christ was not there, but it passes over the next phrase: “He is risen!”

Displaced body

Fourth, some propose the displaced body hypothesis to explain Jesus’ resurrection. This theory says Joseph of Arimathea placed Jesus’ body in his own tomb but later moved it to the criminal’s graveyard. The disciples were not aware that Jesus’ body had been moved and therefore wrongly inferred that he had risen from the dead.

Because of the spurious nature of this theory, virtually no modern scholars hold to it:

1. This theory cannot account for the post-resurrection appearances of Christ or the origin of the Christian faith.

2. It is uncertain why Joseph would not have corrected the error of the disciples by simply showing them where he had moved the body of Jesus.

3. The criminal graveyard, most likely, was quite close to the crucifixion site, so it would have made little sense why Joseph would not have simply buried Jesus there in the first place. In fact, it was against Jewish law to allow a body to be moved after it had already been buried.

The resurrection really happened

In light of these failed hypotheses that attempt to disprove the resurrection, the person who wishes to deny the resurrection of Christ is left with the unexplained mystery of the empty tomb that existed “on the third day.”

The resurrection of Jesus is the cornerstone of the Christian Faith, take away the resurrection, Christianity crumbles and the certain hope of the individual believer vanishes like dust in the wind. That is why the Apostle Paul did not mix any words when the Holy Spirit inspired him to write:

“Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.”

Christ is Risen! And indeed we have the forgiveness of sins and the absolute certainty of eternal life by faith in Jesus, crucified, risen, reigning and coming again.

Solo Deo Gloria!