



Back to Life – Part 3

The Resurrection of Christ

Two weeks ago, we examined **2 Kings 4:8-37**, the story of Elisha resurrecting the son of the Shunammite woman. Death is a certainty and a problem for us all. Faith in God understands death cannot be avoided, but also believes all who place their hope in Jesus can live again. Long before Jesus' death and resurrection, God the Father had been moving amongst His people in Israel through resurrection. The great faith of the Shunammite woman made room for God to work His miracle, and His actions through Elisha picture for us the saving power of the Cross.

Finally, the week that Christians across the world so revere has come upon us. Easter Sunday commemorates the greatest moment in all human history: the resurrection of the Lord, Jesus Christ. This is no myth or fanciful tale; the resurrection of Jesus is a historical event that was reliably documented by eyewitnesses. Jesus invites each of us to believe He is risen, but the sin of the individual and the brokenness of the world can create barriers to belief. Luckily, Jesus has overcome any and every doubt that He was truly God incarnate, come down from the throne to purchase sinners and grant eternal life.



BELONG

Start the group with an opportunity for community. We want this to be a place where the body of Christ can **belong** by sharing their lives with one another in genuine fellowship.

- How is everyone's week going? Life updates?
 - What is something we can be praying about this week?
 - What is something we can praise this week?

 - What historical evidence of the Resurrection of Jesus are you aware of, if any?
 - From your own experience, why do you think people doubt the Resurrection?
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BELIEVE

Move into the relevant Bible passages and read along together. This is where the body of Christ can learn together to **believe** in Jesus more and love Him better.

Jesus Literally & Physically Rose from the Dead

The Reliability of the New Testament

The four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) are the primary evidence of Jesus' resurrection, but what makes them reliable?

To start, the four Gospels were written by eyewitnesses to the events they report. This is only untrue of Luke, the author of the Gospel of Luke (as you probably already guessed), but he claims to have gathered his information from eyewitnesses, and the account he gives matches with the Gospels which *were* written by the eyewitnesses themselves.

However, the Gospel writers did not compose their writings until years to decades *after* the events. For instance, Matthew wrote his Gospel anywhere from 40 AD to 100 AD. Is it possible his memory had faded? What if he forgot certain things or remembered them wrongly? It is important to note two things. First, memorization was much more important back then to preserve information because there wasn't always a library you could conveniently go to, or iPhones to google search for an answer. On the other hand, it is entirely reasonable to believe the Gospel writers wrote down their thoughts early on before composing their final Gospel.

Second, as it pertains to the ancient world, eyewitness testimony is the primary form of evidence concerning events that happened in the past. Everything we know about the ancient world today comes from eyewitness testimony! More importantly, it was not uncommon for the recording of events in the ancient world to take place thousands of years or more *after* the events themselves actually occurred. Compared to the New Testament, which was written not even a hundred years after the resurrection, it is far more likely to be reliable history than any other historical document that has ever been written.

Unfortunately, the originals (known as the autographs) no longer exist. We only have copies of the originals, much the same as other ancient historical documents. As anyone who has played a game of telephone can tell you, it is more difficult than you think to pass along a message as it was originally spoken or, in this case, transcribed. However, in the case of the New Testament, we possess nearly 6000 manuscripts including either part of or all of the New Testament writings.

Some of the earliest manuscripts we possess, such as a papyrus fragment of John's Gospel found in Egypt, dates as early as 125 AD (not long after the original is believed



to have been written, which was likely around the 90s AD). Unlike other copies of historical documents, which are regularly discovered to be hundreds of years older than the originals, the copies of the Gospels are *very* early.

The writings of the early church fathers, the generation of Christians who immediately followed the original Apostles (anywhere from 95 AD to 250 AD), have also been well copied. This is significant because these writings include numerous quotations and citations of the New Testament documents. The New Testament is quoted so many times in the extra biblical writings of the early church fathers that scholars are confident the *entire* New Testament could be recreated from their citations *alone*. Suffice it to say, the Church has great reasons to accept the original Gospels are accurately preserved.

The Historical Evidence

What do the Gospels actually record and what is the most reasonable explanation of the evidence presented?

There are three primary facts that must be wrestled with by the reader:

1. The tomb is discovered empty by a group of women three days following the crucifixion.
2. Jesus' disciples had real experiences with one whom they believed had risen from death.
3. As a result of the disciples' preaching, particularly the resurrection, the Church grew.

Surprisingly, almost all scholars, Christian or not, agree that these three facts are true and verifiable given the evidence. To start, consider the empty tomb. Where did Jesus' body go? If the body was still in the tomb, the Jews could have presented the body to dispute the disciples' claim that Jesus was alive. The last thing the Jewish authorities wanted was for Jesus' movement to continue, and showing the body would prove their lies. Yet they couldn't because the body wasn't there.

One theory suggests that Jesus never actually died. Rather, He survived His wounds and exited the tomb on His own. Could this explain the empty tomb? Absolutely not! Jesus was beaten to near death before He was even nailed to the cross. After suffocating on the cross, Jesus was stabbed through the side with a spear by the Romans to make sure of it. Even if He somehow did survive, it would be impossible to move the rock sealing the tomb from the inside, not to mention the Roman guards stationed outside.

Could the disciples have stolen it? Interestingly, the Jews thought this might happen, which is why Roman guards were stationed to protect Jesus' tomb in the first place. For the disciples to be successful, they would have to contend with these well-trained soldiers as well as move an incredibly heavy stone that blocked the tomb's entrance. If the disciples *were* successful, upon their claim that Jesus rose from the dead based on



the empty tomb, they would be the first suspects to the crime. There would likely be evidence of their crime as well, yet none was found, and they were never charged with stealing the body of Jesus.

Further, what motivation would the disciples have for stealing the body? During Jesus' trial, all except John fled in fear of their lives. Now they would risk life and limb to recover Jesus' body which was being guarded directly by the Romans, the ones they feared would put them on a cross too? It's not likely they would steal the body just to make up a story either. The disciples didn't understand Jesus was going to rise from the dead until *after* He appeared to them. Before that time, the disciples thought Jesus was gone for good. To steal the body for no other reason than simply to possess the body for themselves is laughable.

Second, what about the real experiences the disciples had concerning Jesus' appearance to them after His death? There are only three explanations for this historical fact. One, the disciples lied about the resurrection. Once again, it is unlikely this is the story they would tell given the evidence that they did not understand Jesus was even supposed to rise from the dead in the first place. But for sake of argument, if they did make up the story, for what purpose? If for power, they certainly failed on that account. Every disciple except one was martyred, dying brutal deaths for the sake of the faith. Given every chance to recant and be spared, the disciples never rescinded their original statements concerning the resurrection.

Did the disciples hallucinate? This doesn't account for the disciples saying they physically touched Jesus as well as ate and drank with him. Also, how could all of the disciples have the exact same hallucination when hallucinations are highly individual, nor do they transfer from person to person.

Third, what about the church growing as a result of the belief in the resurrection? Some have suggested that the church actually made up the story later on, yet virtually all scholars admit that the church was created *because* of the resurrection, not the other way around. Given these three independent facts, there is no question that the best explanation is that Jesus literally and physically rose from the dead.

The implications of this are astounding: the supernatural is possible, Christ is authoritative, and Christianity is world changing.



Jesus Actively Overcomes Our Barriers to Belief

Jesus has come to tear down every barrier that keeps us from believing. Consider **John 20:1-31**, which records from John's perspective the resurrection of Jesus and how it unfolded, which demonstrates five of these barriers.

1. Confusion

John 20:2 (NKJV)

² Then she ran and came to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple... and said to them, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

John 20:6 (NKJV)

⁶ ...and he saw the linen cloths lying there, and the handkerchief that had been around His head, not lying with the linen cloths, but folded together in place by itself.

The first reaction of the disciples to Jesus' resurrection is confusion. The women initially believe that Jesus' body has been moved by the Jews or the Romans. The disciples, upon reaching the tomb, are unsure what to make of the evidence. No one understands what has truly happened, except for John. However, Paul says this about God:

1 Corinthians 14:33 (ESV)

³³For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.

Jesus overcomes confusion by making clear what has happened. The historical evidence we have already presented demonstrates clearly, without room for confusion, that Jesus rose. We find peace in the clarity of these events.

2. Distraction

John 20: 14-15 (NKJV)

¹⁴ Now when she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" She, supposing Him to be the gardener, said to Him, "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away.

Mary is so grieved that she doesn't recognize Jesus standing right beside her! Grief should not be minimized, but it must be acknowledged as many times acting as a distraction. We can allow grief and sorrow from the evil we see in this world to keep us from seeing Jesus for who He is. Jesus overcomes distraction by focusing us on who He is in a personal way.



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John 20:16 (NKJV)

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary!"

Instantly Mary recognizes Jesus. He comes to us even while we are distracted and makes Himself known amidst the chaos of our lives. All it takes is one word from Jesus, and we recognize Him for who He is. To stay undistracted, we have to keep up this personal relationship with Jesus, constantly reminding ourselves of His character when the problems of this world vie for our attention.

3. Fear

John 20:19 (NKJV)

¹⁹ Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews...

Keep in mind that the disciples were hiding even *after* Mary told them Jesus was alive! Our fear of the things around us can prevent us from believing Jesus is who He says He is. When faced with trouble, we fear that Jesus won't come through. However, the story continues:

John 20:19 (NKJV)

Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, "Peace be with you."

Jesus overcomes fear through peace. We have no need of fear when we know Jesus has already overcome evil, sin, and death! There is peace in knowing the battle is already won.

4. Doubt

John 20:25 (NKJV)

²⁵ The other disciples therefore said to him, "We have seen the Lord." So he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe."

Thomas doubted Jesus was alive and wanted to see Him for himself before believing. We doubt ourselves many times. Even when we *do* believe we still doubt Jesus! The answer to our doubt is the same as it was for Thomas.

John 20:27 (NKJV)

²⁷ Then He said to Thomas, "Reach your finger here, and look at my hands..."



Jesus invited Thomas to see for himself the truth of His resurrection. In the same way, Jesus does not fear our doubts; He faces them head on by providing proof of His being and answers to our questions.

5. Ignorance

John 20:9 (NKJV)

⁹ For as yet they did not know the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead.

When John first believed upon finding the empty tomb, he believed without knowing what Scripture had foretold. Simply seeing the evidence of the resurrection is enough to convince someone of its reality as we have already discussed! However, the disciples' lack of understanding what Scripture said represented a barrier to belief. If they had known what the Bible said about Jesus and His resurrection, they would have had assurance that Jesus was alive before they ever saw the empty tomb!

Our ignorance, whether of the historical evidence or the council of Scripture, can lead to disbelief. Jesus overcomes ignorance by explaining to the disciples what the Scriptures taught about Him. We too must delve into the Scriptures to see what it says about Jesus, as well as the historical evidence.

BECOME

Wrap up the discussion by asking some closing questions. We can **become** more like the people God is calling us to be by reflecting on what we've learned and applying it.

- Why can we trust the Gospels as a reliable account of history?
- What are the bare-minimum historically accepted facts about the resurrection? What is the best explanation?
- If the resurrection is true, what are the implications of it for our lives?
- What are barriers we face for believing in Jesus? How does Jesus overcome these barriers? How can we guard against them?