

## Lesson 2

### Jesus' Resurrection: The Strange Story of Easter

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**Objective:** To consider the historical reliability of the Bible's account of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. In considering this we will 1) focus on the historical grounds upon which Jesus' resurrection is based; 2) address certain arguments against Jesus' resurrection; and 3) give our attention to the challenge that Jesus' resurrection poses to all.

#### 1. Jewish Belief Concerning Resurrection

##### a. Resurrection Would Be a Returning to Life Bodily After One Had Died

- Your dead shall live; their *bodies* shall rise (Is. 26.19)

##### b. Resurrection Would Take Place At the End

- *On that day...*He will swallow up death *forever* (Is. 25.7,9)

##### c. Resurrection Would Be General, Not Individual

- Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the *whole* house of Israel. Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD" (Ez. 37.11-14)

##### d. No One Expected the Messiah To Rise From the Dead

- In not one single case do we hear the slightest mention of the disappointed followers claiming that their hero had been raised from the dead. They knew better. Resurrection was not a private event. Jewish revolutionaries whose leader had been executed by the authorities, and who managed to escape arrest themselves, had two options: give up the revolution, or find another leader. Claiming that the original leader was alive again was simply not an option. Unless, of course, he was (N.T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?*, p. 63)
- But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel...moreover some women of our company *amazed* us...saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive (Luke 24.21, 22, 23)

#### 2. The Earliest Written Account of Easter

##### a. Claims To Be a Public, Historical Fact (1 Cor. 15.1-11)

- Jesus died (v.3)
- Jesus was buried (v.4)
- Jesus was raised, hence an empty tomb (went through death and came out the other side, didn't simply go to heaven) (v.4)
- Jesus' resurrection was an historical event that was witnessed (vv.5-9)
- Jesus' resurrection demands receptive, life-staking, belief (vv.1-2)

##### b. The Strangeness of the Easter Stories Points to Their Being Very Early and Not Later Fabrications

- The Absence of Biblical Quotation
  - Up to this point all four of the Gospel writers have drawn heavily on Biblical quotation in order to show that Jesus' life, death and even burial are fulfillment of the Old Testament

story. Only later, in the 50's do we hear Paul saying that Jesus was raised on the third day *according to the Scriptures* (I Cor. 15.4). Why is this the case and what's the point?

- The absence of Biblical quotation points in the direction that these stories, although written down later, 'go back to very, very early oral tradition, which was formed and set firmly in the memory of different storytellers before there was any time for biblical reflection (N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope*, p. 54)

- Women as the Primary Witnesses (Luke 24.10-11)

Women's low social status meant that their testimony was not admissible evidence in a court. There was no possible advantage to the church to recount that all the first witnesses were women. It could only have undermined the credibility of the testimony. The only possible explanation for why women were depicted as meeting Jesus first is if they really had (Keller, p.205).

- What's Up with Jesus' Body: Without Biblical Precedent and Not Expected (John 21.12)
  - Clearly and solidly physical (Luke 24.36-43)
  - Can be mistaken for someone else (John 20.15)
  - Comes and goes through locked doors (John 20.19)
  - Disappears into God's space, i.e. Heaven (Luke 24.51)
- No Mention of Future Hope for the Individual Christian

### 3. Historical Fixed Points for the Reality of Easter

#### a. The Tomb Was Empty

#### b. Jesus Was Seen

The empty tomb and the accounts of personal meetings with Jesus are even more historically certain when you realize that they must be taken together. If there had been only an empty tomb and no sightings, no one would have ever concluded it was a resurrection. Yet if there had been only eyewitness sightings of Jesus and no empty tomb, no one would have concluded it was a resurrection, because people's accounts of seeing departed loved ones happen all the time. Only if the two factors were both true together would anyone have concluded that Jesus was raised from the dead (Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*, p. 205).

Both the meetings and the empty tomb are therefore necessary if we are to explain the rise of belief and the writing of the stories as we have them. Neither by itself was sufficient; put them together, though, and they provide a complete and coherent explanation for the rise of the early Christian belief (Wright, *Surprised By Hope*, p.59).

### 4. Alternative Views Regarding the Easter Stories

#### a. Cognitive Dissonance – Individuals fail to come to terms with reality even in light of massive evidence and instead live in a fantasy world of their own constructing

- Problem 1: None of the disciples expected Jesus to come back from the dead in the middle of history
  - But these words (of the women) seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them (Luke 24.11)
- Problem 2: What about the body of Jesus?

#### b. A Spiritual Experience – Jesus, although his body was dead, was alive spiritually and had shown himself to his disciples

- Problem 1: If Jesus was only raised spiritually then he really didn't defeat death
- Problem 2: The NT does not allow for a spiritual resurrection only. If it isn't bodily, then it isn't resurrection

**c. The Resurrection as a Metaphor for a New Spiritual Experience**

- Problem: Although resurrection could be used as a metaphor, i.e. the return from exile, it was never used to refer to a spiritual experience. There was other language for that and it's not resurrection.

**d. Jesus Didn't Die (The Swoon Theory)**

- Problem: Roman soldiers knew how to kill people. Also, who would believe that half-drugged, beaten up Jesus had defeated death and was God's anointed King?

**e. The Women Met Someone Else That Looked Like Jesus**

- Problem: They would have noticed soon enough

**5. Small Arguments That Support the Validity of Easter**

**a. The Switch From Saturday to Sunday: Something remarkable had to have happened for Jews to make such a switch**

**b. The Disciple's Gave Their Life For This Belief**

**6. Historical Questions That Must Be Wrestled With and Addressed**

Why did the Christian Faith emerge so rapidly and with such power if Jesus didn't rise from the dead?

No other messianic group ever claimed that their leader rose from the dead, why then did the followers of Jesus?

No group of Jews ever worshipped another human being as God, why did the followers of Jesus?

How do you account for all the witnesses to the resurrection who maintained this belief publically and for decades, and who eventually gave up their own life for it?

No Jew expected one individual to be raised in the middle of time, what changed this for the followers of Jesus?

**7. The Challenge of the Resurrection**

**a. The Story of Thomas (John 20.24-28)**

- Begins in doubt (v.25) – Dead people don't rise
- The invitation to consider the evidence (v.27) – History says, 'There really was an empty tomb and people really did encounter the risen Jesus.' And then it asks, 'How do you explain that?'
- The challenge to believe (v.27) – You believe not just in the evidence, but in the God who made the world and who has promised to make all things new. Personal Belief, Loving Belief, Hope-filled Belief