

Easter Apologetics

Apologetics – means “to give an answer”

What difference does Jesus’ death and resurrection make?

Today we celebrate Easter – the resurrection of Christ.

Not the chocolate bunnies, baskets, bonnets, cards, flowers, not springtime nor or chicks, or eggs or any other commercial endeavor.

Phillips Brooks got it right:

Tomb, thou shalt not hold Him longer;
 Death is strong, but Life is stronger;
 Stronger than the dark, the light;
 Stronger than the wrong, the right;
 Faith and Hope triumphant say,
 Christ will rise on Easter Day.

He takes men out of time and makes them feel eternity.

Ralph Waldo Everson

How important is the resurrection of Christ?

The resurrection of Christ was the message of the early church.

Peter’s first sermon:

“Men of Israel, listen to these words:

Jesus the Nazarene,

a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs
 which God performed through Him in your midst,
 just as you yourselves know -

this Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God,
 you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.

And God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death,
 since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power.”

Acts 2:22-24

That day the church began with 3,000 responding to salvation.

Today if you were to study philosophy and religion in college you would be faced with a categorical assumption – that miracles simply cannot happen, which makes the claim of the resurrection highly problematic. However, if you disbelieved the resurrection you then had the difficulty of explaining how the Christian church got started at all.

The other problem you will have is that if the resurrection happened it changes our lives completely.

Tim Keller wrote a chapter called, *The reality of the Resurrection*,

“If Jesus rose from the dead, then you have to accept all he said; if he didn’t rise from the dead, then why worry about any of what he said? The issue on which everything hangs is not whether or not you like his teaching but whether or not he rose from the dead.”¹

Paul wrote,

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,

and that He appear to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as it were to one untimely born, He appeared to me also” (1 Cor. 15:3-8).

The gospel that Christ died and rose again from the dead was, as Paul wrote, ***of first importance***.

Christ’s death and resurrection was the priority message of the early church.

“The church today has been politicized, pragmatized, psychologized, and trivialized.”

The early church was energized!

I. Absolute Certainty

How could the early church be absolutely certain that Christ rose from the dead?

Paul points to the eye-witness accounts of those who had seen the risen Christ.

¹ Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*, (New York: Penguin Group, 2008), p. 202.

In N. T. Wright's work, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, he argues that "if there had been only an empty tomb and no sightings, no one would have concluded it was a resurrection. They would have assumed that the body had been stolen. 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."²

All the skeptics of Jesus' time had to do was to produce a body, but they couldn't because the tomb was empty and the risen Christ had revealed Himself to many.

The believers of the early were absolutely certain that Jesus had risen from the grave because they saw Him alive over a period of 40 days until they saw Him ascend back to the Father.

II. Answers to Critics

Paul addresses the question "What if Christ had not risen from the dead?"

But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised.
(v. 13)

This verse shows the negative attitude of the culture towards bodily resurrection.

Timothy Keller writes,

"To all the dominant worldviews of the time, an individual bodily resurrection was almost inconceivable"³

N. T. Wright describes the Greco-Roman thinking as against a bodily resurrection.

"Since the soul or spirit was good and the physical and material world was weak, corrupt, and defiling, to them the physical, by definition, was always falling apart and therefore salvation was conceived as liberation from the body. In this worldview resurrection was not only impossible, but totally undesirable. No soul having gotten free from its body, would ever want it back... The goal was to get free from the body forever. Once your soul is free of its body, a return to re-embodied life was outlandish, unthinkable and impossible."⁴

² N. T. Wright, *The resurrection of the Son of God* (Fortress, 2003), p. 608.

³ Keller, p. 206.

⁴ N. T. Wright, p. 113 (as summarized by Tim Keller).

The Jews also thought of the resurrection as unthinkable, simply because God wouldn't bring someone back to a corrupt and unjust world, full of suffering, sickness, decay, and death. The idea of a physical resurrection would have been unthinkable to both the Jew and to the Greek.

Paul takes his readers to the next logical progression.

¹⁴If Christ has not been raised,

then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain.

¹⁵Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God,
because we witnessed against God that He raised Christ,
whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised.

¹⁶For if the dead are not raised,

not even Christ has been raised;

¹⁷and if Christ has not been raised,
your faith is worthless;
you are still in your sins.

¹⁸Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.

¹⁹If we have hoped in Christ in this life only,

we are of all men most to be pitied.

(1Cor. 15:14-19)

The first Christians had a resurrection-centered view of reality. They were convinced that Christ had risen and that they too would be resurrected.

III. Affirmation

“But now Christ has been raised from the dead,

the first fruits of those who are asleep.

For since by a man (Adam) came death,

by a man also came the resurrection of the dead.

For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive.

But each in his own order:

Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming...”

(1 Cor. 15:20-23).

Christ's resurrection means our resurrection.

This resurrection worldview happened instantly after Christ's crucifixion.

N. T. Wright points out that this new perspective was unique in the world up to that time...such a massive shift in thinking at the worldview level only happens to a group of people over a period of time.⁵

“In other words it would have taken years of dialogue, discussion, and argument in which various thinkers and writers debate ‘the nature of the resurrection’ until one side wins. This is how culture and worldviews change. But the Christian worldview of resurrection sprang up full-blown immediately after the death of Jesus. There was no process or development. Even if you propose the highly unlikely idea that one or two of Jesus’ disciples did get the idea that he was raised from the dead on their own, they would never have gotten a movement of other Jews to believe it unless there were multiple, inexplicable, plausible, repeated encounters with Jesus.”⁶

The early church saw the resurrected Christ, and a resurrection of saints.

“And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, and the earth shook; and the rocks were split, and the tombs were opened; and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many.” (Matt. 27:50-53)

The truth of the resurrection gave them ultimate hope to a future resurrection. Their lives were instantly changed forever!

1 Cor. 15:50-57

IV. Application

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord. (1 Cor. 15:58)

Two Lessons:

⁵ Ibid., p. 552.

⁶ Keller, p. 209.

1. Nothing here matters.

All will be made right when Christ returns. And since nothing here is eternal, this temporal existence will be left behind at the resurrection. Everything evil will become untrue.

2. Everything here matters.

Everything here has meaning because Christ will inspect everything about how we lived for Christ and His kingdom in this life.

- Attitude towards the Lord's work
 - steadfast** – refers to being seated, and therefore to being settled and firmly situated.
 - immovable** – carries the same basic idea but with more intensity. It denotes being totally immobile and motionless.
- Quality/quantity of our work for the Lord
 - always abounding** – *“exceeding the requirements, of overflowing or overdoing.”*
- Confidence - knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord..
 - Our **toils** (labors to the point of exhaustion) are not in vain.

If Jesus Christ is truly risen from the dead,
Christianity becomes good news for the whole world.
(N. T. Wright)

“Therefore we should mortify emotion, be steadfast, unchangeable, not erratic and scatterbrained, easily discouraged, and should multiply our good works in the knowledge that the Lord will make them profitable.”
(Paraphrase by Gordon Clark)

“Only one life, t’will soon be passed,
Only what’s done for Christ will last.”