

Easter Celebration

Easter is the highest celebration in the Christian church. It commemorates Christ's victory over death and the completion of His work of salvation.

Paul highlights Christ's resurrection in his letter to the Romans,

“who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord...” (Rom. 1:4).

When Paul spoke of the greatest essentials of the Christian faith, he wrote of Christ's death and resurrection,

“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 appeared 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 to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.” (1 Cor. 15:3-8).

People believed in Jesus as the promised Messiah.

Jesus asked the question: “Who do people say that I am?”

Matthew records this conversation,

And they said,

“Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.”

He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

And Jesus said to him,

“Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it...” (Matt. 16:14-18).

Jesus' identity as the Messiah was established by Jesus as the basis upon which He would build His church. Peter was inspired by God to understand this.

The next section shows us what they could not grasp.

From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day. (V. 21)

Though they had faith in Christ as their Messiah, they were unable to grasp Christ's coming crucifixion and resurrection from the dead.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians that He purposed to know nothing but '*Christ crucified*' when he came to them.

“For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” (1 Cor. 1:18, 23-24).

It is obvious that their faith, understanding, and message changed from before Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, and afterwards.

The difference is Christ's resurrection from the dead.

On the cross Jesus bore our sins on His body.

His death paid the awful price that God's holiness demanded,

“So that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus”
(Rom. 3:26).

When Jesus rose from the dead He conquered death and completed the work of salvation on behalf of mankind, which was His great purpose in coming.

“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom. 6:23)

Why should we believe in the Resurrection?

Why did the first followers of Jesus believe in the resurrection?

Everyone believes that Jesus was an exceptional person. His teachings are universally admired. The major stumbling point is believing in Christ's bodily resurrection from the dead.

Why should we believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead?

What evidence led the early believers to conclude that Christ had risen?

John Stott, in his book, *Basic Christianity*, addresses the evidence for Christ's resurrection. [I will be relying heavily on Stott's excellent synopsis here.]

1. The Body was gone.

When certain women arrived on Easter Sunday morning at the tomb of Jesus they were dumbfounded to discover that the body of Jesus had disappeared. A few days later the apostles began to preach that Jesus had risen. They couldn't have done this if anyone could have taken a short walk to Joseph's tomb and seen Jesus body still laying there.

No... The tomb was empty and Jesus' body was gone!

How can this be explained?

- **One theory: *The went to the wrong tomb.***

They were overcome with emotion and went to the wrong place.

It could have been dark. But it was dawn. Luke said that it was 'early dawn.' Mark writes distinctly that 'the sun had risen.' Perhaps the women weren't fools as some might believe. Then Mary the mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene, repeated the error when they returned with Salome, Joanna and 'the other women.'

Mary also returned by herself and lingered in the garden by the tomb, until she met Jesus, thinking he was the gardener.

Stott writes,

"They had come on a practical mission. They had bought spices and were going to complete the anointing of their Lord's body, since the approach of the Sabbath had made the work so hasty two days previously. These devoted and businesslike women were not the kind to be easily deceived or to give up the task they had come to do. Again, even if they mistook the tomb, would Peter and John, who ran to verify their story, made the same mistake, and others who doubtless came later including Joseph and Nicodemus themselves."¹

- **The Swoon Theory** – Jesus never died on the cross- He only fainted and then revived in the Tomb, and subsequently made himself known to the disciples. The problems with this view never end. It's a thoroughly perverse view entirely contradicted by all evidence.

¹ John R. W. Stott, *Basic Christianity*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans publishing Company, 1999), p. 48.

Stott continues,

“Pilate was surprised that Jesus was already dead but was sufficiently convinced by the centurion’s assurance to give permission to give Joseph permission to remove the body from the cross. The centurion was certain because he must have been present when ‘one of the soldiers pierce his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water’. So Joseph and Nicodemus took down his body, wound it in the grave clothes and laid it in Joseph’s new tomb.”²

If we think of what Jesus went through in the great difficulties of His trial,

“...mocking, flogging and crucifixion, followed by thirty-six hours in a stone sepulcher with neither warmth nor food nor medical care? That he could rally sufficiently to perform the superhuman feat of shifting the boulder which secured the mouth of the tomb, and this without disturbing the Roman guard? That then weak and sickly and hungry, he could appear to the disciples in such a way as to give them the impression that he had vanquished death? That he could go on to claim that he had died and risen, could send them into all the world and promise to be with them unto the end of time?”³

In all the events that followed for the next 40 days, with occasional appearances and convincing proofs, along with convincing Thomas’s unbelief. The swoon theory just falls apart at every point.

- **Thieves stole the body.**

This conjecture has no evidence. How could thieves have stolen the body? They would first have to overcome the Roman guards. Then why would they have left the grave clothes. Then, what would their motive be?

What really happened was when the guards saw the angels they were paralyzed with fear and fainted; as the Scriptures say, “became like dead men

- **The disciples removed the body.**

This is the rumor spread by the Jews (Matthew). Pilate was confronted by the Jews to prevent this possibility by placing a Roman guard in front of the Tomb. Pilate’s orders were to “Make it as secure as you can!” So they sealed the stone and placed the guard. After the resurrection the guards were bribed to say that the disciples had stolen the body.

² Stott, p. 49.

³ Ibid.

Such a planned falsehood by the apostles would mean that they would have to then, preach a lie and suffered for it. Would they be willing to be imprisoned, suffer beatings and rejection and even death for a fairy tail?

- **The fourth** and most unreasonable challenge to the challenge of the missing body is that **the Jews or Romans took the body themselves.**

In the fear that someone else would take the body they decided as a precaution, to confiscate the corpse themselves. Within a few weeks the disciples were boldly proclaiming that Christ had risen from the dead. They could have produced the body along with a published explanation of what they had done; but didn't.

Stott eloquently writes,

“Instead they were silent and resorted to violence, they arrested the apostles, threatening them, flogged them, imprisoned them, vilified them, plotted against them, and killed them. But all this was entirely unnecessary if they had in the own possession the dead body of Jesus. The church was founded on the resurrection. Disprove the resurrection, and the church would have collapsed. But they could not; the body was not in their possession. The authorities' silence is as eloquent a proof of the resurrection as the apostles witness.”⁴

The Body was missing. Just as the angels said in Matt. 28:6:

“He is not here; for He is risen. Come, see the place where the Lord lay.”

2. Second, the graveclothes were undisturbed.

When Peter and John arrived at the tomb the body of Jesus was gone but the graveclothes he was wrapped in (mummy-like fashion) were lying on the stone slab. John tells his first-hand account in ten verses in (John 20:1-10). John saw this and believed.

1. Linen bandages wrapped around his body with spices sprinkled into the folds. A separate cloth would have been used for the head. When Jesus rose the body simply disappeared and passed through the graveclothes and the stone tomb. The clothes collapsed.

⁴ Stott. P. 51.

2. The head napkin was in a place by itself separate from the other, (similar to the way a carpenter would fold a wiping cloth over a job that was complete).

Stott writes,

“It is not hard to imagine the sight which greeted the eyes of the apostles when they reached the tomb: the stone slab, the collapsed graveclothes, the shell of the head-cloth and the gap between the two. No wonder ‘they saw and believed’.”⁵

Mary Magdalene also returned to the tomb of Jesus and when she entered saw two angels. They invited her to see the place where Jesus had laid. The graveclothes and the missing body were great evidences.

[Seems to be more Scripture dedicated to the empty tomb]

3. The Third evidence for the resurrection is that the Lord was seen.

Mary saw Jesus at the tomb, mistaking Him for the gardener, until He revealed Himself to her.

Paul includes a list of eyewitnesses who saw the resurrected Christ:

“...and that **He appeared** 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 to one untimely born, **He appeared** to to me also.” (1 Cor. 15:5-8).

Perhaps the strongest evidence of Christ’s resurrection from the dead is the eye-witness accounts of those who saw Him.

To These He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God.

Acts 1:3

The skeptics claim that they were either inventions or hallucinations, but the simple facts are that Jesus was really seen, by real people- alive and real.

4. The disciples were changed.

One day shortly after the crucifixion the scattered followers of Jesus were huddled in fear of the Sanhedrin; and on the next were defying that very Sanhedrin who had condemned Jesus to death, and rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame in his Name.

⁵ Stott. P. 53.

Peter had turned from denying Jesus out of fear to a real rock, who proclaimed Christ without thought of those who would do him harm.

Stott writes,

“It was the resurrection which transformed Peter’s fear into courage, and James’ doubt into faith. It was the resurrection that changed the Sabbath into Sunday and the Jewish remnant into the Christian church. It was the resurrection which changed Saul the Pharisee into Paul the apostle, that fanatical persecutor into a preacher of the very faith he previously tried to destroy.”⁶

These are the evidences for the resurrection:

- **The body had disappeared.**
- **The graveclothes remained undisturbed.**
- **The Lord was seen.**
- **And the disciples were changed.**

The only conclusion: The Lord is risen indeed!

Abdu Murray a Muslim attorney examined the evidence for Christ’s resurrection. He said, I didn’t want to believe the evidence for the resurrection because if I did, it would change who I was.” Murray says,

“Everything about me would change, and I wanted to have no part of that. I wasn’t ready for that. So I had intellectually assented to these truths, but I hadn’t embraced them as true. I often put it this way: The reason it took me nine years is not that the answers were hard to find, but they are hard to accept. And I think that’s true not just of Muslims. I think it’s true of anybody, quite frankly.”⁷

Gary Habermas, distinguished professor of apologetics and philosophy at Liberty University, has made the study of the resurrection of Christ his life’s work, and written 20 books dealing with the resurrection. He writes,

“When the disciples saw Jesus on Easter Sunday, they saw walking, talking eternal life... The disciples saw Heaven for 40 days and experienced the fellowship of Christ for 40 days – or to say it in another way, for 40 days Heaven broke into earth.”⁸

⁶ Stott, p. 59.

⁷ Jerry Pierce, *The Towering Truth of the Resurrection*, Decision Magazine: Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, April 2017), p. 8.

⁸ Pierce, p. 9.

Thomas' conclusion when he saw Jesus, "My Lord and My God."

Additional eye-witnesses:

At the time of Christ's resurrection, a very significant event also took place,
"And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which
slept arose, and came out of the graves after his resurrection, and
appeared to many." (Matt. 27:52-53).