

The Resurrection of Jesus: Fact or Fiction?

“THE LORD HAS RISEN INDEED, AND HAS APPEARED TO SIMON!” LUKE 24:24

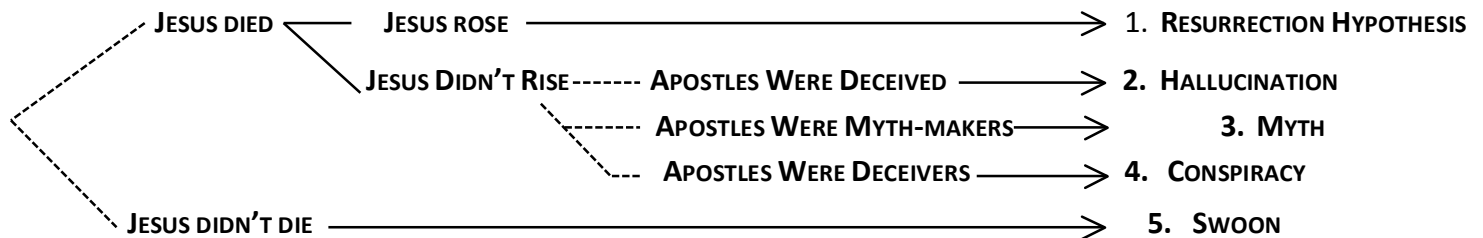
“Christ’s Resurrection is not an event of the past; *it contains a vital power* which has permeated this world. Where all seems to be dead, signs of the resurrection suddenly spring up. *It is an irresistible force.*” Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* §276

1. THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS: DOES IT REALLY MATTER?

- i) **ST. PAUL:** “*If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.*” (1 Cor 15:14)
- ii) **POPE BENEDICT XVI:** “The Christian faith stands or falls with the truth of the testimony that Christ is risen from the dead. If this were taken away, it would still be possible to piece together from the Christian tradition a series of interesting ideas about God and men ... *but the Christian faith itself would be dead.* Jesus would be a failed religious leader ... and his authority would extend *only so far as his message is of interest to us* ... the only [thing] left would be our own judgment in selecting ... what strikes us as helpful. *In other words, we would be alone.*”¹

2. THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST: FIVE POSSIBLE THEORIES.²

FIGURE 1: EXPLAINING THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS: THE FIVE POSSIBILITIES

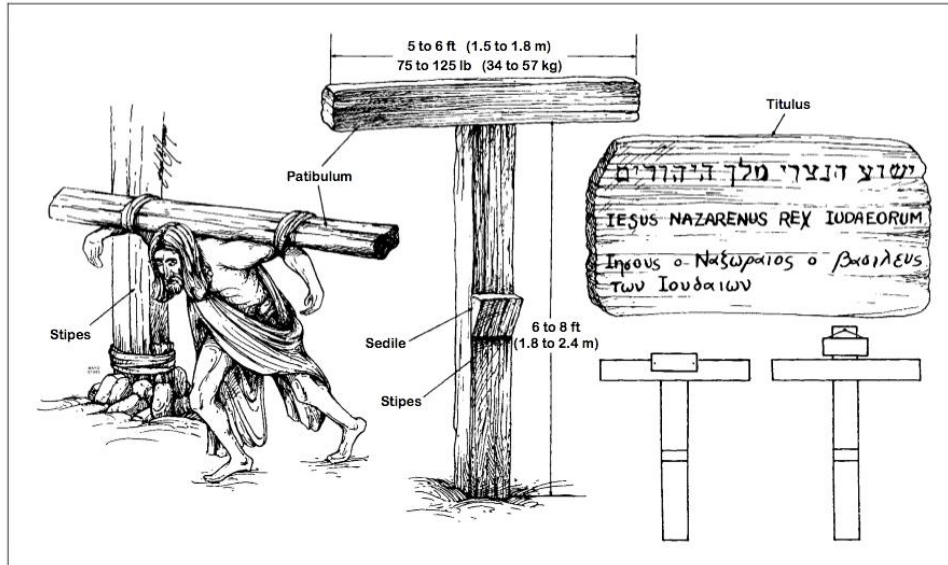


¹ Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *Jesus of Nazareth: Part Two: Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 241-42.

² For a helpful introduction, see: “The Resurrection,” Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics: Hundreds of Answers to Crucial Questions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 173-98. Also: “The Resurrection of Jesus” in: William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 255-98. See also: R. E. Brown, Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave, a Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels* (New York; London: Yale University Press, 1994) vol. II, 945-52; also M. O. Wise, “Crucifixion,” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism* (eds. John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 500-501; Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (trans. John Bowden; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

i) **THE “RESURRECTION” HYPOTHESIS (CHRISTIANITY).**

i) **FACT #1 JESUS DIED.** Jesus died by crucifixion on a Roman cross outside of Jerusalem



(Matt 27:32-55; Mark 15:6-41; Luke 23:26-49; John 9:17-37).

FIGURE 2: THE BRUTALITY OF ROMAN CRUCIFIXION

(1) **PUBLIC HUMILIATION, PSYCHOLOGICAL FEAR.**

(a) JOSEPHUS, *Jewish War* V. 451 “[Titus] allowed his soldiers to have their way ... he hoped that the gruesome sight of the countless crosses might have moved the besieged to surrender. The soldiers, out of the rage and hatred ... *nailed those they caught in different postures to the crosses, by way of jest.*”

(b) QUINTILIAN, *Declamations* 274: “When we [the Romans] crucify the guilty, *the most crowded roads are chosen, where most people can see and be moved by this fear.*”

(2) **HIGHLY EFFECTIVE CRUELTY: DEATH BY EX-CRUCIATION**

(a) While the Romans did not invent crucifixion, they perfected it to a horrific art.

(b) It was reserved it as a form of capital punishment. By nature, it was gruesome –

and intended to bring about a painfully slow, “*excruciating*” death.

(c) A brutal procession: It was customary for the condemned to carry his own cross from the flogging post to the site of crucifixion outside the city walls.

(3) **SURE AND CERTAIN DEATH**

(a) John, an eyewitness, certified that he saw “*blood and water*” come from Jesus’ pierced heart (*John* 19:34–35) a clear indication that an individual expired.

(b)

ii) **FACT #2: THE EMPTY TOMB**

(1) **A NEW TOMB.** Following his gruesome death, Jesus was buried in a new tomb, belonging to “Joseph of Arimathea.” All four Gospels attest to this (*Matt.* 27:57-60; *Mark* 15:42-46; *Luke* 23:50-54; *John* 19:31-42).

(2) **SEALED AND GUARDED.** *Matthew* indicates that the tomb was sealed by a guard: “*Pilate said to them, ‘You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can.’* So they went and made the Sepulchre secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.” (*Matt.* 27:65-66)

(3) **FOUND EMPTY.** On Sunday morning, the tomb was discovered as “empty” – the body was “missing.” This testimony is attested in all Four Gospels (*Matt.* 28:5-8; *Mark* 16:2-8; *Luke* 24:1-8; *John* 20:1-2).

(4) **COVER-UP AND BRIBERY BY OFFICIALS.** *Matthew* records, “And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, *they gave a sum of money to the soldiers and said, ‘Tell people, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’* And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble. [The soldiers] took the money and did as they were directed; *and this story has been spread among the Jews to this day*” (*Matt.* 28:12-15).

(5) **COMPELLING EVIDENCE.**

(a) While the empty tomb itself is “*not a direct proof of Resurrection*” - it remains a crucial piece of evidence that must be dealt with.⁴

(b) “Naturally, the empty tomb as such does not prove the Resurrection ... The empty tomb is no proof of the Resurrection, that much is undeniable. Conversely, though, one might ask: Is the Resurrection compatible with the body remaining in the tomb? Can Jesus be risen if he is still lying in the tomb? What kind of resurrection would that be?”⁵

iii) **FACT #3 THE BODILY RESURRECTION APPEARANCES OF JESUS.**

(1) **Numerous eye-witness appearances. The NT records numerous eye-witness appearances of Jesus, to:**

(a) MARY MAGDALENE (*Matt.* 28:5-8; *Mark* 16:2-8; *Luke* 24:1-8; *John* 20:1-2)

³ W. D. Edwards, M.D., F.E. Hosmer, AMI, et. al. “On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ” in: *Journal of the American Medical Association* (1986) #255 (11), 1455-1463. For an introduction to “crucifixion” in the first century, see especially: David W. Chapman, *Ancient Jewish and Christian Perceptions of Crucifixion* (WUNT 2.244; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010).

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #640; “Mary Magdalene, in John’s account, found it empty and *assumed that someone must have taken Jesus’ body away*” (J. Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: Part Two*, 254.).

⁵ “Naturally, the empty tomb as such does not prove the Resurrection ... The empty tomb is no proof of the Resurrection, that much is undeniable. Conversely, though, one might ask: Is the Resurrection compatible with the body remaining in the tomb? Can Jesus be risen if he is still lying in the tomb? What kind of resurrection would that be?” J. Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: Part Two*, 254.

- (b) THE TWELVE (*Matt. 28:16-17; Mark 16:14; Luke 24:34-43; John 20:19-25*)
- (c) APPEARANCES TO OTHER DISCIPLES (i.e., Emmaus Road *Luke 23:33-35*)
- (d) APPEARANCES TO MANY – INCLUDING ST. PAUL (*I Cor. 15:3-8*)
- (2) “*The mystery of Christ’s resurrection is a real event, with manifestations that were historically verified, as the NT bears witness. In about A.D. 56, St. Paul could already write to the Corinthians: “I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve ...” (I Cor. 15:1-4).*⁶

iv) **INITIAL CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE RESURRECTION HYPOTHESIS**

- (1) The case for the RH does not rest on religious belief but on solid data and eyewitness testimony.
- (2) There are three major facts that must be contended with:
 - (a) Jesus of Nazareth really died.
 - (b) The tomb of Jesus was found empty.
 - (c) The Resurrection appearances of Jesus.

ii) **EXAMINING THE FOUR ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS:**

(1) **THE HALLUCINATION HYPOTHESIS**

- (a) **OBJECTION:** Jesus’ disciples were “traumatized” and merely imagined that Jesus was raised from the dead, in a sort of hallucinatory fashion.
- (b) **FACTS:** There were far too many individuals effected / involved to make this scenario plausible.
 - (i) Hallucinations are *private, subjective, individual affairs*.
 - (ii) Hallucinations do not talk, walk or eat (*Luke 24:42; John 21:1-14*).
 - (iii) The disciples *touched* Jesus (*Matt 8:9; Luke 24:39; John 20:27*).
 - (iv)* *Where was the corpse?*

(2) **THE MYTH THEORY**

- (a) **OBJECTION:** Over many years, a “resurrection myth” grew and grew, replacing the fact that Jesus died and remained dead.
- (b) **FACTS:**
 - (i) The Four Gospels exhibit none of the literary style of ancient myth. “There are no overblown, spectacular, childishly exaggerated events. Nothing is arbitrary, everything is meaningful. The hand of a master is at work. *Psychological depth is at a maximum ...* The character depth and development of everyone in the Gospels - especially, of course, Jesus himself - is remarkable.”⁷
 - (ii) There simply was nowhere near enough time for such a myth to develop.
 - (1) A myth of this scale, magnitude and imagination would require an inordinate amount of time to lapse for the historical facts to be gradually subsumed into a mythical tale.

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para. 639.

⁷ Kreeft and Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, 189. St. Augustine, *Confessions* V.II.

- (2) Yet, “resurrection!” was the proclamation of the earliest Christians – from Pentecost onward – just weeks after the events themselves.
- (3) There is not even one generation from Jesus’ Resurrection to St. Paul’s epistles. The earliest NT writings.
- (4) The *terminus ad quem* (latest date) of the Four Gospels is, at the outset, 100 A.D. – and not later in the 2nd century as some scholars have suggested.

(3) **THE CONSPIRACY HYPOTHESIS**

(a) **OBJECTION:** Jesus’ disciples were not “merely deluded” but intentional *deceivers*.

(b) **FACTS:**

- (i) The very idea of an “individual resurrection in the middle of reality” was utterly unimaginable in first-century Judaism. How did the disciples think this up?
- (ii) There was absolutely no plausible advantage / motive for such a lie. What advantage would it *benefit them*?
 - (1) “If [the apostles] made up the story, they were the most creative, clever, intelligent fantasists in history, far surpassing Shakespeare, or Dante or Tolkien. ‘Fish stories’ are never that elaborate, that convincing, that life-changing, and that enduring. The disciples’ character argues strongly against such a conspiracy on the part of all of them, with no dissenters. They were simple, honest, common peasants, not cunning, conniving liars... Their sincerity is proved by their words and deeds. They preached a resurrected Christ and they lived a resurrected Christ. They willingly died for their ‘conspiracy.’ Nothing proves sincerity like martyrdom.”⁸

(4) **THE SWOON HYPOTHESIS**

(a) **OBJECTION:** Jesus did not actually die, but only appeared to have died.

(b) **FACTS:** Jesus could not have survived crucifixion (above).

- (i) Jesus’ legs were not broken, as He was *already dead* (*John* 19:31-32). The soldiers were *certain* that He expired and needed no further convincing.
- (ii) Blood and water poured out from his pierced heart (*John* 19:34-35), a sure sign of lung collapse and death by asphyxiation.
- (iii) How could Jesus, in a horrifically beaten, dehydrated, bleeding and shock-trauma state remove a massive stone from the tomb?
- (iv) How did He escape notice by the guards? Where did He go?
- (v) There is absolutely no data about a “later life” of Jesus’ after his crucifixion.

iii) **HISTORICAL CONCLUSIONS.** Given all of the evidence, the “Resurrection Hypothesis” is and remains the *best and most plausible* historical explanation of what transpired to Jesus of Nazareth after his death by crucifixion.

- i) Despite attempts to show that the Gospel accounts contradict one another, they are, in substance, remarkably coherent in the core narrative.
- ii) Numerous pieces of data demonstrate that *the tomb of Jesus was found empty* by a group of women followers. *No natural explanation or hypothesis can explain this fact.*
- iii) Subsequently, Jesus appeared to His numerous disciples in a physically raised and glorified (not merely resuscitated) body, *who saw him, spoke with him, touched him, ate with him – and were martyred in firm confidence that He was truly raised.*

⁸ Kreeft and. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, 185.

- iv) All alternative theories (*Hallucination; Swoon; Myth; Conspiracy*) must take all of this same historical data – and not only *disprove* their veracity, but additionally, *replace* the RH with a theory that is more plausible than it. None have succeeded in such attempts.
- v) “The stupefaction of contemporary scholarship when confronted with the facts of the empty tomb, the resurrection appearances, and the origin of Christian faith suggests that *no better rival is anywhere on the horizon.*”⁹

iv) **THE CHALLENGE OF THE RESURRECTION**

“The greatest importance of the resurrection is not in the past—“Christ rose”—but in the present—“Christ is risen.” The angel at the tomb asked the women, “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” (*Lk 24:5*). The same question could be asked today to mere historians and scholars. If only we did not keep Christ mummified in a casket labeled ‘history’ or ‘apologetics,’ *he would set our lives and world afire as powerfully as he did two millennia ago; and our new pagan empire would sit up, take notice, rub its eyes, wonder and convert a second time.*”¹⁰

POPE FRANCIS: “I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. With a tenderness which never disappoints, but is always capable of restoring our joy, he makes it possible for us to lift up our heads and to start anew. *Let us not flee from the resurrection of Jesus*, let us never give up, come what will. May nothing inspire more than his life, which impels us onwards!” (*Evangelii Gaudium* §3)

⁹ Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 295.

¹⁰ Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics: Hundreds of Answers to Crucial Questions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 177.