

Hard Questions

Is It Rational To Believe In A Resurrection?

Dan Barker is the co-president, Freedom From Religion Foundation. Dan became a teenage evangelist at age 15. At 16 he was choir librarian for faith-healer Kathryn Kuhlman's Los Angeles appearances. He received a degree in Religion from Azusa Pacific University and was ordained to the ministry in 1975.

Dan was a missionary in Mexico for two years. After that he maintained a touring musical ministry for 17 years, including eight years of full-time, cross-country evangelism.

Following five years of reading, Dan gradually outgrew his religious beliefs. He says, "I just lost faith in faith." He announced his atheism publicly in January, 1984.

In *Abuse Your Illusions: The Disinformation Guide To Media Mirages and Establishment Lies* Dan Baker writes;

"During the 19 years I preached the Gospel, the resurrection of Jesus was the keystone of my ministry. Every Easter I affirmed the Apostle Paul's admonition: "If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. I wrote a popular Easter musical called "His Fleece Was White As Snow" with the joyous finale proclaiming: "Sing Hosanna! Christ is Risen! The Son has risen to shine on me!"

But now I no longer believe it. Many bible scholars and ministers--including one third of the clergy in the Church of England--reject the idea that Jesus bodily came back to life.

Why? When the Gospel of John portrays the post-mortem Jesus on a fishing trip with his buddies and the writer of Matthew shows him giving his team a mountain-top pep talk two days after he died, how can there be any doubt that the original believers were convinced he had bodily risen from the grave?

There have been many reasons for doubting the claim, but the consensus among critical scholars today appears to be that the story is a "legend." During the 60-70 years it took for the Gospels to be composed, the original story went through a growth period that began with the unadorned idea that Jesus, like Grandma, had "died and gone to heaven" and ended with a fantastic narrative produced by a later generation of believers that included earthquakes, angels, an eclipse, a resuscitated corpse, and a spectacular bodily ascension into the clouds."

Could it possibly be true that this event that's the cornerstone of the Christian faith is just an illusion? Is Dan Baker right when he argues that Jesus' resurrection is really just a made up story with no historical foundation?

He's certainly right when he says that the resurrection is everything. Christianity stands or falls on the truth of the resurrection.

In fact, the Bible says *"And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty."* I Corinthians 15:14

See, everything is built on that foundation of Jesus' resurrection. So what if the resurrection is a myth? Is it rational to believe in the resurrection?

You say, "Wait a minute, Ed, how can we use the words rational and resurrection in the same sentence? People don't just rise from the dead, we all know that. Why should it be any different with Jesus Christ?"

What proof could there be in support of Jesus' resurrection?

We're in the final message in a series on hard questions that can cause people to doubt. Each week we've tried to look at issues from the lense of fact and evidence.

We believe that the key to a relationship with God is faith, but that that faith isn't blind. It's a reasonable faith that's built upon measured, verifiable evidence.

Now obviously we can't study the question of whether Jesus rose from the dead by using the scientific method.

His resurrection, if it occurred, was a non-repeatable event. So we need to be careful of just assuming that since resurrections don't happen to anyone else it couldn't have happened to Jesus.

If there's an all-powerful, creator, God then He can raise Jesus from the dead.

What we need to do is approach the question of the resurrection from a historical/legal standpoint.

We need to examine the testimony of history. We need to check out the evidence for ourselves and make our decision based on the validity of that evidence.

Thomas Arnold, author of the 3 volume work "History of Rome" and a fellow of Oriel College, Oxford wrote, "I have been used for many years to study the histories of other times, and to examine and weigh the evidence of those who have written about them, and I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better and fuller evidence of every sort, to the understanding of the fair inquirer, than the great sign which God has given us that Christ died and rose again from the dead."

Dr. Paul L Mair, professor of ancient history at Western Michigan University concluded that "If all the evidence is weighed carefully and fairly, it is indeed justifiable, according to the canons of historical research, to conclude that the tomb in which Jesus was buried was actually empty on the morning of the first Easter and no shred of evidence has yet been discovered in literary sources, epigraphy (study of inscriptions), or archaeology that would disprove this statement."

A few weeks ago, when we talked about the question, "Is it OK to doubt?" we mentioned Simon Greenleaf.

He was the Dane Professor of Law at Harvard University. Greenleaf wrote the three volume work, "A Treatise on the Law of Evidence" which is still considered to be one of the greatest single authorities on the use of legal evidence.

His was a Jewish born agnostic but he was challenged by his students to use the laws of evidence to examine the New Testament and especially the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

He took the challenge and the results are published in his book "An Examination of the Testimony of The Four Evangelists by the Rules of Evidence Administered in the Courts of Justice."

Simon Greenleaf became an unapologetic believer in Jesus Christ and wrote: "There is more evidence for the historical fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ than for just about any other event in history."

Like Simon Greenleaf, Frank Morrison wasn't the kind of guy you'd find in church on Sunday morning. He was a well-educated British lawyer who was, philosophically, skeptical towards Christianity. His thinking had been shaped by

philosophers and thinkers and writers and educators who denied the possibility of miracles.

Frank Morrison set out to write a book which would examine all the evidence in a lawyer-like fashion and would finally and fully disprove the historic Christian belief that Jesus was miraculously raised from the dead.

Little by little his research of the circumstances and the evidence and the facts began to pile up leading him to the opposite conclusion which he had originally set out to prove. The book which resulted was called *Who Moved The Stone?*

The first chapter is called "The Book That Refused To Be Written"

Over and over again this has happened. Those who examine the evidence thoroughly, with an unbiased attitude, recognize that there was a resurrection.

Maybe your not there yet. Maybe you're still looking into Christianity and checking out the evidence. That's OK. God wants us to investigate the Bible's claims. I honestly believe that God welcomes that kind of scrutiny.

But even if you haven't looked at all the evidence yet, you'll still have to admit that something major happened 2000 years ago that changed the course of history. It changed our very reckoning of time from before Christ to Anno Domini, the year of our Lord.

That something, whatever it was, was so dramatic that it completely changed the lives of 11 men so that all but one died a martyrs death.

That something was an empty tomb. An empty tomb that a 15 minute walk from Jerusalem would have confirmed or disproved.

What I'd like us to do for the rest of our time today is to consider the facts and then ask ourselves "Where does the evidence point?"

I. Jesus Died On A Cross

The man Jesus was brutally beaten, nailed to a cross, had a spear pushed through His side, and was declared dead by his Roman executioners who were experts at capital punishment.

His body was taken down from the cross, wrapped up like a mummy with strips of cloth imbedded with about 100 pounds of spices, placed in a cave, and sealed in with a large stone. Then to top it off, the tomb was sealed and a Roman guard was placed there to protect it.

When that tomb was sealed, it contained the dead body of Jesus of Nazareth.

In his book “Did Jesus Rise From The Dead?” Albert Roper, a graduate of the university of Virginia Law School and a lifelong member of the bar, writes,

“There can be, it would seem, no doubt in any reasonable mind that when Tiberius Caesar was Emperor at Rome and Pontius Pilate Procurator in Judea, one Jesus of Nazareth was crucified. That event has been accepted as an established fact by historians who have no connection whatsoever with the sacred record.”

“The Roman historian, Cornelius Tacitus, in his Annals 15;44, records as fact that one Christus was put to death by the procurator Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius Caesar.”

Turn to John 19 pg 961 Read 28-34

The reason they broke the legs of someone being crucified was so they could no longer hold themselves up and they’d suffocate.

The soldiers knew Jesus was dead. That’s why they didn’t break his legs.

II. Three Days Later The Tomb Was Empty

On the Sunday morning following the burial that tomb was empty. You say, “Wait a minute Ed, how do you know it was empty?”

Here’s how I know that.

Immediately Jesus followers went out and told everybody He has risen from the dead. Here’s what’s so significant about that. They didn’t go on a preaching tour across the Roman Empire. They didn’t show up in Athens or Corinth.

They started right in the city of Jerusalem, of all places. The whole resurrection thing wouldn't have lasted for 10 minutes if that tomb hadn't been empty.

If that tomb still held the body of Jesus Christ Christianity would have been over before it ever started.

The last thing the Roman authorities and the Jewish leaders wanted was a bunch of people running around saying that Jesus was alive. That's why the guard was posted in the first place.

You can bet that they would have paraded Jesus body up and down the streets of Jerusalem at the first hint of trouble if they had it.

Interestingly, even the Jewish historian, Josephus, mentions that the tomb was empty. But what I find even more fascinating was that not one writer of ancient history says different.

Tom Anderson, former president of the California's Trial Lawyers Association says, "Let's assume that Christ did not rise from the dead. Let's assume that the written accounts of His appearances to hundreds of people are false. I want to pose a question. With an event so well publicized, don't you think that it's reasonable that one historian, one eye witness, one antagonist would record for all time that he had seen Christ's body? 'Listen, I saw the tomb. It was not empty! I was there. Christ did not rise from the dead. As a matter of fact, I saw His body.' The silence of history is deafening when it comes to a testimony against the resurrection."

So fact 1, Jesus died and was buried. Fact 2, on Easter morning the tomb was empty.

III. A Whole Roman Guard Went AWOL

Matthew 27 pg 880 Read 27:62 - 28:4, 11-15

There were 16 hardened soldiers posted to guard that tomb. The authorities had a vested interest in making sure that Jesus' body stayed in that grave. They wanted to make sure that there wasn't a question in anyone's mind.

Jesus has spoken explicitly about His resurrection. They just wanted this whole Jesus thing to die out and go away.

These soldiers were part of the best trained fighting force in the world. To fall asleep or to fail in anyway was a crime punishable by death.

And yet we're told there was an earthquake, the stone was rolled back, and when it was, the tomb was empty.

The guards were frightened for their lives. Their only hope was to get the Jewish authorities on their side so they went to them and said, "Big problem! This Jesus is gone and we're going to loose our heads."

The leaders said, "We'll take care of your commanding officer. You just tell everyone that you fell asleep and the disciples came along and stole the body."

You don't have to be the sharpest knife in the drawer to see the holes in that story.

If they were asleep how did they know the disciples stole the body? And to top it off how did 11 guys sneak up on them, roll back a massive stone, and run off with the body without waking anybody up?

What was it that made these men, under penalty of death, leave their post? I believe that nothing else outside of a resurrection could account for their desertion.

IV. Confirmed Appearances of Christ

Several times Jesus Christ appeared alive after the cataclysmic events of the first Easter.

When you're studying an event in ancient history, it's always important to investigate whether enough people who were supposed eyewitnesses to the event were alive when the facts about the event were published.

If we saw a crime being committed, and two weeks later a news report came out that was bogus, we could speak to that and refute it.

If there were eyewitnesses to Jesus this would be very important information to recon with.

One of the earliest records of Christ's appearing after the resurrection is give by Paul. **Turn to I Corinthians 15 pg 1022 Read 3-8**

Dr. Edwin Yamauchi, retired professor of history at Miami University makes this observation. "What gives special authority to this list as historical evidence is the reference to most of the 500 brethren being still alive. Paul says in effect, 'if you don't believe me, you can ask them.'"

"Such a statement in an admittedly genuine letter written 30 years after the event is almost as strong evidence as one could hope to get from something that happened nearly 2000 years ago."

If you took those 500 witnesses who saw Jesus alive after his death and burial and put them in a court room to testify. And they each testified just 6 minutes each, including cross examination you would have an amazing 50 hours of firsthand eye witness testimony. Add to that the testimony of the many other eyewitnesses and you would have the largest, most lopsided trials in history.

Not only that, but you have to remember that the people who saw Jesus Christ after the resurrection weren't all eagerly waiting for him to rise. This wasn't some kind of mass hallucination.

He appeared to Mary but when she told the disciples Mark tells us they refused to believe. He showed himself to to men walking along the Judean countryside. They went and told the disciples too. Again, the disciples wouldn't believe it.

Look now at John 20 pg 962 Read 19-21, 31

Christ appeared to his own disciples and they finally believed when they saw him but that first time the disciple Thomas wasn't there.

All the rest told him "Hey we've seen Jesus alive" and Thomas said "Sure you did." "I'll believe when I see him and not before."

And of course when Christ appeared to Thomas he fell on his knees and said "My Lord and my God."

The 5th and final fact that would have to be taken into account in thinking about the validity of the resurrection story is the changed lives of the disciples.

V. Changed Lives of the Disciples

During Christ's life on earth the disciples exhibited an occasional demonstration of boldness but most of the time they were fearful and vacillating.

The night that Jesus was arrested John followed Christ to the place where he was questioned but everyone else took off and Peter even swore and denied any association with Jesus.

After the crucifixion they all were in hiding expecting to be next for execution.

But then something happened. Some event transpired in their lives that gave them the boldness to go out on the street corners and preach and to eventually give up their lives as martyrs.

Stephen was stoned to death. Matthew was killed in Ethiopia. Mark was dragged through the streets until dead. Luke hanged, Andrew was tied to a cross and left to die, James beheaded, Philip crucified, Bartholomew whipped to death, Thomas lanced, Jude shot with arrows, Matthias stoned to death, Paul beheaded and Peter crucified upside down because he said he wasn't worthy to die like his Lord.

What motivated them? What made them change? It certainly wasn't prestige, wealth, and increased social status.

There's only one answer that fits the facts. They saw the resurrected Christ. They weren't out there preaching theory or personal opinion. They were preaching fact. That's what accounts for their dedication, and nothing else can.

We can know there's a happy ending. As bleak as things look sometimes there's a happy ending to the human story because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The facts are all there. It happened.

Lord Caldecote, Lord Chief of Justice of England has written: "My examination of the cardinal test of the claims of Jesus Christ, namely, his resurrection, has lead me as often as I have tried to examine the evidence to believe it as a fact beyond dispute."

This morning I'd like to challenge you to ask yourself this logical question: "What difference does all of this evidence make to me? What difference does it make whether or not I believe Christ rose again?"

I think the answer is best put by something that Jesus said to Thomas. He told him: "I am the way, the truth and the life, no man comes unto the father but by me."

With the basis of all the evidence for Christ's resurrection, and considering the fact that Jesus offered forgiveness of sin and eternal life with God, who would be so foolhardy as to reject him? Christ is alive? He's living today.

To know him is life eternal life. To reject him is, according to the Bible, to reject the only way to heaven.