

Know Why You Believe Part 1: Resurrection

Welcome and Introductions

From the word you heard to your world

Which aspects of this sermon did you find most interesting/exciting/challenging?

What questions or difficulties arise for you as you consider the sermon?

Wrestling with the Word

The earliest Gospel account of Jesus' burial and empty tomb is found in the Gospel of Mark. It ends in a very surprising way. Read **Mark 15:42-16:8**.

Do you agree that this account seems 'stark in its simplicity and unadorned by theological reflection'? Why do you think Mark finished his Gospel in this way?

Read **John 20:24-29**. If you were in Thomas's shoes, what would have constituted 'good enough' evidence for you to believe that Jesus was risen? What do you think constitutes reasonable evidence now? What is the strongest evidence for you that Christ is Risen – He is Risen indeed?

The earliest piece of evidence from the bible that Jesus rose from the dead is agreed by many scholars to be found in **1 Corinthians 15:3-8**.

Almost all biblical commentators believe that this statement in 1 Corinthians is in the form of an early Christian creed – a public confession, passed on from person to person, and given to Paul after his conversion (but formulated before Paul was converted to Christianity). It contains some technical language that indicates Paul himself did not come up with it, but simply repeated what had been passed on to him. Paul became a Christian about 3 years after Jesus' death. This creed was already formulated by the time Paul became a Christian.

What can we learn about Christian beliefs within 3 years of Jesus' death from this Creed? Why are these things important?

Wrestling with the World

Gary Habermas, a Christian apologist, deduces a 'set of minimal facts,' about which almost all scholars agree, about the resurrection of Jesus. They include the following twelve points:

1. Jesus died by crucifixion.
2. He was buried.
3. The death of Jesus caused the disciples to despair and lose hope, believing that his life was ended.
4. Many scholars hold that the tomb in which Jesus was buried was discovered to be empty just a few days later.
5. The disciples had experiences they believed were the literal appearances of the risen Jesus.
6. The disciples were transformed from doubters who were afraid to identify themselves with Jesus to bold proclaimers of his death and resurrection.
7. This message was the centre of the preaching of the early church.
8. This message was especially proclaimed in Jerusalem, where Jesus died and was buried shortly before.

9. As a result of this teaching, the church was born and grew.
10. Sunday became the primary day of worship.
11. James, who had been a skeptic, was converted to the faith when he also believed that he had seen the resurrected Jesus.
12. A few years later, Paul was converted by an experience that he likewise believed to be an appearance of the risen Jesus.

You could make up a much shorter list of ‘minimal facts’ surrounding the resurrection of Jesus. It might even be reduced to this:

1. After Jesus died, the tomb was found to be empty of his body.
2. The disciples and others, including those who disbelieved in Jesus during his lifetime, such as James (Jesus’ brother) and Paul, claimed they had met the bodily resurrected Jesus.
3. 10 out of 11 of the apostles (11 out of 12 if we include Paul) died for proclaiming their belief that Jesus was alive, yet there is no record that any of them ever recanted, even under torture.

Many people have tried to explain these ‘minimal facts’ by postulating something other than the physical resurrection of Jesus. Can you think of any other explanation that fits all of the minimal facts? How do you think the disciples would respond to your alternative explanation?

Evidence external to the Bible

There are at least 5 profound ways in which the earliest Christian community changed the social practices of its Jewish roots. These are pieces of circumstantial evidence, external to Biblical evidence, which point to *something happening* to cause these fundamental changes in the earliest community of Christian disciples.

1. The disciples were willing to die for their beliefs that Jesus, who suffered the ‘ultimate penalty’ as a criminal, was raised from the dead.

(Rhetorical questions) What would you be willing to die for? Given that the disciples were in the best position to know whether or not what they said about Jesus was true, how likely is it that they would be willing to die for what they knew was false? How likely is it that none of them would recant under torture?
2. Skeptics were converted (Paul, James – see above)
3. Changes to key social structures of Jewish life. – Sabbath worship is replaced by Sunday worship; Animal sacrifices are given up; Adherence to the Laws of Moses is no longer required; the rise of belief in the Trinity and the worship of Jesus as God; the statement ‘Jesus Christ is Lord’ as a replacement for the statement ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one’ (ie the shift from absolute monotheism to Trinitarian monotheism).

(Rhetorical Question: What would it take you to change your most cherished beliefs and practices?)
4. The sacraments of Communion and Baptism

(Rhetorical Question: IF you had a beloved friend who died a violent death, would you gather regularly to celebrate *with joy* the death of that friend? How would you explain the rise of the celebration of Communion among early Jewish Christians? Would you be willing to undergo a ceremony in which you relived and were said to participate in that friend’s death, such as Christian baptism clearly was – see Romans chapter 5 & 6?)
5. The emergence of the Church

(One commentator said that the rise of the early church ‘rips a great hole in history, a hole the size and shape of the Resurrection.’ What do you think of this?)

The historian Tacitus wrote about Nero blaming the great fire of Rome in 64 AD on the sect called Christians:

Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.[4]

What does this quote tell us about the spread of Christianity by 64AD, just over 30 years after Jesus’ death? How many Christians were there already in Rome by this time? What does it tell us about the attitude of Christians to death and to denying that they were Christians?)

Thinking things through

The Biblical proclamation is not only that Jesus **was** alive but that Jesus **is** alive.

The proclamation is not merely ‘he **has** risen’ (past tense) but that **Jesus IS risen** (present tense, something that is still true and effective now). Not just that the tomb was empty, but that people meet with the living Jesus.

Because Jesus is living now, it’s possible to have a relationship with him – communicate with him, talk with him, know him. The factual evidence can strengthen our faith (our commitment to and trust in Jesus) – and help us in the step of putting the factual evidence to the experiential test through a relationship with the living Jesus.

Experiential evidences include answered prayer, changed lives of Jesus’ followers including you, the witness of the Holy Spirit, the power of Jesus’ message and presence, the witness of the Holy Spirit, and others.

What are the most powerful evidences for the resurrection of Jesus for you? Are they the factual evidences or the experiential evidences, or a combination of both?

Read **Romans 6:1-14**. What difference does Jesus’ resurrection make to those who follow him?

In what ways have you experienced the presence of the Risen Jesus in your life? In the life of others?

When has the message of the resurrection of Jesus been most powerful in your life?

How does this message impact on your day to day life? Would you like it to do so more? How might that happen?

What would you say to a friend who said to you, ‘Why should I believe that Jesus rose from the dead?’

Jesus says to Thomas in John 21, ‘Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who do not see yet still believe.’ That means us!

Spend some time in prayer for each other.