

1 Corinthians 15:3-7

In 1993 FBI agents conducted a raid of Southwood psychiatric hospital in San Diego, which was under investigation for medical insurance fraud. After hours of reviewing medical records, the agents had worked up an appetite. The agent in charge of the investigation called a nearby pizza parlor to order a quick dinner for his colleagues.

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According to snopes.com, the following telephone conversation actually took place.

Agent: Hello. I would like to order 19 large pizzas and 67 cans of soda.

Pizza Man: And where would you like them delivered?

Agent: We're over at the psychiatric hospital.

Pizza Man: The psychiatric hospital?

Agent: That's right. I'm an FBI agent.

Pizza Man: You're an FBI agent?

Agent: That's correct. Just about everybody here is.

Pizza Man: And you're at the psychiatric hospital?

Agent: That's correct. And make sure you don't go through the front doors. We have them locked. You will have to go around to the back to the service entrance to deliver the pizzas.

Pizza Man: And you say you're all FBI agents?

Agent: That's right. How soon can you have them here?

Pizza Man: And everyone at the psychiatric hospital is an FBI agent?

Agent: That's right. We've been here all day and we're starving.

Pizza Man: How are you going to pay for all of this?

Agent: I have my checkbook right here.

Pizza Man: And you're all FBI agents?

Agent: That's right. Everyone here is an FBI agent. Can you remember to bring the pizzas and sodas to the service entrance in the rear? We have the front doors locked.

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Pizza Man: I don't think so.

**** Click ****

(Kevin A. Miller, vice president, Christianity Today International; source: www.vasthumor.isfunny.com)

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Sometimes doubt is a perfectly reasonable response. Sometimes it's the right response. It can even save us heartache and hassle. But sometimes our doubts don't represent reality. If the question is important enough, then it's not only reasonable, it's wise to take the time to investigate the evidence – to doubt our doubts. After all, doubt should be submitted to the same scrutiny as belief. Sometimes our assumptions are wrong. Sometimes the evidence points away from doubt toward belief. Sometimes FBI agents really have taken over the psychiatric hospital.

Every 3 or 4 years, we do that here at Gateway on Easter Sunday: we examine the evidence of Jesus' resurrection. I'm convinced the question is that important. We said here last Sunday that the Christian faith rises and falls on the actuality of Jesus' death and resurrection. Our faith is not simply a philosophy of life or a set of religious practices. It rests on the belief in the historical fact of Jesus' resurrection. The Apostle Paul put it like this:

“If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ¹⁵ More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God,

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for we have testified about God that he raised
Christ from the dead."

1 Corinthians

15:14-15

If you or I disbelieve the fact of the resurrection then we
may be wonderful people but we are not Christ-followers.

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But let's admit it; the resurrection of Jesus is hard to
believe. There is simply nothing like it in our experience.
We've never heard anything like it, we cannot recreate it nor
can we examine it directly. And we've been trained to
believe only what we can observe and re-create and dissect
and examine.

But, in fairness to the first witnesses, they themselves
understood this to be a radically unique, once-in-history
event. So, if we're going to examine Jesus' resurrection,
we'll have to approach this question differently.

I. APPROACHES

In recent history, two main approaches to the study of
Jesus' life have been proposed. These approaches
dominated much of the academic approach to Jesus in the
20th Century, although this has begun to change in recent
years. And these approaches dramatically limit our ability to
believe in the historical validity of Jesus' resurrection if we
adopt them. The first approach is ...

1. ... to demythologize Jesus

Rudolph Bultmann was a German NT scholar and the most famous proponent of this approach. He summarized the assumption of this approach: "It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles." ('NT and Mythology' p. 5)

Given this approach, the events of Jesus' life are examined in light of our experience and everything that does not match with our observation or our experience of reality is not considered historical. These are considered to be mythical recreations designed to communicate some theological truth in larger than life form. So, for example, according to Bultmann the belief in God's omnipotence is demonstrated in the fictional form of Jesus calming the sea. In the case of the resurrection: the reality that God transcends death is communicated through the myth of the resurrection of Jesus.

Problem with this approach:

But the problem with this approach is that its proponents end up rejecting the resurrection and other miracle stories without a thorough investigation. Bultmann, for example,

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took as his starting point: "Is it not a mythical event pure and simple? Obviously it is not an event of past history. Our own history confirms this for us." He comes to this conclusion without a proper examination of the evidence. He simply assumes it.

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He does not put the shoe on the other foot, so to speak. He does not doubt his doubts. In other words, there is no physical proof and not a shred of documentary evidence that would suggest that Jesus' resurrection is a myth used by his followers to represent an epic theological truth.

One scholar (John Macquarrie) who was sympathetic with Bultmann in many ways says this of Bultmann's approach to the resurrection:

"And here we must take Bultmann to task for what appears to be an entirely arbitrary dismissal of the possibility of understanding the resurrection ...The one valid way in which we can ascertain whether a certain event took place or not is not by bringing in some sweeping assumption to show that it could not have taken place, but to consider the historical evidence available, and decide on that."

Bultmann is to be commended in that he at least gave an explanation for where the resurrection story might have come from. But his explanation should itself have some standing in reality. There should be some *reason* to believe it. For example, if there were a 1st or 2nd C. Jewish source that claimed Jesus' resurrection was a myth then there would be some actual reason to believe it. But there isn't.

2. A second approach: Natural/rational explanation

According to this approach, the events of Jesus' life, especially his resurrection, have some basis in history but there is a natural explanation behind the events. Miraculous occurrences are contrary to nature and to all observation, the naturalists say. While those who believe in miracles are not liars nor are they trying to create myth, they are just misled. In other words, there is a natural explanation for everything – in some cases, we don't know it yet, but given enough time and the right investigative energy we will discover it.

For example, walking on the water might really have been walking on ice blocks floating in the water. Healing stories were really examples of the human minds' ability to rouse and heal itself when it is in an excited state. Concerning the resurrection specifically, the swoon theory would be the

most important example of the Rationalist approach.

According to the swoon theory, Jesus did not actually die on the cross. Because of the trauma he experienced, he passed out; then later he resuscitated.

Problem:

The problem with this approach is that it makes the same mistake as the demythologizing approach; and the same mistake it accuses faith of making: that is, it begins with an assumption and then it formulates its ideas in light of that assumption. Simply put, this approach assumes that miracles cannot happen, by definition, because they have not been verifiably observed – or at least they have not been observed by the one who is doubting. So since I have not observed a miracle and I cannot reliably recreate one, then they don't exist.

I would suggest a better approach than either of these approaches is to let the evidence speak for itself.

QUESTION: WHEN LAST TIME LOOKING AT A TELE OR MICROSCOPE

II. THE EVIDENCE

I want to begin our examination of the evidence by looking at the death of Jesus. The swoon theory is perhaps the

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most reasonable counter explanation for belief in the resurrection. It explains how the first followers could have been truly deceived. It explains how the idea could have gained a foothold so early. So what does the evidence say? Could it be that Jesus never really died?

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After Jesus' trial, John 19:1 says, "Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged." This was not unusual for Roman crucifixions. Many detailed descriptions of Roman floggings and crucifixions have survived the centuries so that we have a real good idea about what this process was like.

Jesus would have been tied to a post and beaten at least 39 times with a whip that had jagged bones and balls of lead woven into it. The heavy thongs would have cut through his skin, and as the blows continued, they would have cut deeper into the underlying tissues, initially producing an oozing of blood from the capillaries and veins and finally the spurting of arterial bleeding from vessels in the underlying tissues and muscles as the cuts got deeper. By the end, the skin of his back would have been left hanging in long ribbons, and the entire area would have been an unrecognizable mass of torn and bleeding tissue.

One witness to a Roman flogging wrote, "The sufferers veins were laid bare. The very muscles and tendons and bowels

of the victim were laid open to exposure.” Many people sentenced to be crucified never made it alive to the cross; they died at the flogging.

Undoubtedly, Jesus was in very critical condition even before the crucifixion began. It's no wonder that the historical accounts tell us that he was unable to carry his own cross.

He was laid on top of the cross on the ground and five to seven inch spikes were driven through his wrists, crushing the median nerve, which is the largest nerve that runs to the hand. After his wrists and feet were nailed securely to the cross, the cross was hoisted into the air with Jesus hanging from the crossbeam.

Crucifixion was a well conceived crime deterrent. It was designed to inflict maximum agony. It was a slow death by suffocation. It happened like this: because of the way Jesus' body hung, the stress on his windpipe and chest muscles was so great that he could inhale but he could not exhale unless he pushed up with his feet to relieve some of the pressure on his chest. Again and again Jesus had to push up against incredible pain, while the tissue in his feet ripped. Eventually exhaustion set in.

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If the Romans wanted to hasten death, they would come by with a mallet and shatter the shin bones of the person on the cross, so he could no longer push up. The person would then more quickly asphyxiate. That's what the executioners did to the criminals who were crucified on Jesus' side; but they didn't do that to Jesus because it was clear Jesus was already dead. These Roman torturers were quite expert in the art of killing. It was their job to insure that no one came down from a Roman cross alive. Still, in Jesus case, as in others according to historical accounts, the soldiers confirmed his death by plunging a spear between his ribs. Modern medical experts who have studied the accounts of the witnesses have surmised that the spear punctured the sack around his heart as well as the heart itself. This would explain the issue of a clear fluid and streams of blood. Jesus Christ was dead.

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An article in the *Journal of the American Medical Society* (3/21/86) agreed saying:

"Clearly, the weight of the historical and medical evidence indicates that Jesus was dead before the wound to his side was inflicted and supports the traditional view that the spear probably perforated not only the right lung but also the paracardium and heart, and thereby, insured his death. Accordingly,

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interpretations based on the assumption that Jesus did not die on the cross appear to be at odds with modern medical knowledge.”

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So what if Jesus did somehow survive the cross? What if he decided to deceive the crowd – perhaps even his followers – and claim he had risen from the dead? Even though this would be completely inconsistent with everything we know about Jesus, let’s just suppose it happened. That would mean that he somehow escaped the linen cocoon in which his body was wrapped which contained 75 to 100 pounds of spices. This would also mean that he was able to push away the boulder from the mouth of his tomb, a boulder so large one ancient account said 20 men couldn’t budge it. And then he was able to sneak past the Roman guards surrounding his tomb?

Suppose all of this happened ... think of the condition he would have been in when he appeared to his disciples. His would certainly not have been the kind of image that would have inspired a revolution. “Hey guys, I am risen from the dead. Let’s go take the world.” I suspect they would have been more inclined to call a doctor than start preaching about him.

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The best interpretation of the facts is that Jesus Christ died on the cross. That part is easy enough, but why should we believe that he rose again from the dead.

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First piece of evidence: the early accounts

Accounts of Jesus' resurrection surfaced very early after the event, *before* mythology could contaminate them. The first biography of Jesus was written within 40 years after his death. Paul's first letter was written within 30 years after Jesus' death. And Paul and John both contain quotes of hymns and creeds that were formulated much earlier than that. In fact, scholarship is unanimous in affirming that the earliest creeds like the one we quoted at the beginning today were formulated at the latest less than 5 years after Jesus' resurrection.

The creed from 1 Corinthians 15 says, "Jesus died for our sins according to the Scriptures. He was buried. And he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures."

The creed goes on to specifically mention eye witnesses to whom Jesus appeared. The fact that these accounts of Jesus' resurrection emerge so early completely contradicts the assertion that the resurrection was a product of myth that developed during the decades following Jesus' life. In

other words, there simply was not enough time for the myth of resurrection to have developed and spread.

Studies into the rate at which legend accrued in the ancient world conclude that it took a minimum of two generations for legend to corrupt a solid core of historical fact. There was nowhere near that amount of time in the case of Jesus Christ. In fact, when the apostle Paul mentions that Jesus appeared to 500 people at one time, he says many of the 500 were still alive. In effect, Paul was saying, "If you don't believe me, go ask the witnesses. They're still around." The proclamation that Jesus Christ is the resurrected Son of God began virtually immediately after his death. It was not a product of mythology.

Second piece of evidence: Empty Tomb

The NT accounts unanimously confirm that Jesus was buried in a typical ancient near eastern tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea. This is certainly not the kind of detail that the NT authors would have invented. Joseph was a member of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the very group of Jewish leaders who falsely accused Jesus and then led the uprising which ultimately forced Pilate's hand and caused Jesus to be crucified. That Jesus was shown extraordinary, uncommon kindness by a member of the Sanhedrin is not the kind of

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feature which can easily be explained away unless it is true. And, all four accounts mention this detail.

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Why is this important? First, given Joseph's position and station in life, his tomb would fit the description given by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It would have been an open hole in a hillside outside of which there would have been a trench that formed the trough for a large stone.

But more importantly, the tomb would have been well-known. Jesus' place of burial was well-known! The NT accounts tell us it was even guarded because the Jewish leaders feared that Jesus' Jewish followers would steal his body.

The claim that Jesus' tomb was empty would have been easy to refute. Even up to the time of the final writing of the four biographies, the location would have still been known and the claim could have been refutable.

So maybe the disciples stole the body. Maybe a tired, disorganized, disheartened group of untrained backwater Galileans most of whom had already deserted him – maybe they overwhelmed the armed Roman guards and broke open the tomb and stole the body. But I don't think so.

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It's also important to note that even Jesus' *opponents* admitted the tomb was empty. The accounts tell us they bribed the guards of the tomb to say it was the disciples who stole the body while they were asleep. This, of course, is ridiculous since the disciples wouldn't have had the opportunity. Besides, if the guards were sleeping, how did they know it was the disciples who stole the body?

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No, the complete absence of dissenting voices confirms beyond doubt that the tomb was empty. Again, no 1st C. witnesses claim that Jesus was still in the ground. The whole point of the crucifixion had been to rid the Jewish community of the blasphemy and the threat to stability that Jesus represented to the authorities. Don't you know that if they had his body or knew where it was they would have produced it? Instead they admitted the tomb was empty on Easter. This does not mean that they all came to believe in him. They may have truly believed the disciples stole the body. So even more so, their testimony confirms that the tomb was empty.

So how did it happen? Certainly the Romans and Jewish authorities wouldn't have taken the body. They wanted Jesus dead and gone.

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What about the disciples? As I said, let's remember they had nothing to gain and everything to lose by stealing the body? They surely would not have chosen deprivation, ostracism, torture and death for a charade. If this had been a conspiracy, certainly one of the disciples would have broken ranks under the pain of torture and told the truth. But it never happened.

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Perhaps the women on Easter morning went to the wrong tomb. When they found it empty, they wrongly assumed Jesus had returned. But this argument doesn't withstand scrutiny either. Not only did Mary Magdalene and the other women find the tomb empty, but Peter and John came out and checked it out for themselves. Don't you think they would have made absolutely sure this was the right tomb before they risked their lives proclaiming that Jesus' body was gone? Besides, Joseph of Arimathea knew where his own tomb was located, and he certainly would have told them. If all of them came down with collective amnesia, surely the Jewish and Roman authorities would have pointed out, "No, here's the real tomb," so they could show that Jesus was still inside.

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There is no account from any source within the Bible or outside of it, from any authority, Roman or Jewish, declaring that the claim of an empty tomb was incorrect. History's unanimous testimony is that on Easter morning the tomb was empty. There was no motive for the Jewish authorities, the Romans, or the disciples to have stolen the body. So what happened? One explanation is that Jesus really did return from the dead.

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Third piece of evidence: Eyewitnesses

A small group of women were the first witnesses to the resurrection. The fact that the Bible says women discovered the tomb lends even more credibility to these accounts. In all matters, women had low status in Jewish society at that time. Their testimony was often not admissible in court. If the disciples were fabricating this story, surely they would have put the claim of an empty tomb on the tongues of a group of men. Not just because the testimony of men would have been more credible in that culture, but these men simply would have never thought to insert women into the heart of this story. This is one more indication that the writers were committed to recording actual events as they actually happened, even though it did not at first glance help their case.

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But far more than just these women, the first generation accounts tell us that over the 40 days after the resurrection Jesus appeared a dozen times to more than 515 different individuals. He talked with people. He ate with people. He even invited one skeptic to put his fingers in his hands where the nail holes were and to put his hand in his side where the spear had been thrust into him.

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Five hundred fifteen eye witnesses. That is a lot of people. If we had a trial on the question of whether Jesus returned from the dead, and if we were to call each one of the 515 witnesses to give a first-hand account of their encounter with Jesus for just 15 minutes, and if we did it around the clock, we'd be sitting here for FIVE DAYS AND NINE HOURS. I wonder, after sitting through 128 hours of eye witness testimony, how many people would leave here unconvinced of Jesus' resurrection?

Well, what if they were all hallucinating. One psychologist commenting on the hallucinating theory reminded his readers that hallucinations are like dreams. They're individual events that cannot be shared. He said, "If you had 515 people all having the same hallucination at the same time that would be a bigger miracle than the resurrection itself."

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Maybe it was group-think. This occurs when people in a group subtly encourage one another through the power of suggestion to see an image that isn't really there. Dr. Gary Collins, the president of a national association of psychologists, was asked if this was possible.

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"The circumstances would have been all wrong for this sort of thing to have occurred," he said. "The disciples were not anticipating a resurrection. The idea of Jesus coming back from the dead would run totally contrary to all of their Jewish, cultural, and religious beliefs – as well as their experience. So they weren't primed for that sort of thing to have happened. Besides, Jesus ate with them. He talked back to them. He appeared at numerous times before all kinds of people with all kinds of different emotional make-ups and in various settings – all of which runs contrary to this group-think theory."

The appearances of Jesus were not hallucinations, not wish fulfillments, and not mythology. So how do we explain them? Well, one explanation is that they were real historical events that revolutionized people's lives. Think about what happened to the disciples. History tells us that before Easter they defected because they thought their leader was gone forever. The disciples after the crucifixion were hiding

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behind closed doors, afraid they might be put to death. Yet, after their claim of having seen Jesus these same men and women were out boldly proclaiming that Jesus Christ was alive at the risk of their own lives. Suddenly these once cowardly individuals were transformed. It is difficult to imagine an event cataclysmic enough to have produced this kind of change. However, the bodily resurrection of a dead man is such an event.

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History suggests that at least Peter, James and John suffered violent deaths. Yet none of them ever disavowed their testimony that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who literally and bodily appeared to them.

Charles Colson was a part of the inner circle for President Richard Nixon during his reelection campaign and during the Watergate incident. He was not a Christ-follower at the time, but later became one. I love what Colson said about the resurrection:

"I know the resurrection is a fact, and Watergate proved it to me. How? Because 12 men testified they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years, never once denying it. Every one was beaten, tortured, stoned and put in prison. They would not have endured that if it weren't true. Watergate embroiled 12 of the most powerful men in the world-and they couldn't keep a lie for three weeks.

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You're telling me 12 apostles could keep a lie for 40 years? Absolutely impossible."

For me over the years, the lives of disciples is the thing that has provided the most assurance to my own stubborn and doubt-ridden heart. I remember the blinding realization when I caught the significance of this. Looking at the lives and ultimately the deaths of these disciples I used to think, "Hey, but there are all kinds of crackpots who will die for their religious beliefs." Almost every month, some incredibly devout and sincere person will strap explosives to themselves somewhere in the world and drive or walk or fly willingly to their death.

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And then it hit me. All of these people die for what they *really believe*. None of them would die for something they know to be a myth. And in the case of the disciples, their lives are radically altered beyond recognition and ultimately they are killed ... would they do this for a known lie?

And remember, they weren't proposing a philosophy or a belief system like communism or Islam. They were witnessing to a history-altering event. They had seen the .resurrected Son of God. They had heard him speak, touched his scarred hands and side, broken bread with him.

SO WHAT? WHY DOES THIS MATTER

1. If you are a follower of Christ, then knowing the reality of the resurrection with confidence is a huge boost to your faith.

Erik Weißenmayer, is a blind mountaineer who successfully scaled Mount Everest. He wrote this in Outside magazine:

A few days after I arrived in the Khumbu Valley for the Mount Everest climb, a rumor began circulating. Because I wasn't flopping on my face every few minutes, the Sherpas thought I was lying about my blindness. Women would approach me in the alleys of Namche Bazaar and wave their hands in front of my face. I'd feel the wind and flinch, which only confirmed their suspicions. Finally, I resorted to drastic measures. I asked Kami Tenzing, our climbing sirdar, into the kitchen tent. "Kami," I said, "I want to give you a message to take back to the Sherpas." I pulled down my left lower eyelid, leaned my head forward, and my prosthetic eye plopped into my palm. "I can take the other out if you want," I said. "No!" he said firmly. "Not necessary."

The resurrection is God popping one eye out for us.

- It validates all the other stuff he did.
- It validates all the other stuff he said.
- It validates what his followers said about him.
- And it gives us the confidence to live our lives with a different kind of perspective. Death is not the end.

2. If you are not a follower of Christ, if you have never placed your trust completely in Christ, then I hope this will give you reason to place your trust there today!

(Most doubt is emotional based)

So what will you do with the evidence? Will you recommit your life to the only cause that ultimately matters? Or will you commit yourself fully for the first time? Will you dedicate yourself to being a student of Jesus? If Jesus Christ is really raised from the dead, then that one fact changes everything! And the evidence points convincingly to Jesus Christ having told the truth when he said in John 11:25, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies."

GARY HABERMAS
WILLIAM LANE
LEE STROBEL/C.S. LEWIS
CRAIG KEENER (MIRACLES)