

# THE HISTORICAL EVIDENCE FOR THE RESURRECTION

By Clement Harrold

April 24, 2025

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us that “[t]he mystery of Christ’s resurrection is a real event, with manifestations that were historically verified, as the New Testament bears witness” (§639). At the heart of the Christian faith is a set of historical claims: Jesus of Nazareth really lived; He really died; He was really buried; and He really did rise from the dead. The Christian belief in the Resurrection of Jesus is not some nice story or quaint myth but a historical *fact*, a fact which split history in two, and changed the world forever.

## The Historical Facts

According to scholars like Gary Habermas and William Lane Craig, there are at least four key claims in the Gospel Resurrection accounts which are accepted by the wide majority of New Testament historians. Here we follow the structure employed by Dr. Craig.

*FACT 1: After dying on a cross, Jesus was buried in a tomb by Joseph of Arimathea.*

Several lines of evidence support this fact. First, the burial of Jesus is attested to in the creed St. Paul quotes in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5: “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, 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.”

The significance of this proclamation can hardly be overstated, as Craig explains: “Paul not only uses the typical rabbinical terms “received” and “delivered” with regard to the information he is passing on to the Corinthians, but vv. 3-5 are a highly stylized four-line formula filled with non-Pauline characteristics. This has convinced all scholars that Paul is, as he says, quoting from an old tradition which he himself received after becoming a Christian. This tradition probably goes back at least to Paul’s fact-finding visit to Jerusalem around AD 36, when he spent two weeks with Cephas and James (Gal. 1.18). It thus dates to within five years after Jesus’ death. So short a time span and such personal contact make it idle to talk of legend in this case.”

A second piece of evidence in favor of the burial of Jesus is the mention of Joseph of Arimathea in the Gospel accounts (see Jn 19:38). The fact that Joseph of

Arimathea was a member of the Sanhedrin—the Jewish court which condemned Jesus—makes it highly unlikely that the Gospel writers would involve him positively in the story if their accounts were made up.

Finally, the burial of Jesus is not denied in any of the early sources. If Jesus were never given a burial, we would expect the Jewish and Roman opponents of Christianity to have pointed to some other explanation for where His corpse went. Since they never do this, the majority of New Testament historians agree that Jesus was indeed buried following His crucifixion.

*FACT 2: On the Sunday following the crucifixion, Jesus's tomb was found empty by a group of his women followers.*

This fact is attested from very early on, both in the 1 Corinthians 15 creed quoted by St. Paul and in the Passion narrative provided by St. Mark (which is considered by most scholars to be the earliest Gospel). Again, the proximity of these sources to the actual events they describe makes it impossible for legends to have sprung up in the interim.

The reality of the empty tomb also finds support from other quarters. In first century Judea, a woman's testimony was considered virtually worthless in a Jewish court of law. This makes the discovery of the empty tomb by a group of Jesus's women followers extremely embarrassing for the four evangelists. The only reason they would tell the story this way is if this is what actually happened.

Finally, if Jesus's body never left the tomb, then it is almost impossible to explain the origins of the Christian belief in His bodily Resurrection. Nobody would have begun believing Jesus was raised from the dead if the tomb were still sealed, especially given that all the Jewish authorities had to do in order to refute the Christian movement was open up Jesus's tomb and prove to the world that His corpse was still there.

For these reasons and others, the great majority of Biblical scholars accept the historical veracity of the empty tomb tradition.

*FACT 3: On multiple occasions and under various circumstances, different individuals and groups of people experienced appearances of Jesus alive from the dead.*

What's striking about this third fact is that even highly critical, non-Christian scholars like Bart Ehrman accept it. There are several reasons for this. First, these

appearances are multiply attested by five independent sources: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Paul.

As we've already seen, Paul's witness is particularly striking, and it's worth reading the rest of the passage in 1 Corinthians 15:

. . . and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (vv. 5-8)

Paul's allusion to the five hundred brethren is noteworthy. While some of these have fallen asleep (i.e. died), most of them are still alive. In other words, Paul is saying to his readers: "Still don't believe me? Then go ask them yourself!"

More generally, it's very difficult to explain the origins of the early Christian belief in the Resurrection of Jesus if every single person who claimed to have seen Him risen from the dead was lying. For this reason, most New Testament historians agree that various individuals and groups *did* experience appearances of Jesus alive from the dead.

(Of course, not all of these historians accept that a miracle is the best explanation for these appearances. More on that below!)

*FACT 4: The original disciples believed that Jesus was risen from the dead despite their having every predisposition to the contrary.*

Even skeptical scholars tend to accept that the original disciples became firmly convinced that their interactions with the risen Christ were real interactions with Him in His risen and glorified body, rather than mere visions or hallucinations. To understand why, we need to consider the sheer unlikelihood of any first century Jew embracing what the first disciples came to believe.

Following the crucifixion of Jesus, the disciples had every reason to believe their movement had ended in catastrophic failure. Their understanding of their Jewish faith offered them no grounds for believing that the long-awaited Messiah would be defeated and killed, much less suffer a humiliating and cursed death on a cross. Hence when Jesus was crucified, the disciples' whole world came crashing down. As Cleopas and his companion confess on the road to Emmaus, "[W]e had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Lk 24:21). They *had* hoped, but now their hopes lay in tatters.

The historian therefore has an extraordinarily perplexing task in trying to account for how the original disciples were able to overcome all this and begin believing that Jesus was the victorious Messiah after all. The problem becomes even more acute when we consider that ancient Jewish belief contained no concept whatsoever of an *individual* resurrection taking place before the end of the world. First century Jews believed in a *general* resurrection of the dead at the end of the world, and nothing more.

Given this background, there is zero historical basis for accusing the original disciples of making up their belief in the Resurrection of Jesus. The fact that these disciples were prepared to be tortured and killed on account of their newfound conviction shows that they firmly and sincerely believed that the inexplicable had taken place: the crucified Messiah had risen from the dead.

### **Explaining the Facts**

With these historical facts in place, the question becomes: *How best to explain them?* Here the skeptic has a problem, because none of his standard hypotheses are at all convincing. Here we will briefly consider just three of the most common ones.

*Hypothesis 1: Jesus never actually died.*

This hypothesis fails spectacularly. The Roman soldiers were expert executioners; they knew how to kill their victims efficiently and even had methods (like piercing the victim's side with a lance) for checking they were truly dead.

But even if Jesus did (quite miraculously!) survive His crucifixion, it remains ludicrous to suppose that He could (a) survive more than 24 hours in a tomb by Himself without food, water, or medical attention; (b) escape from the tomb by Himself; and (c) successfully convince His followers that He *did* in fact die (contrary to all their expectations) before rising from the dead with a glorified body (also contrary to all their expectations).

*Hypothesis 2: The disciples were hallucinating when they thought they saw the risen Jesus.*

There are at least four major problems with this hypothesis. First, it doesn't explain the fact of the empty tomb. What happened to Jesus's body?

Second, it struggles to explain how so many different people from diverse backgrounds—and not only individuals but also *groups* of people—all had similar hallucinations, and all came to believe the same thing about what had happened to Jesus.

Third, it struggles to explain the conversion of a figure like St. Paul, who was an ardent opponent of the fledgling Christian movement. It doesn't seem at all likely that Paul would experience a hallucination that suddenly led him to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was Israel's long-awaited Messiah who had died on a Cross and subsequently risen from the dead.

Finally, the hallucination hypothesis has no way of explaining why the early disciples came to believe in the *bodily* Resurrection of Jesus. Given the backdrop of ancient Jewish belief, the disciples' baseline assumption upon experiencing visions of Jesus after His crucifixion would have been to view Him as some kind of ghost (which is precisely what we see in the Gospels). If they were all just hallucinating, it's difficult to account for why they began believing that Jesus's Body had been raised and glorified.

*Hypothesis 3: The disciples stole the body and later lied about it.*

This hypothesis suffers from the fact that if the disciples were lying, then this was a really bizarre lie to tell, and not one that their fellow Jews would easily believe. It also struggles more generally from a lack of historical credibility. For example, to argue that the disciples stole the body involves going against the weight of historical evidence which favors the third and fourth of the facts that we discussed in the first half of this article.

More generally, the stolen body hypothesis buckles in the face of the early disciples' obvious sincerity. If they were all making this up, wouldn't we expect at least one of them to eventually come clean about it? Doesn't it seem implausible that so many people would willingly go along with such a weird and outlandish conspiracy? And how likely is it that they would successfully deceive even some of their most zealous enemies into thinking it was true?

Lastly, it beggars belief to say that all of the early disciples (with the exception of St. John) went happily to their deaths insisting that their lie was the Gospel truth. As Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli remind us, "They were hated, scorned, persecuted, excommunicated, imprisoned, tortured, exiled, crucified, boiled alive, roasted, beheaded, disemboweled and fed to lions - hardly a catalog of perks!"

## The Truth of the Resurrection

Needless to say, there is much more that could be said on this topic; readers who wish to learn more are encouraged to consult the reading list below. But from the brief review of the evidence that we've provided here, one thing becomes apparent: *the simplest and most compelling explanation for the historical facts surrounding the death and burial of Jesus is that He truly did rise from the dead, just as His disciples claimed.* This is the only explanation which makes sense of the data, and it's the only explanation which properly accounts for the origins of the Christian religion.

In describing the Gospel narratives, J.R.R. Tolkien once observed that “[t]here is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many skeptical men have accepted as true on its own merits.” As Christians, we can be confident that Jesus Christ is the Risen One who has conquered sin and death and now offers eternal life to all those who believe. Truly, this is the greatest story—indeed, the greatest history—ever told.

About Clement Harrold: Clement Harrold earned his master's degree in theology from the University of Notre Dame in 2024, and his bachelor's from Franciscan University of Steubenville in 2021. His writings have appeared in *First Things*, *Church Life Journal*, *Crisis Magazine*, and the *Washington Examiner*

## Further Reading

<https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/popular-writings/jesus-of-nazareth/the-resurrection-of-jesus>

<https://www.catholic.com/magazine/print-edition/is-belief-in-the-resurrection-reasonable>

<https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/scholarly-writings/historical-jesus/jesus-resurrection>

William Lane Craig, *On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision* (David C. Cook, 2010)

William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Crossway, 3rd edition, 2008)

Gary R. Habermas and Michael Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Kregel Publications, 2004)

Brant Pitre, *The Case for Jesus: The Biblical and Historical Evidence for Christ* (Image, 2016)

Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Zondervan, updated edition 2016)

N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Fortress Press, 2003)