1

The Truth of the Resurrection

**Question 1:**
*When have you been an eyewitness to an exciting event?*
THE POINT

The resurrection of Christ is a historical fact.

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

For most of us, national or global news stories are just that: stories we saw or read in the news. It may be a once-in-a-lifetime experience, but on rare occasions we may be able to say, “I was there!” Of course, none of us were there at the momentous event that changed everything—the resurrection of Jesus Christ—but we joyfully celebrate it every spring. But do we embrace the resurrection as an actual historical event or simply regard it as spiritual folklore? Many people favor the latter view. Others see the resurrection as an “inspiring story” about a great teacher named Jesus, but they do not believe He is the true Messiah who was resurrected for all mankind. Jesus is just someone unenlightened people used to believe in.

The apostle Paul had something to say about that! In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul made an objective truth claim: Jesus did physically rise from the dead, and many people could attest to that. They could say, “I was there!” Since Christ actually rose from the dead, His resurrection triggered monumental implications for humanity.
WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

1 Corinthians 15:1-3

1 Now I want to make clear for you, brothers and sisters, the gospel I preached to you, which you received, on which you have taken your stand 2 and by which you are being saved, if you hold to the message I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. 3 For I passed on to you as most important what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.

Paul was arguing against a culturally accepted idea that had influenced some Christian believers in Corinth. It's one familiar to us today: people simply don’t rise from the dead. So, Paul began this section on the resurrection with a clear reminder of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus and its resultant importance for the work of salvation.

AD 55, placing it within the first twenty-five years after Jesus’ death. Knowing both the date of this letter and the time the earlier creed was conceived is important to us today because it demonstrates that even the earliest reports concerning Jesus included all three elements of the gospel story; they were not a fabrication by Christians at a much later date.

In verse 3, Paul set up his claims by declaring, “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.” Paul had in mind statements in the Old Testament concerning the Messiah’s death, such as the “Suffering Servant” passage in Isaiah 53:5-9 and the description of piercing His hands and feet in Psalm 22:16. Paul tied Jesus’ death back to the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. Paul stressed that it was critical for Christ to fulfill the Messiah’s role in atoning for the sins of the world. Yet, for Jesus’ atoning sacrifice to matter, Jesus actually had to die.

Question 2:

What makes the death of Jesus so significant?

Paul stated that he passed on to the Corinthian believers what he first received. Verses 3-5 are considered to be a creed that was formulated between the time of Jesus’ resurrection and Paul’s writing of 1 Corinthians. This letter is dated at around
The resurrection of Christ is a historical fact.

Critics of Jesus sometimes deny that He was a real person at all, let alone that He died. However, too much evidence testifies to the historical nature of Jesus’ death to dismiss Jesus and claim He never was a real person. The Gospel accounts, as well as other New Testament authors, bear witness to the truth of Jesus’ death.

Accounts of Jesus’ death were found by others besides the Gospel writers:
- Tacitus, the most trusted ancient Roman historian;
- Josephus, the Jewish historian;
- Lucian of Samosota, the Greek satirist; and
- Mara Bar-Serapion, a prisoner writing to his son.³

None of these people had reason to support Jesus or His followers—some, in fact, were overtly opposed to them—which aids the trustworthiness of their comments about Christ’s crucifixion. We might be tempted to think that corroborating testimony isn’t that powerful, but having this much evidence concerning a historical person who lived two thousand years ago is rather impressive. We don’t find this quantity of written testimony even for some of the prominent emperors of Rome, the most powerful empire in the world at that time! Because of the compelling historical testimony to Jesus’ death, even John Dominic Crossan, certainly no conservative scholar, has written, “That he was crucified is as sure as anything historical can ever be.”⁴

1 Corinthians 15:4

4 That he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.

We cannot overstate the significance of the resurrection and its historical nature; the very foundation of the Christian faith depends and hopes on the resurrection of Jesus. So Paul continued with the creed in this verse to lay out the basics of the gospel: not only did Christ die for our sins, but furthermore, He was buried and raised. Therein lies the uniqueness and importance of the gospel.
Jesus entered into the world as a human and willingly paid the consequence of human sin: death (Rom. 6:23). He did not die for His own sin—He had no sin (2 Cor. 5:21)—He died for ours. He died as a result of a horrific crucifixion, but His body did not decay (Acts 2:31). Rather, as Paul related to the Corinthians, Jesus was physically resurrected on the third day. This early creed may be referring to Psalm 16:10, a messianic prophecy in which King David declared that God’s “faithful one” would not see decay.

Jesus was laid in a tomb, because he was a real human with a physical body like other humans. He was neither a disembodied spirit nor a mythological god nor a demi-god. He was both fully human and fully God, which afforded Him the power to lay down His own life and the authority to take it up again (John 10:18). Jesus’ burial—the fact that He was laid in a physical tomb—reminds us He was a human being.

Jesus’ death and burial also remind us that sin has consequences. His death stands in stark contrast to our culture’s current trend of redefining good and evil to be whatever each individual holds to be true. Through Jesus’ death, however, we see that good and evil have resulting consequences and that no one escapes the result of evil in the world. As a result of human sin, we all will die.

Yet, Jesus, the atoning sacrifice for our sin, the One who took on death itself, didn’t remain dead. Jesus provided the only defeat of death in history: a true resurrection. Think about this: if you want to reverse death, what do you have to do? You have to overcome it with life. Jesus’ resurrection was a historical event in which the power of God reversed death.

Critics might say the resurrection sounds like a fairy tale to soothe those who are afraid to die. But Paul surely would not have called it a fairy tale. Far from it. He wrote a little bit later in this passage that if Jesus wasn’t raised from the dead our faith is useless (1 Cor. 15:14,17). His description of such a situation was not the stuff of fairy tales, but of hopelessness.
1 Corinthians 15:5-8

5 And that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. 6 Then he appeared to over five hundred brothers and sisters at one time; most of them are still alive, but some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. 8 Last of all, as to one born at the wrong time, he also appeared to me.

Paul continued in his line of reasoning by describing how Jesus appeared to many people after His resurrection. This argument makes no sense if Jesus’ body was still in the tomb, yet scholars generally agree that all evidence from the first century points to an empty tomb. In fact, ancient sources offer no other account of what happened to Jesus after His crucifixion.

Multiple accounts from different people reported seeing the resurrected Christ in various places. Paul reported that Jesus appeared to one or more of the disciples at least twice, and then later to a group of five hundred people. Paul stated this matter-of-factly, and if anyone questioned the truthfulness of what he said, they could ask those people themselves, since “most of them are still alive” (v. 6).

The disciples had nothing to gain from making up a story of resurrection. Indeed, quite the opposite happened: all the apostles except John were killed because of their proclamation of the risen Messiah who appeared to them. They went from terrified individuals in hiding after Jesus’ crucifixion to bold proclaimers of the good news of resurrection and salvation in Christ.

Let’s also not forget Paul—formerly known as Saul of Tarsus, the Pharisee of Pharisees—who was relaying this information to the Corinthian Christians. Saul was a man who actively persecuted the church and gave up his entire community and status to proclaim Jesus to the Gentiles. As a former Pharisee, Paul had been part of the highly educated elite. He knew logic and could skillfully present his case before various audiences. He had not been an easy convert. Yet, he moved from persecuting Christians to joining their ranks as the most prominent evangelist for Christ. And all this happened because he saw the resurrected Christ (Acts 9:4-6)!

Question 4:

What’s the importance of eyewitness testimony?

The disciples had nothing to gain from making up a story of resurrection. Indeed, quite the opposite happened: all the apostles

Question 5:

How can our group be a witness for others of Jesus’ resurrection?
Dear Faith Blog,

I’ve read a lot about the resurrection of Christ, but it just seems like a fairy tale to me. Can you give me valid proof that Christ rose from the grave?

Your Response:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

1 Peter 1:3
The resurrection of Jesus is the most robust answer for what happened two thousand years ago in Jerusalem. What will you do with that truth? Choose one of the following applications:

- **Trust.** Commit your life to the risen Christ. “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9). Read the inside cover of this book for more information.

- **Read.** For alternative theories about the resurrection and replies to those theories, read Jim Warner Wallace, *Cold-Case Christianity* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2013), 41-50.

- **Share.** Think of someone who needs to know the truth of the resurrection of Jesus. Write that individual’s name down and pray for the person. Pray also for an opportunity to share about Christ’s resurrection. Be ready and willing to engage in a conversation on the powerful truth of the resurrection, an event that changes everything for us!

All of us can point to life-changing historical events on some level. But the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ stands apart as an event that gives us hope now and for eternity!