



THE LIVING HOPE

The 10 Best Historical Proofs & Pillars for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ

A Forty-Year Return to the Evidence

By [Chaplain Todd DuBord \(M.Div.\)](#)

Forty Years Later: Returning to The Empty Tomb

More than forty years ago, I approached Jesus from almost the opposite direction from the one in which I write today. I had grown up in an atheistic environment. Christianity was not the intellectual framework through which I understood the world; in fact, for years I regarded its central claims with the instinctive suspicion of someone who assumed that modern people had outgrown them. Christmas was far more familiar to me through Santa Claus than through Bethlehem, and Easter through colored eggs and a rabbit rather than an empty tomb. When I first began hearing Christians say that Jesus of Nazareth had literally risen from the dead, my reaction was not reverence. It was disbelief. Dead people do not ordinarily return to life, and I assumed there must be a simpler explanation: legend, religious imagination, wishful thinking, or some other mistake that history had magnified into doctrine.

Those questions did not disappear when I became a Christian. They became more important. Roughly four decades ago I began collecting historical, medical, biblical, and legal arguments concerning the Resurrection and eventually wrote and taught from the material that became the earlier study behind this edition. I was not trying to escape hard questions; I wanted to know whether the Christian claim could survive them. The questions I wrote down then still strike me as the right questions: **Was Jesus really dead? Was He actually buried? Why did His followers begin proclaiming resurrection almost**

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immediately? What happened to the body? What explains the appearances? Why did frightened disciples become public witnesses? What explains Paul? And what rival explanation can account for all of those facts at once?

What has changed is not the central Christian claim but the amount I have learned in the forty years since that first investigation. Archaeology has added texture to what we know about first-century Jewish burial. Historical work on Roman crucifixion has become more specialized. Resurrection scholarship has grown enormously. Philosophers have refined the way miracle claims are evaluated. Psychologists and historians have challenged both simplistic skeptical explanations and simplistic apologetic replies. Most importantly for this revision, I can now place the evidence in a broader scholarly conversation—drawing not merely from writers who share Christian convictions, but also from scholars whose theological conclusions differ sharply from mine. That does not dilute the case. It tests it.

So this is not an attempt to apologize for an old investigation. It is the fulfillment of it. I have returned to the same empty tomb with four additional decades of study behind me and with a larger library of scholarship on the table. The conclusion I reached then has not weakened. It has become more carefully defined: **the Resurrection of Jesus is not a detachable spiritual metaphor added to Christianity after the fact; it is the historical claim that best explains why Christianity began in the particular form in which it did.** The task of this treatise is to follow that evidence as an investigation, not merely to announce the verdict before hearing the witnesses.

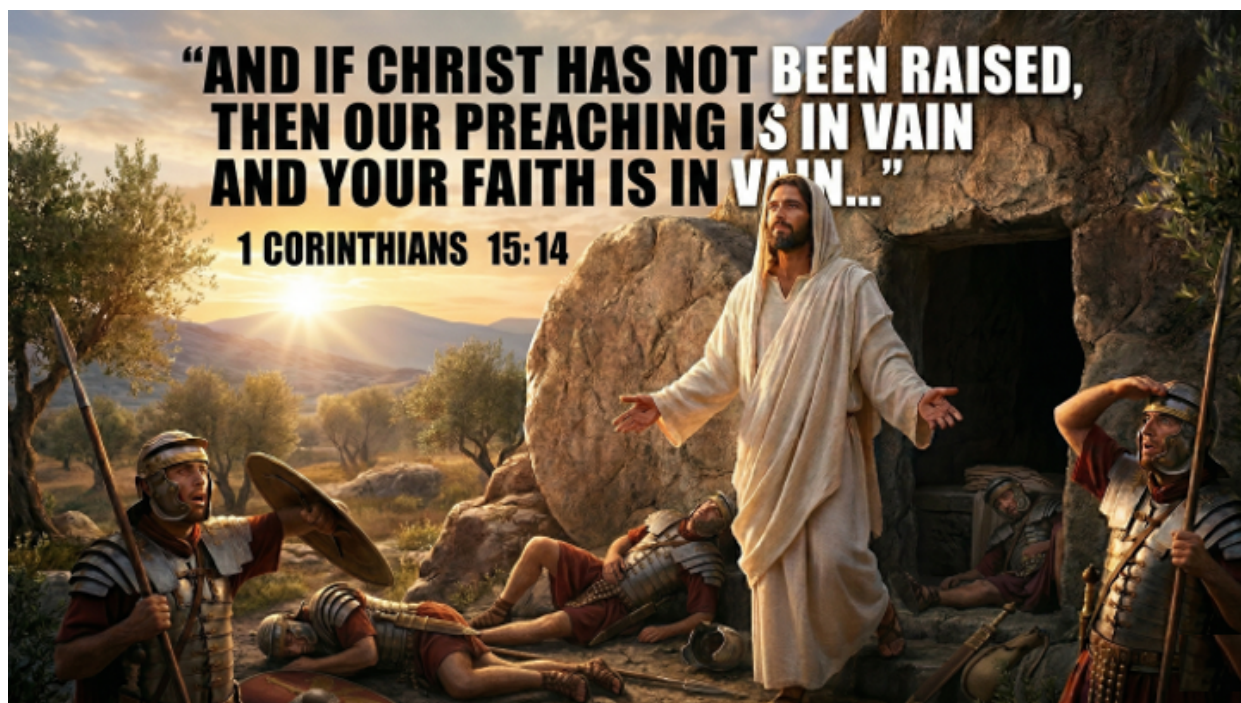
What Christians Mean By “Resurrection”

The Greek noun *anastasis* means a rising or standing up. In the New Testament it does not mean that Jesus merely continued to influence His friends after death, nor that His soul survived while His body decayed, nor that He was temporarily resuscitated only to die again. The earliest Christian claim was more radical: the crucified Jesus had been raised bodily into transformed, indestructible life. Dr. N. T. Wright (**born 1948**), **one of the world’s foremost New Testament historians, a Pauline theologian, former Anglican bishop of Durham, and Research Professor Emeritus of New Testament and Early Christianity at the University of St Andrews**, emphasizes that in a Jewish setting “resurrection” referred to embodied life after bodily death, not simply to immortality of the soul ([N. T. Wright, “Can a Scientist Believe in the Resurrection?”](#)). Larry Hurtado likewise notes that the earliest believers distinguished Jesus’ Resurrection from a mere return to ordinary mortal life; their claim was that God had vindicated and exalted the very Jesus who had been crucified ([Larry W. Hurtado, “The Resurrection of Jesus”](#)).

That distinction becomes especially important when we examine the actual New Testament descriptions. The risen Jesus is portrayed as the **same Jesus who had been crucified**, yet now existing in a transformed mode of embodied life. Luke emphasizes sight and touch—Jesus tells His startled followers to look at His hands and feet and declares that “a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have” (Luke 24:39)—while John presents Thomas confronting the identifiable wounds of crucifixion.

Contemporary New Testament scholar **Brittany E. Wilson**, in her Oxford University Press study of embodiment in Luke-Acts, observes that Luke deliberately employs both “**sight**” and “**touch**” to establish the corporeality of the risen Jesus ([Brittany E. Wilson, *The Embodied God: Seeing the Divine in Luke-Acts and the Early Church*](#)). Philosopher and theologian **Stephen T. Davis** similarly argues that the New Testament claim is not resuscitation but “**bodily transformation**”—continuity with the body that died, coupled with a radically transformed condition ([Stephen T. Davis, “Was Jesus Raised Bodily?”](#)).

— [Oxford University Press](#)). Thus, when the earliest Christians proclaimed, “He is risen,” they were not announcing that Jesus’ spirit lived on somewhere or that His memory had survived His death. They were making a far more concrete and historically vulnerable claim: **the One who had actually died had been raised bodily by God into a new kind of life that death could no longer destroy.**



The Internal Claim: Jesus and Paul Put Everything on the Resurrection

Before we move to the external evidence, the investigation must recognize how deliberately the earliest sources place the Resurrection at the center. In Mark, Jesus predicts that the Son of Man will be rejected, killed, and after three days rise again ([Mark 8:31](#); [Mark 9:31](#); [Mark 10:33–34](#)). Matthew preserves the “sign of Jonah” saying ([Matthew 12:40](#)), and John interprets Jesus’ challenge to destroy the temple and see it raised in three days as a reference to His body ([John 2:19–21](#)). Scholars may discuss the precise wording and setting of particular predictions, but the canonical record consistently presents Jesus’ death and Resurrection as inseparable from His identity and mission.

The Jewish world into which Jesus and Paul spoke already contained a vigorous debate about resurrection, but the expectation was not ordinarily that **one individual would rise bodily in the middle of history while everyone else remained in their graves**. Second Temple Judaism contained a spectrum of views. The Sadducees denied resurrection, while the Pharisees affirmed a future resurrection of the dead. Daniel had spoken of many who “sleep in the dust of the ground” awakening ([Daniel 12:2](#)), and 2 Maccabees portrays faithful Jewish martyrs expecting God eventually to restore their mutilated bodies.

Dr. N. T. Wright emphasizes that where Jewish resurrection hope existed, it normally concerned **God’s future, corporate raising of the dead at the climax of history**, not the isolated resurrection of the Messiah ahead of everyone else ([N. T. Wright, “Christian Origins and the Resurrection of Jesus: The Resurrection of Jesus as a Historical Problem”](#)). Wright notes that Pharisaic resurrection belief anticipated a **future embodied existence**, whereas the Sadducees rejected such postmortem hope altogether.

That historical setting makes the earliest Christian proclamation unusually specific. Jesus and Paul were not merely repeating the familiar Jewish doctrine that the dead would rise someday. They were announcing that **the future resurrection expected at the end of the age had already begun, unexpectedly, in one man—Jesus of Nazareth**. Paul would later express that remarkable claim by calling Christ the “firstfruits” of those who sleep ([1 Corinthians 15:20](#)), meaning that His Resurrection was the first installment and guarantee of the general resurrection still to come.

Jesus did not present His Resurrection as an optional wonder disconnected from His identity; He placed His own authority and credibility upon it. He declared that He possessed authority both to lay down His life and to take it up again ([John 10:17–18](#)). When His opponents demanded a sign, He pointed them toward His coming death and Resurrection through the “sign of Jonah” ([Matthew 12:38–40](#)), while John records Him presenting the raising of His body as the decisive vindication of His authority ([John 2:18–22](#)). Matthew even reports that after the Crucifixion, the chief priests and Pharisees remembered Jesus’ prediction that He would rise after three days and appealed to Pilate to secure the tomb ([Matthew 27:62–66](#)). According to the canonical record, therefore, Easter was not an explanation invented by embarrassed disciples after their movement’s apparent collapse. Jesus had already united His messianic mission, sacrificial death, divine authority, and coming vindication around the promise that He would rise.

The apostles then proclaimed the Resurrection with the same uncompromising centrality. Peter announced at Pentecost that God had raised Jesus and exalted Him as Lord and Messiah ([Acts 2:22–36](#)); before the Jewish authorities, he declared that the rejected and crucified Jesus had been raised and had become the only source of salvation ([Acts 4:8–12](#)); and Paul told the Athenians that God had furnished assurance of Jesus’ authority to judge the world by raising Him from the dead ([Acts 17:30–31](#)). Paul was not creating a new emphasis. In [1 Corinthians 15:3–8](#), he explicitly “delivered” what he had earlier “received”: that Christ died for sins, was buried, was raised on the third day, and appeared to named witnesses. The Resurrection therefore stands at the center of Jesus’ predictions, the earliest confession Paul inherited, the apostles’ public preaching, the offer of forgiveness, the identification of Jesus as Lord, and the promise of final resurrection. Remove it, and there is no recognizable apostolic Christianity left.

Paul makes the claim even more vulnerable to historical testing. Writing to Corinth in the AD 50s, he does not tell Christians that resurrection is an uplifting symbol that remains true whether or not anything happened to Jesus’ body. He writes the opposite: “If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, your faith also is in vain” ([1 Corinthians 15:14](#)). He adds that if Christ was not raised, the apostles were false witnesses, Christian faith is worthless, believers remain in their sins, those who died trusting Christ have perished, and Christians are “of all people most to be pitied” ([1 Corinthians 15:15–19](#)).

Paul therefore places Christianity upon a historical hinge. If Jesus remained dead, the apostolic proclamation collapses. If Jesus was raised, however, the event changes the meaning of His death, confirms His identity, validates the saving significance of the Cross, guarantees the future resurrection of believers, and transforms the entire Christian understanding of history. Paul does not leave his readers suspended in uncertainty. He immediately declares, “But the fact is, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep” ([1 Corinthians 15:20](#)).

IN SIMPLE TERMS: Jesus repeatedly told His disciples that He would be killed and rise again, and Paul later declared that Christianity is false if that Resurrection did not actually happen. The earliest Christians were not merely teaching the familiar Jewish hope that everyone would be raised at the end of history. They were making the startling claim that God’s promised future resurrection had already

begun in the middle of history with one person—Jesus. In the clearest possible terms: **if Jesus remained dead, Christianity collapses; but if Jesus truly rose bodily from the grave, then He is who He claimed to be, His sacrifice for sin was accepted, death has been defeated, and everyone must decide how to respond to the living Christ.**



Before the Ten Proofs: The Foundation — Was Jesus Really Dead and Buried?

I added biographical appositives and verified dates wherever reliable published information is available. The birth dates of William D. Edwards and Wesley J. Gabel do not appear in dependable public biographical sources, so I have not invented them. Floyd Hosmer's dates are documented, while Cook and Magness are living scholars and therefore receive "born" dates.

Before the Ten Proofs: The Foundation — Was Jesus Really Dead and Buried?

Every Resurrection investigation begins with a fact so obvious that it can easily be overlooked: **there is no Resurrection unless Jesus first died.** The Roman crucifixion of Jesus under Pontius Pilate belongs among the most secure facts in the historical study of Jesus. It is multiply attested throughout the Christian sources and independently reflected in non-Christian testimony, including **Publius Cornelius Tacitus (c. AD 56–c. 120), the Roman senator, provincial governor, and one of antiquity's foremost historians,** who reported that *Christus* suffered the extreme penalty under Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius. The serious historical question is therefore not whether crucifixion was generally lethal—it was a Roman method of execution—but whether there is any credible reason to believe that Jesus somehow survived His.

The famous 1986 *JAMA* study was written by **Dr. William D. Edwards, a Mayo Clinic anatomical and clinical pathologist and professor of pathology; the Rev. Wesley J. Gabel (dates not publicly**

documented), a United Methodist minister with a Master of Divinity degree; and Floyd E. Hosmer (1928–2008), a Mayo Clinic medical illustrator and certified member of the Association of Medical Illustrators. Together, they examined the historical descriptions of Jesus’ scourging and crucifixion in light of modern medical knowledge.

The authors concluded that the scourging would have produced severe lacerations, substantial blood loss, and the conditions for hypovolemic shock. They further explained that crucifixion seriously interfered with normal respiration and identified hypovolemic shock and exhaustion asphyxia as the principal causes of death. The spear thrust into Jesus’ side provided an additional and decisive confirmation that the execution had been completed.

The article’s conclusion is direct and unambiguous: **“Modern medical interpretation of the historical evidence indicates that Jesus was dead when taken down from the cross.”** ([Edwards, Gabel, and Hosmer, “On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ,” JAMA](#)). Whatever disagreements may exist over the precise interaction of the physiological mechanisms involved, the medical conclusion is not that Jesus barely survived or later revived. It is that He was already dead before His body was removed from the cross.

That conclusion also fits the historical circumstances. Roman soldiers were professional executioners operating under military authority. According to John’s account, when they came to Jesus, they saw that He was already dead and therefore did not break His legs, as they did those of the two men crucified beside Him. One soldier then pierced Jesus’ side with a spear ([John 19:31–37](#)). Mark reports that Pilate was initially surprised that Jesus had died so soon and summoned the centurion to verify His death before releasing the body to Joseph of Arimathea ([Mark 15:43–45](#)). The Roman governor did not surrender the body on the hopeful word of grieving disciples; he did so after receiving confirmation from the officer responsible for the execution.

Insert the following **three bold paragraphs immediately after** the paragraph ending, “he did so after receiving confirmation from the officer responsible for the execution.”

The testimony does not end with the New Testament. Writers from the first few centuries repeatedly speak of Jesus not merely as having been crucified, but as having genuinely died. Around AD 107, Ignatius of Antioch (c. AD 35–c. 107), the early bishop of Antioch and disciple of the apostolic generation who was later martyred in Rome, wrote that Jesus “was truly crucified, and [truly] died” under Pontius Pilate ([Ignatius, *Epistle to the Trallians*, Chapter 9](#)). He reinforced the point to the Christians at Smyrna: Christ “suffered truly,” rather than merely appearing to suffer ([Ignatius, *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*, Chapter 2](#)). Ignatius was confronting an early form of Docetism—the teaching that Jesus’ physical body and suffering were only apparent—and answered it by insisting upon the real incarnation, real crucifixion, real death, and real bodily Resurrection of Jesus.

Only a few decades later, Polycarp of Smyrna (c. AD 69–155), the early Christian bishop traditionally connected with the Apostle John and later executed for refusing to deny Christ, wrote of “our Lord Jesus Christ, who endured to face even death for our sins, whom God raised” ([Polycarp, *Epistle to the Philippians*, Chapter 1](#)). Justin Martyr (c. AD 100–165), the philosopher, Christian apologist, and martyr who addressed his defense of Christianity to the Roman emperor Antoninus Pius, likewise summarized the Christian proclamation in direct historical terms: Jesus “was crucified and died and after rising again ascended into heaven” ([Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, Chapter 21](#)). Near the end of the second century, Tertullian of Carthage (c. AD 155–c. 220), the North African lawyer, theologian, and one of early Latin Christianity’s most influential defenders, wrote that when Christ was nailed to

the cross, “He with a word dismissed from Him His spirit,” after which His body was removed and placed inside a tomb ([Tertullian, *Apology*, Chapter 21](#)).

The non-Christian record confirms the same central fact. Writing around AD 116, the Roman historian Tacitus stated that Christus “had undergone the death penalty” during the reign of Tiberius by the sentence of Pontius Pilate ([Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44](#)). Later in the second century, Lucian of Samosata (c. AD 125–after 180), the Syrian-born Greek satirist who ridiculed Christianity rather than defending it, referred contemptuously to the founder worshiped by Christians as the man who “was crucified” for introducing their teachings ([Lucian, *The Passing of Peregrinus*, Chapters 11–13](#)). These witnesses wrote from different regions, perspectives, and theological commitments, yet they converge upon the same historical foundation: Jesus’ crucifixion was an execution that resulted in His death. The earliest Christians did not claim that a wounded Jesus recovered; they proclaimed that the Jesus who had truly died was subsequently raised by God.

The suggestion that Jesus merely fainted, survived the crucifixion, revived inside the tomb, escaped, and then convinced His followers that He had conquered death strains every dimension of the evidence. It requires Jesus to survive scourging, crucifixion, massive trauma, blood loss, and a spear wound; endure removal from the cross and burial; escape from a closed tomb while desperately injured; and then appear to His disciples in a condition that persuaded them He had entered glorious, immortal life.

A barely living, mutilated survivor would have required immediate medical care. He would not have inspired the proclamation, “**He has risen from the dead.**” At most, such an appearance would have convinced the disciples that Jesus had somehow escaped death temporarily and urgently needed their assistance.

The burial question has also benefited from later historical and archaeological scholarship. Some critics have argued that crucified victims were routinely denied burial, thereby making Joseph of Arimathea’s tomb unlikely. That objection, however, treats one Roman practice as though it were an inflexible rule applied in every province and circumstance.

Dr. John Granger Cook (born 1955), a classical philologist, historian of Greco-Roman religion, and professor of religion and philosophy at LaGrange College whose scholarship specializes in crucifixion and early Christianity within the Roman world, surveyed Roman legal texts and extensive Greco-Roman evidence. Cook demonstrated that Roman officials possessed discretion. Although some crucified bodies were left exposed, others were released to relatives or other petitioners for burial ([John Granger Cook, “Crucifixion and Burial,” *New Testament Studies*](#)).

The Gospel account is especially credible within the setting of Jerusalem at Passover. Jewish law opposed leaving an executed person exposed overnight ([Deuteronomy 21:22–23](#)), and the Gospel of John specifically connects the removal of the bodies with the approaching Sabbath ([John 19:31](#)). Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the Jewish council, petitioned Pilate for Jesus’ body, wrapped it in linen, and placed it inside a rock-cut tomb. The account therefore fits both Pilate’s Roman authority to release the body and Jewish concern to complete the burial before the Sabbath began.

Dr. Jodi Magness (born 1956), a distinguished classical and biblical archaeologist, specialist in ancient Judaism and first-century Palestine, and Kenan Distinguished Professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, has likewise demonstrated that the Gospel descriptions

correspond to what archaeology reveals about Jewish burial customs and rock-cut tombs in first-century Jerusalem ([Jodi Magness, “What Did Jesus’ Tomb Look Like?”](#)).

The tomb, linen burial cloth, rapid preparation before the Sabbath, and placement of the body within a rock-cut burial chamber all belong naturally within the known world of first-century Judaism. The burial narrative is not a later story carelessly imposed upon an unfamiliar ancient setting; it is filled with details that fit its historical and cultural environment.

These medical, historical, textual, and archaeological considerations do not by themselves prove that Jesus rose from the dead. They establish the indispensable foundation upon which the ten proofs must proceed: **Jesus was genuinely dead, and He was buried.** He was not a visionary who merely disappeared, nor an injured man who later recovered and resumed an ordinary life. He was publicly scourged, crucified, certified dead by Roman authority, and placed in a known tomb.

Yet within an extraordinarily short time, His followers were proclaiming something far more radical than the survival of His teachings or the continued existence of His spirit. They declared that **the same Jesus who had been crucified, confirmed dead, and buried had been bodily raised from the grave.** The investigation must therefore begin where the earliest Christian proclamation began—not with a man who narrowly escaped death, but with a dead and buried Jesus whom His followers soon insisted they had encountered alive.

The 10 Best Historical Proofs & Pillars



1. The Earliest Creed and the “Historical Bedrock”

The first pillar begins not with the written Gospels but with a passage preserving material that predates them: [1 Corinthians 15:3–8](#). The apostle Paul tells the Corinthians that he is passing along what he had previously “received”: that Christ died for our sins, was buried, was raised on the third day, and

appeared to Cephas—another name for Peter—then to the Twelve, more than five hundred believers at one time, James, all the apostles, and finally Paul himself. The formulaic wording and Paul’s deliberate use of the technical terms “received” and “delivered” are among the principal reasons scholars identify the core of this passage as an earlier Christian tradition rather than something Paul invented while writing to Corinth.

Dr. Gary R. Habermas (born 1950), an American New Testament scholar, philosopher of religion, and Distinguished Research Professor of Apologetics and Philosophy at Liberty University, has built his well-known “minimal facts” approach around historical data that enjoy broad recognition across a wide range of contemporary scholarship. His original survey catalogued thousands of scholarly treatments of the Resurrection, while his extensive 2024 work, *On the Resurrection: Evidences and Refutations*, substantially updates the historical, philosophical, and critical discussion ([Gary R. Habermas, Publications—including *On the Resurrection: Evidences and Refutations*](#)).

The importance of Habermas’ approach is methodological. One does not have to begin by convincing a skeptic that the entire Bible is divinely inspired or completely without error before examining the historical case for the Resurrection. The investigator can begin with evidence recognized by a broad spectrum of scholars—including many who do not accept conservative Christian theology—and then ask which explanation best accounts for those agreed-upon facts.

The dating of the tradition preserved in 1 Corinthians 15 is especially important. Scholars differ over whether its original formulation should be placed within months of the crucifixion or several years afterward, but there is wide agreement that Paul received it before writing 1 Corinthians in approximately AD 53–55. Its roots therefore reach back into the earliest years of the Christian movement, when the original apostles and other eyewitnesses were still alive and available to confirm or challenge what was being proclaimed.

Paul’s own movements help narrow that historical distance. According to [Galatians 1:18–19](#), Paul visited Jerusalem three years after his conversion and spent fifteen days with Cephas, or Peter, while also meeting James, the brother of Jesus. These were not peripheral figures who had heard the story several times removed. Peter was one of Jesus’ leading disciples, and James had known Jesus within His own family. Paul’s direct contact with them places him in personal communication with two of the most important witnesses named in the early Resurrection tradition.

Dr. James P. Ware, a New Testament scholar specializing in Paul and ancient Christianity and professor emeritus of religion at the University of Evansville, treats [1 Corinthians 15:3–5](#) explicitly as a pre-Pauline formula. His technical study examines what this primitive confession meant when it declared that Jesus had been raised ([James P. Ware, “The Resurrection of Jesus in the Pre-Pauline Formula of 1 Cor 15.3–5,” *New Testament Studies*](#)). Ware argues that the formula’s language reflects belief in Jesus’ bodily Resurrection, not merely the survival of His soul, a spiritual vision, or the symbolic continuation of His teachings.

This creates a formidable historical problem for the theory that bodily Resurrection belief emerged only after decades of legendary development. However one ultimately explains the reported appearances, the conviction that Jesus died, was buried, was raised, and appeared to named witnesses belongs to the earliest recoverable strata of Christianity. It was not a theological decoration added after the original witnesses had disappeared. It was already being proclaimed while Peter, James, Paul, the other apostles, and many members of the earliest Christian community were still alive.

The historical distance between the crucifixion and the Resurrection proclamation is therefore far too small to dismiss Easter faith as a late legend that gradually replaced an earlier form of Christianity uninterested in Jesus' Resurrection. The evidence instead indicates that the Resurrection was embedded within Christianity's foundational proclamation from the beginning. The earliest Christians did not first preach Jesus as merely a moral teacher and then transform Him into a risen Lord generations later. They proclaimed from the outset that He died, was buried, rose bodily, and appeared to witnesses.

IN SIMPLE TERMS: Paul did not invent the Resurrection story decades after Jesus lived. He repeated a carefully preserved declaration that he had received from the earliest Christians, and he had personally met Peter and James—two of the central witnesses named in that proclamation. This creed arose so close to Jesus' crucifixion that there was scarcely enough time for a legend to develop, much less replace an earlier version of Christianity. **The historical bedrock is this: from the very beginning, Jesus' followers were proclaiming that He truly died, was buried, rose bodily from the grave, and appeared alive to numerous named witnesses.**



2. The Jewish “Mutation”: One Man Raised in the Middle of History

The second pillar asks a question that my earlier study only began to appreciate fully: **Why did Jewish followers of a crucified Messiah suddenly begin proclaiming that one man had already undergone the resurrection expected at the end of the age?** Second Temple Judaism contained diverse beliefs about death and the afterlife. The Sadducees denied a future resurrection, while the Pharisees affirmed it. Passages such as [Daniel 12:2](#) anticipated a future awakening of those who “sleep in the dust of the ground,” and Jewish martyrs portrayed in 2 Maccabees expected God eventually to restore their mutilated bodies.

Yet the early Christian claim was not merely that Jesus' soul had gone to heaven, that His teachings continued to inspire His followers, or that His memory remained alive. It was that the future bodily resurrection promised for the end of the age had suddenly broken into the middle of history in one person. Jesus had risen first, while the general resurrection of everyone else remained in the future.

The New Testament itself preserves evidence of how unexpected this claim was. When Jesus told Martha that her brother Lazarus would rise again, she immediately placed that hope at the end of history: "I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the last day" ([John 11:23–24](#)). Her response reflects the familiar Jewish expectation—God would raise His people collectively on the final day. Even Jesus' closest disciples struggled to understand what He meant when He spoke of "rising from the dead," discussing among themselves what such a statement could mean ([Mark 9:9–10](#)). Their confusion is historically revealing: they possessed a category for resurrection at the end of the age, but not for the Messiah dying and rising bodily ahead of everyone else. The Christian proclamation therefore cannot be explained as the disciples simply seeing what they already expected to see. Their inherited expectations ran in the opposite direction. Something extraordinary forced them to create an entirely new category: the general resurrection had begun early because the crucified Messiah had risen first.

Dr. N. T. Wright has again made this remarkable Jewish "mutation" central to his historical case. Wright uses the word *mutation* not to suggest a biological process, but to describe a sudden and significant transformation within an existing Jewish belief.

Wright explains that where first-century Jews believed in resurrection, they ordinarily expected it to be a large-scale, collective event at the end of the present age. The Christian movement, however, began announcing that one man had been raised in advance, inaugurating the final resurrection while the remainder of the dead still awaited their future raising ([N. T. Wright, "Jesus' Resurrection and Christian Origins"](#)). This was not a minor theological adjustment. It represented a dramatic rearrangement of the Jewish eschatological timetable around Jesus.

Paul expressed this unprecedented claim by calling Christ "the first fruits of those who are asleep" ([1 Corinthians 15:20](#)). In an agricultural society, the first fruits were the initial portion of the harvest, demonstrating that the remainder would follow. By applying this image to Jesus, Paul declared that Christ's bodily Resurrection was the beginning and guarantee of the general resurrection still to come. The end-time harvest had not yet arrived in its fullness, but its first and decisive portion had already appeared.

The point becomes even more striking when the Christian movement is compared with other failed messianic movements. A would-be messiah executed by Rome had, according to ordinary expectations, been publicly discredited. His followers might mourn his death, preserve his teaching, honor his memory, abandon the movement, or transfer their hopes to another leader. They would not naturally conclude that his shameful Roman execution had been reversed through an individual bodily resurrection that inaugurated God's promised new creation.

Crucifixion was not merely a tragic way for a messianic claimant to die. It was Rome's deliberate public announcement that the condemned man had been defeated, humiliated, and stripped of every claim to authority. The Jewish Scriptures also declared that anyone hanged upon a tree was under a curse ([Deuteronomy 21:22–23](#)). Nothing about Jesus' crucifixion, considered by itself, would naturally have encouraged His followers to proclaim Him as God's victorious and vindicated Messiah.

Wright therefore asks the historian to explain not merely why the disciples continued to admire Jesus or cherish His memory, but why **this particular belief** erupted from within a Jewish setting where it was not the expected response to the execution of a messianic claimant ([N. T. Wright, “Christian Origins and the Resurrection of Jesus: The Resurrection of Jesus as a Historical Problem”](#)). Something caused devout Jewish followers of Jesus to revise their understanding of resurrection, Messiahship, history, and the arrival of God’s kingdom simultaneously.

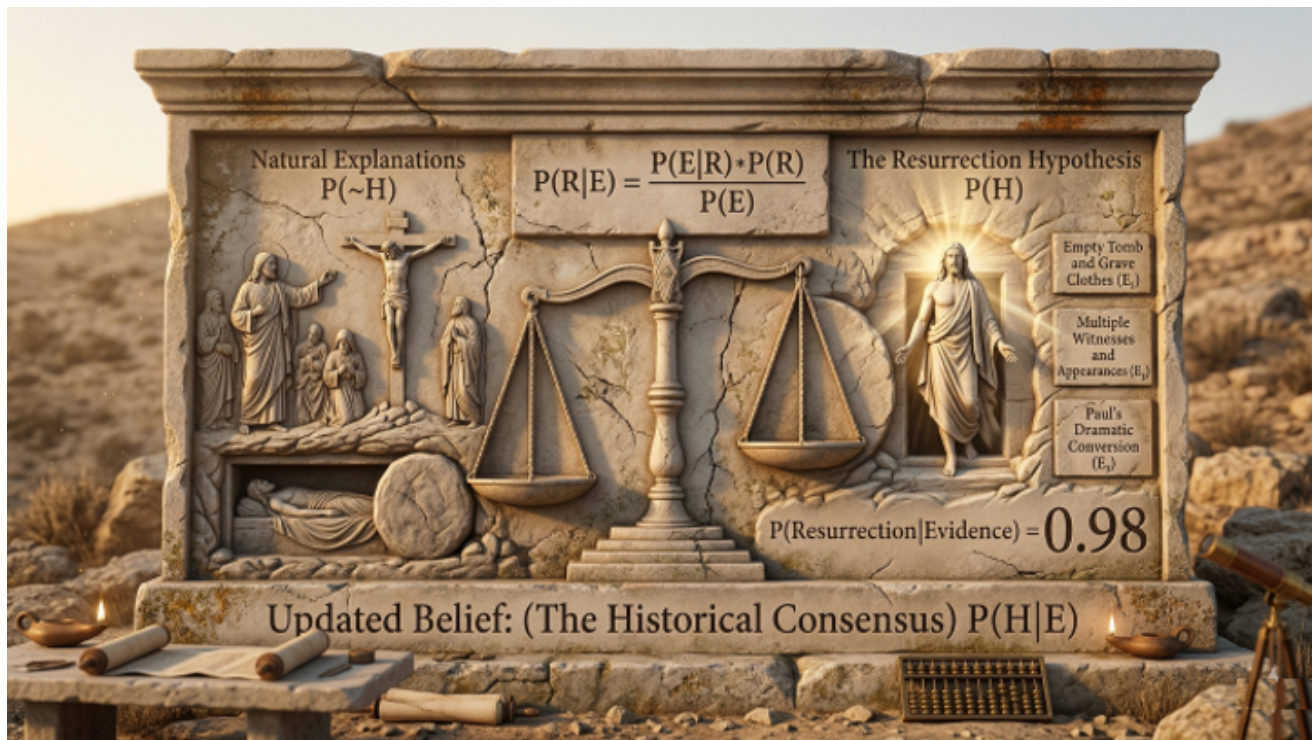
Dr. Larry W. Hurtado (1943–2019), an influential American New Testament scholar, historian of early Christianity, specialist in earliest devotion to Jesus, and Professor Emeritus of New Testament Language, Literature, and Theology at the University of Edinburgh, added a second and equally important dimension to this historical problem. The earliest Christian sources display not only a new Resurrection claim but also an extraordinary new devotional pattern. Jesus was incorporated into the prayers, hymns, confessions, baptismal practices, sacred meals, and corporate worship of communities whose foundational religious commitment was Jewish monotheism.

Hurtado described this development as a sudden and significant “mutation” in Jewish devotional practice. The earliest believers did not abandon their conviction that there is only one God. Instead, they began including the risen and exalted Jesus within the worship and devotion they believed belonged to the God of Israel. Hurtado argued that powerful experiences interpreted as encounters with the risen Jesus became a decisive catalyst for this remarkable development ([Larry W. Hurtado, “Earliest Jesus-Devotion and Putative ‘Parallels’”](#)).

This means that the historian must account for two closely connected developments. First, Jesus’ followers began proclaiming that He had been bodily raised ahead of the final resurrection. Second, these Jewish believers began worshiping and invoking the risen Jesus within an unmistakably monotheistic devotional life. Neither development is adequately explained by saying that the disciples simply admired a dead teacher, preserved His moral lessons, or felt that His influence continued after His death.

Something far more powerful produced this historical explosion. The disciples became convinced that God had reversed Rome’s verdict, vindicated the crucified Jesus, raised Him bodily from the dead, and exalted Him as Lord. The Resurrection did not merely console them after the loss of a beloved teacher; it compelled them to reorganize their understanding of Israel’s Messiah, the resurrection of the dead, the unfolding of history, and even the worship of the one God around Jesus.

IN SIMPLE TERMS: The Jewish followers of Jesus were expecting the resurrection of everyone at the end of history—not the Resurrection of one man while everyone else remained in their graves. When Jesus was crucified, normal expectations should have told them that His messianic mission had failed. Instead, they suddenly proclaimed that He had risen bodily, that the final resurrection had already begun in Him, and that this crucified man now belonged within their worship of the one God. **The historical question is therefore not merely why the disciples continued to remember Jesus. It is what happened that caused devout Jews to transform their beliefs about the Messiah, resurrection, history, and worship virtually all at once. Their answer was unmistakable: they had encountered Jesus alive after His death.**



3. The Bayesian Question: Is a Resurrection Automatically Impossible?

The third pillar moves from ancient history into philosophy and probability. Skeptical treatments sometimes reject the Resurrection before examining the historical evidence because dead people do not ordinarily rise. That observation is certainly true as far as it goes. Resurrection would be extraordinary precisely because normal biological experience moves relentlessly in the opposite direction. The dead remain dead unless something—or Someone—outside the ordinary course of nature acts upon them.

The deeper philosophical question, however, is whether the regularity of death makes divine action impossible or whether the worldview brought to the investigation has already decided the case. If a person begins with the absolute conviction that God does not exist, cannot act in history, or would never raise anyone from the dead, then no amount of historical evidence could ever be sufficient. The conclusion has been built into the starting assumptions before the tomb, the witnesses, or the earliest testimony is ever examined.

Bayesian reasoning takes its name from **the Rev. Thomas Bayes (c. 1701–1761), an English Presbyterian minister, mathematician, and early pioneer in probability theory.** In its simplest form, Bayesian reasoning asks how new evidence should cause us to update the probability of a proposed explanation. It considers both what we already have reason to believe—the background evidence—and how likely the newly discovered evidence would be if a particular explanation were true.

Dr. Richard G. Swinburne (born 1934), a British analytic philosopher, Fellow of the British Academy, influential philosopher of religion and science, and Nolloth Professor Emeritus of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion at the University of Oxford, applies this method to the Resurrection. Swinburne does not begin with the testimony about the empty tomb in isolation. He first considers the broader philosophical evidence concerning whether God exists, what purposes such a God might possess, and whether God might have reason to enter human history and reveal Himself.

Swinburne's argument begins with background evidence. If God does not exist, then a divinely caused Resurrection has no probability because there is no divine agent capable of producing it. If God exists, however, and if God has reason to reveal Himself, identify with humanity, confront evil, and authenticate a uniquely revelatory life, then the prior probability of a divinely caused Resurrection is no longer zero. The life and claims of Jesus, His crucifixion, the early testimony concerning His appearances, the empty-tomb tradition, and the inadequacy of rival explanations can then be weighed as historical evidence rather than dismissed before the investigation begins ([Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate*, Oxford University Press](#)).

$$P(h|e \cdot k) = \frac{P(h|k) \cdot P(e|h \cdot k)}{P(e|k)}$$

Bayesian reasoning asks how new evidence should update the probability of a hypothesis given its background assumptions.

Bayesian reasoning does not mean that frequently occurring events must always be believed and rare events must always be rejected. It asks a more discriminating question: **Under which proposed explanation would the available evidence be most likely to exist?** A rare event may still become the best explanation when the evidence would be extremely difficult to account for if that event had not occurred.

Suppose, for example, that someone wins a major lottery. Winning is extraordinarily rare before the numbers are drawn, but if the person produces the verified winning ticket, the rarity of winning does not require us to reject the evidence. The probability changes because new evidence has entered the investigation. This comparison is limited because a lottery victory remains a natural event, whereas Resurrection requires divine action. Nevertheless, it illustrates the underlying principle: rarity alone does not determine whether an event occurred. Evidence can rationally alter an initially low probability.

Swinburne became famous for assigning the Resurrection a probability greater than 97 percent within his formal philosophical model. That figure should be understood correctly. It does not mean that a laboratory tested the Resurrection and returned a scientifically measured result of 97 percent. Nor does it mean that everyone who uses Bayesian reasoning must accept Swinburne's precise numerical assignments. The result depends upon his specific estimates concerning the probability of God's existence, the likelihood of divine revelation and incarnation, the character and claims of Jesus, the historical evidence, and the probability of alternative explanations.

The more enduring value of Swinburne's work is therefore not merely the final percentage but the structure of his reasoning. He demonstrates that extraordinary events cannot be rationally excluded simply because they are rare. Their probability depends partly upon whether there is independent reason to believe that an agent capable of producing such an event exists and has a sufficient reason to act. Oxford University Press summarizes the conclusion of Swinburne's final chapter more cautiously: given the philosophical and historical case he has constructed, the overall balance of evidence favoring the Resurrection is "very strong" ([Richard Swinburne, "The Balance of Probability"](#)).

This matters greatly for the Resurrection investigation because it exposes the hidden premise behind a common skeptical objection. The statement "dead people do not rise naturally" is not an argument against the Christian claim because Christianity has never claimed that Jesus recovered through a natural biological process. Christians are not proposing that a dead body spontaneously restarted itself

or that medical recovery occurred inside the tomb. They are claiming that **God acted** and raised Jesus from the dead.

The real question is therefore not, “Do dead bodies ordinarily return to life?” Everyone already knows that they do not. The relevant questions are whether God exists, whether God could have reason to act in this particular life, and whether the historical evidence is better explained by divine action than by hallucination, legend, conspiracy, mistaken identity, bodily survival, or some other naturalistic alternative. If God exists, miracles cannot be rejected as impossible in principle. They must be investigated as claims about what God may have done within history.

IN SIMPLE TERMS: Saying “dead people stay dead” does not settle the question because Christians agree that dead people do not rise by natural biological processes. The Christian claim is that God raised Jesus. If someone assumes from the beginning that God does not exist or can never act, the Resurrection will automatically be rejected no matter what evidence is presented. But if God’s existence is even possible, then the evidence must be examined rather than dismissed. **The question is not whether resurrections happen naturally; they do not. The question is whether the historical evidence surrounding Jesus is strong enough to conclude that, in this unique case, God acted supernaturally and raised Him from the dead.**



4. The Women at the Tomb: An Awkward Tradition That Would Not Go Away

All four canonical Gospels place women—and most consistently Mary Magdalene—at the discovery of the empty tomb ([Matthew 28:1–10](#); [Mark 16:1–8](#); [Luke 24:1–12](#); [John 20:1–18](#)). Matthew names Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary.” Mark names Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome. Luke names Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and other women. John focuses upon Mary Magdalene and her personal encounter with the risen Jesus.

These accounts provide different perspectives and complementary details, but their central testimony is remarkably consistent: **women came first to the tomb, discovered that Jesus' body was gone, received the announcement that He had risen, and carried that news to the male disciples.** In Matthew and John, women also become the first recorded witnesses to an appearance of the risen Christ.

Dr. J. Michael Winger, a New Testament researcher whose published work has examined the language and chronology of the Synoptic Resurrection narratives, observes that despite the distinctive details preserved by the Gospel writers, all the accounts agree that women came first to the empty tomb ([J. Michael Winger, "When Did the Women Visit the Tomb?" *New Testament Studies*](#)). This agreement is historically important because the Gospel writers did not replace these women with male witnesses who would have carried far greater public and legal authority in the surrounding culture.

How little public authority did women possess?

To appreciate the evidential force of this feature, the modern reader must enter a world in which a woman's public voice did not carry anywhere near the institutional authority normally accorded to a man. Women could be respected within their households, participate in religious life, own property under certain circumstances, conduct business, exercise influence, and communicate reliable information. Scripture itself records many courageous, intelligent, and influential women. Nevertheless, the ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds were overwhelmingly patriarchal, with legal, political, educational, and public authority concentrated in the hands of men.

In the Roman world, freeborn women could hold citizenship and sometimes possess considerable wealth, but they could not vote, hold political office, serve in the Roman military, sit in the Senate, or exercise the public authority routinely available to male citizens. Roman women could testify in some judicial proceedings, so it would be inaccurate to say that their evidence was never heard. Yet they did not normally serve as prosecutors or legal advocates, and Roman legal writers repeatedly treated women as occupying an inferior public and juridical position. Their legal capacity was restricted, their participation was bounded by male-dominated institutions, and their credibility could be evaluated through deeply entrenched assumptions about the supposed weakness or instability of their sex.

The imbalance could be even sharper within certain Jewish judicial settings. **Flavius Josephus (c. AD 37–c. 100), the first-century Jewish historian, military commander, and Roman citizen whose writings are among our most important non-Christian sources for Judaism and Roman Judea,** preserves a striking rule in *Antiquities of the Jews*. In his presentation of Jewish law, Josephus declares that the testimony of women should not be admitted because of what he regarded as the "levity and boldness" of their sex ([Josephus, *Antiquities* 4.219](#)).

Josephus' statement does not mean that no ancient man ever believed anything a woman said. Women naturally conveyed information in families, households, markets, religious communities, and ordinary social life. Its importance lies in what it reveals about formal public credibility: when serious legal or communal claims required authoritative confirmation, male testimony carried a status that female testimony did not approach. Women lived and spoke within that society, but they did not stand beside men as social, judicial, or political equals.

This makes the Gospel testimony particularly striking. If the evangelists or early Christians had been inventing a persuasive Resurrection story designed to overcome public skepticism, placing women at the head of the witness list would have been a remarkably counterproductive choice. A fabricated

account intended to achieve maximum credibility in that culture would naturally have placed Peter, John, Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, or another prominent man at the tomb first. Instead, the Gospel writers faithfully preserved the far more culturally awkward claim that Mary Magdalene and other women made the discovery and carried the first Easter proclamation to the apostles.

Luke preserves an especially candid detail. When the women returned from the tomb and reported what they had encountered, the apostles initially dismissed their words as “nonsense” and refused to believe them ([Luke 24:9–11](#)). That reaction reflects the cultural assumptions of the time while also placing the future leaders of the Church in an unflattering light. The women remembered and acted upon Jesus’ words, while the apostles responded with disbelief. An invented account designed to magnify apostolic prestige would have had every reason to reverse those roles.

John’s Gospel makes the point even more personal. Mary Magdalene stood weeping outside the tomb until Jesus appeared and called her by name. She then returned to the disciples with the declaration, “I have seen the Lord” ([John 20:11–18](#)). Jesus deliberately entrusted the first announcement of His Resurrection to a woman in a culture in which male public testimony carried far greater authority. The Gospel writers did not erase that uncomfortable memory when Christianity began proclaiming the Resurrection throughout the Roman world.

Why the women’s names matter

The women are not presented as an anonymous crowd inserted merely to move the narrative forward. The Gospel writers repeatedly preserve individual names: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, Salome, and others. This naming allowed early readers to connect the Resurrection proclamation with identifiable people remembered within the first Christian communities.

Dr. Luuk van de Weghe, a New Testament scholar trained at the University of Aberdeen whose research specializes in ancient names, eyewitness memory, and the historical character of the Gospels, has studied how personal names were preserved within the Synoptic tradition. His research argues that named individuals associated with significant events could function as links to living eyewitness sources within early Christian communities. Names attached to crucial events were not meaningless decorations; they could identify the people from whom particular memories had been received ([Luuk van de Weghe, “Name Recall in the Synoptic Gospels,” *New Testament Studies*](#)).

The persistent naming of Mary Magdalene is therefore especially significant. She appears in all four Gospels as a witness to Jesus’ crucifixion, burial, empty tomb, or Resurrection appearance. In a culture that gave women far less public authority than men, the early Church nevertheless continued to preserve her name at the center of Easter morning. Had the story been freely invented or substantially reshaped for apologetic convenience, Mary Magdalene was one of the easiest features to remove. Instead, her identity remained firmly embedded within every Gospel account.

Dr. Pheme Perkins (born 1945), an internationally recognized New Testament scholar, specialist in early Christianity and its Greco-Roman setting, and Joseph Professor of Catholic Spirituality Emerita at Boston College, concludes that there is good historical reason to affirm that women first heard the Easter message and played a crucial role in gathering Jesus’ scattered disciples after the crucifixion. Perkins further argues that Mary Magdalene deserves recognition among those to whom the risen Christ first appeared ([Pheme Perkins, “I Have Seen the Lord’: Women Witnesses to the Resurrection”](#)).

The prominence of Peter in the early Church makes the preservation of the women's testimony even more revealing. Paul's early creedal tradition emphasizes appearances to Cephas, the Twelve, James, the apostles, and Paul himself ([1 Corinthians 15:3–8](#)). That list reflects the male witnesses who carried recognized apostolic authority in the Church's public proclamation. Yet the Gospel tradition stubbornly preserves an earlier moment: before Peter and the other apostles understood what had happened, women had already arrived at the tomb and received the news.

The early Christians did not remove the women from the account, replace them with more socially authoritative men, or rewrite the apostles as immediately believing heroes. They preserved the historically awkward truth that the women arrived first and that the male disciples initially failed to believe them. This is precisely the kind of detail that bears the unmistakable marks of authentic memory. It remained in the tradition because that is how the events were remembered by those closest to them.

The women at the tomb are therefore not a decorative or sentimental feature. They are an important component of the historical case. Their presence is multiply attested across all four Gospels, their names were carefully preserved, their initial report was candidly described as rejected by the apostles, and their priority survived even as male apostolic leadership became prominent throughout the Church. **The most convincing explanation for this stubborn and culturally inconvenient tradition is that women—above all Mary Magdalene—really were the first witnesses to the empty tomb and the first heralds of the risen Christ.**

IN SIMPLE TERMS: In the ancient Jewish and Roman world, a woman's public, legal, and political standing was nowhere close to that of a man. If early Christians were inventing a Resurrection story to persuade their culture, they would almost certainly have placed respected men such as Peter or John at the tomb first. Instead, all four Gospels preserve the awkward truth that women discovered the empty tomb, received the first Easter announcement, and carried it to male disciples who initially refused to believe them. **The women remained in the story because they belonged to the history. Their culturally inconvenient testimony is powerful evidence that the Gospel writers faithfully reported what actually happened.**



5. Why the Hallucination Hypothesis Does Not Explain the Whole Evidence

Forty years ago, I argued that group hallucinations were clinically impossible. I would state the case with greater precision today—not because the naturalistic explanation has grown stronger, but because the strongest Christian apologetic confronts every proposed alternative in its most credible form. Individual hallucinations unquestionably occur. Grieving people sometimes report sensing or seeing a deceased loved one. Expectation, suggestion, emotional excitement, and social influence can shape how groups interpret unusual experiences. Some reported collective religious visions may involve a combination of subjective perception and social reinforcement.

None of those observations, however, establishes that a hallucination hypothesis can explain the Resurrection appearances. The proper question is not whether anyone has ever experienced a vision of a deceased person. The decisive question is far more demanding: **Can hallucinations account for the entire historical pattern—the different individuals and groups, varied circumstances, bodily character of the appearances, empty tomb, Jewish understanding of resurrection, conversions of previous skeptics and enemies, and sudden emergence of the Resurrection proclamation?**

What is a hallucination?

A hallucination is a sensory experience occurring without a corresponding external physical object. A person may see, hear, or feel something that appears real to him even though other people do not perceive the same external reality. Hallucinations are experienced within individual minds and may arise through illness, neurological conditions, sleep deprivation, grief, trauma, medication, substance use, or other psychological and physiological causes.

A group of people may certainly influence one another. An excited crowd can misinterpret an ambiguous sight, adopt another person's description, or reinforce a shared religious expectation. Yet

this is not the same thing as numerous people independently encountering the same recognizable person, under different circumstances, over an extended period, and reaching the same bodily Resurrection conclusion. The word *collective* can describe a group's shared interpretation or socially reinforced response, but it does not by itself supply a psychological mechanism through which one person's private hallucination is transferred into the minds of everyone else.

Dr. Jake H. O'Connell (birth date not publicly documented), an independent scholar specializing in Resurrection research, apparitional experiences, religious visions, and Bayesian analysis, has produced one of the most extensive direct examinations of this proposal. His study is especially valuable because he does not defeat the hallucination theory merely by defining collective hallucinations out of existence. He surveys modern reports of group religious visions and acknowledges that some may plausibly involve collective hallucinatory or socially reinforced visionary phenomena.

O'Connell then compares the characteristics of those reported phenomena with the early Christian Resurrection traditions. His conclusion is that collective hallucination remains an inadequate explanation for the appearances of Jesus ([Jake H. O'Connell, "Jesus' Resurrection and Collective Hallucinations," *Tyndale Bulletin*](#)). The Easter evidence contains too many interlocking elements that the hallucination hypothesis leaves untouched.

Multiple appearances under different circumstances

The Resurrection traditions do not describe a single emotionally overwrought individual having one private experience that was gradually repeated by others. The earliest tradition preserved in [1 Corinthians 15:3–8](#) reports appearances to Peter, the Twelve, more than five hundred people at one time, James, all the apostles, and finally Paul. The Gospel narratives add appearances involving Mary Magdalene, other women, two disciples traveling to Emmaus, the gathered disciples in Jerusalem, and disciples in Galilee.

These encounters occur under varied circumstances. Some take place indoors and others outdoors. Some involve individuals and others involve groups. Some occur near the tomb, another along a road, others inside a closed room, and another beside the Sea of Galilee. They are not confined to one person, one emotional state, one location, one moment, or one set of suggestive surroundings.

A naturalistic hallucination theory must consequently propose not one hallucination but a succession of different visionary experiences involving numerous people and groups. It must then explain why those separate subjective experiences produced the same revolutionary conclusion: Jesus had not merely appeared spiritually or communicated from heaven; **God had bodily raised Him from the dead.**

The disciples were not expecting what happened

Hallucination explanations are most persuasive when an individual intensely expects or desperately desires a particular experience. The Gospel narratives, however, do not portray the disciples eagerly awaiting Jesus' Resurrection and psychologically preparing themselves to see Him. They portray frightened, grieving, scattered followers whose messianic hopes had been shattered by His crucifixion.

The women went to the tomb carrying spices associated with burial, not expecting to welcome a risen Messiah ([Mark 16:1–3](#); [Luke 24:1](#)). When they reported what they had encountered, the apostles initially regarded their words as nonsense ([Luke 24:9–11](#)). Thomas refused to believe without direct

physical confirmation ([John 20:24–29](#)). The two disciples traveling to Emmaus spoke of their hopes in the past tense: “We were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel” ([Luke 24:21](#)).

The earliest witnesses therefore did not move naturally from expectation to vision. They moved from despair, disbelief, and confusion to the settled conviction that Jesus was bodily alive. Their belief was not simply the emotional continuation of what they already expected. It required a radical reversal of what they believed had happened when Jesus was crucified.

James and Paul do not fit a bereavement explanation

The hallucination hypothesis becomes even more strained when applied to James and Paul. The Gospels report that during Jesus’ earthly ministry, His brothers did not believe in Him ([John 7:5](#)). Yet the early creed preserved by Paul specifically names James as a recipient of a Resurrection appearance ([1 Corinthians 15:7](#)). James subsequently emerged as a leading figure in the Jerusalem church ([Acts 15:13–21](#); [Galatians 1:18–19](#)).

Paul presents an even greater difficulty. He was not a grieving disciple longing to see Jesus again. He was an active opponent of the Christian movement who believed its proclamation was dangerously wrong. He persecuted Christians and attempted to destroy the Church ([Galatians 1:13–23](#)). Yet Paul became convinced that the risen Jesus had appeared to him and transformed from persecutor to apostle.

Bereavement visions may be proposed for people who deeply loved and missed Jesus, but that explanation does not naturally account for an unbelieving brother or a hostile persecutor. To include James and Paul, the hypothesis must multiply its assumptions, proposing different psychological mechanisms for different people while still explaining why all of them reached the same Resurrection conclusion.

The appearances were understood as bodily encounters

The earliest Christian proclamation was not merely, “Jesus’ spirit is still with us,” “We sensed His presence,” or “His cause continues.” First-century Jews already possessed categories for dreams, visions, angels, spirits, the continued existence of the dead, and heavenly exaltation. Yet the disciples chose the far more specific and startling language of resurrection.

The Gospel accounts emphasize the bodily character of Jesus’ appearances. He invites the disciples to see and touch Him, distinguishing Himself from a spirit ([Luke 24:36–43](#)). He shows them His wounds ([John 20:19–29](#)). He eats in their presence and later prepares food beside the Sea of Galilee ([John 21:9–14](#)). These narratives deliberately communicate continuity between the crucified body placed in the tomb and the glorified Jesus encountered afterward.

Hallucination theories may attempt to classify these bodily details as later elaborations, but that simply assumes away the evidence requiring explanation. Paul’s earlier language already identifies the risen Christ as the “first fruits” of the future resurrection of believers ([1 Corinthians 15:20–23](#)). The earliest Christian message was bodily Resurrection, not the survival of Jesus as a memory or disembodied spirit.

A hallucination does not empty a tomb

The hallucination hypothesis also fails to account for the burial and empty-tomb evidence. A vision might help explain why one grieving person believed that he or she had seen someone who had died. It cannot, by itself, remove a body from an identifiable burial place.

Jesus had been publicly executed, His death had been confirmed by Roman authority, and Joseph of Arimathea had placed His body in a tomb. The Christian proclamation then emerged in Jerusalem, the same city in which Jesus had been crucified and buried. If His body remained available, the authorities possessed an obvious means of undermining the message. Yet the ancient controversy centered upon how the tomb became empty, not upon the production of Jesus' corpse.

A complete naturalistic explanation must therefore combine a hallucination theory with a second theory explaining the missing body. One hypothesis must explain the appearances, while another must explain the tomb. The more independent assumptions an explanation requires, the less persuasive it becomes—especially when the Resurrection itself accounts naturally for both the appearances and the empty tomb as parts of the same event.

Hallucinations do not explain the Jewish Resurrection proclamation

The hypothesis must also explain why the disciples interpreted their experiences as the bodily Resurrection of one man in the middle of history. Jewish people could believe that the dead existed with God, that a martyr's soul had been received into heaven, or that someone had experienced a vision of a deceased person. None of those beliefs required the conclusion that the final resurrection had already begun.

Yet the disciples proclaimed that Jesus had been raised bodily as the “first fruits” of the general resurrection still to come. Their message rearranged the Jewish eschatological timetable around Jesus and soon incorporated Him into the devotional life of Jewish monotheists. A hallucination theory must therefore explain not only why certain individuals thought they saw Jesus but why those experiences generated this unprecedented theological conclusion.

The cumulative evidence exceeds the hypothesis

Dr. Dale C. Allison Jr. (born 1955), a prominent American New Testament historian, specialist in the historical Jesus and early Christianity, and Richard J. Dearborn Professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, has examined Resurrection appearances, religious visions, Jesus' burial, the empty tomb, competing explanations, and the historical conclusions that follow from them. His major 2021 study brings these lines of evidence together in a single extensive investigation ([Dale C. Allison Jr., *The Resurrection of Jesus: Apologetics, Polemics, History*](#)).

The value of confronting visionary phenomena directly is that the Resurrection case does not depend upon pretending that human beings never experience hallucinations, bereavement visions, or religious apparitions. Those phenomena exist, but their existence does not demonstrate that they caused Easter faith. When the entire body of evidence is considered, the hallucination hypothesis explains too little and requires too many additional assumptions.

It does not adequately explain the different individuals and groups, the varied times and locations, the physical character of the encounters, the initial disbelief of the disciples, the conversions of James and

Paul, the empty tomb, the Jewish category of bodily Resurrection, or the immediate proclamation that God had raised Jesus from the dead. It may attempt to explain one portion of the evidence—why someone believed that he saw Jesus—but it cannot carry the weight of the complete historical case.

A confident Christian defense does not need to fear the psychological evidence. It can acknowledge the reality of individual hallucinations while demonstrating that they do not explain Easter. **The Resurrection hypothesis possesses far greater explanatory scope because it unites the empty tomb, the appearances, the transformation of the witnesses, and the birth of the earliest Christian proclamation within one coherent historical explanation: Jesus was truly raised from the dead.**

IN SIMPLE TERMS: Hallucinations can happen to individuals, especially during grief, but that does not explain what happened after Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus appeared to different people and groups, in different places and circumstances, including an unbelieving brother and a hostile persecutor. His followers did not claim merely to sense His spiritual presence; they proclaimed that His crucified body had been raised. Hallucinations also cannot remove a body from a tomb. **The hallucination theory tries to explain one piece of the evidence while leaving the rest untouched. The bodily Resurrection of Jesus explains the appearances, the empty tomb, the transformed witnesses, and the sudden birth of the Christian proclamation together.**



6. The Guard, the Theft Charge, and the Problem of a Stolen Body

Matthew records that Jesus' enemies took extraordinary measures to prevent anyone from removing His body from the tomb. The account does not begin with Pilate spontaneously ordering a guard. Rather, **the chief priests and Pharisees went directly to Pontius Pilate and requested one.** They remembered that Jesus had said He would rise after three days, and they feared that His disciples might steal the body and then announce a Resurrection.

Their request was explicit: “Therefore, give orders for the tomb to be made secure until the third day; otherwise, His disciples may come and steal Him, and say to the people, ‘He has risen from the dead,’ and the last deception will be worse than the first” ([Matthew 27:62–64](#)). Pilate replied, “You have a guard; go, make it as secure as you know how.” Matthew then states, “And they went and made the tomb secure with the guard, sealing the stone” ([Matthew 27:65–66](#)).

Matthew’s description emphasizes intentional security. The tomb was known, the danger the authorities feared was specifically identified, permission was obtained from the Roman governor, a guard was posted, and the stone was officially sealed. Jesus’ enemies were not careless custodians of the burial site. They understood in advance exactly what the disciples could later be accused of doing, and they acted to prevent it.

Did Pilate supply Roman soldiers or authorize a Temple guard?

The Greek wording of Pilate’s answer can be translated either “You have a guard” or “Take a guard.” The expression *echete koustodian* can grammatically function as an indicative or an imperative. This has produced two principal interpretations. Pilate may have assigned Roman soldiers to the religious leaders, or he may have authorized them to use guards already under the Temple authorities.

Several details support the presence of Roman soldiers. The chief priests and Pharisees approached Pilate specifically to request that the tomb be secured. If they already possessed unrestricted authority to use their own Temple police, their appeal to the Roman governor appears less necessary. The Greek term *koustodia* is derived from the Latin *custodia*, a word associated with a Roman guard detail. After the tomb was found empty, the religious authorities promised the guards that if the report reached “the governor’s ears,” they would satisfy Pilate and keep the guards out of trouble ([Matthew 28:11–15](#)). That promise is particularly understandable if the soldiers were accountable to Pilate.

Other interpreters identify the men as members of the Jewish Temple guard because the guards reported directly to the chief priests after the tomb was opened. The Jerusalem Temple possessed an organized security force under priestly authority, and the New Testament elsewhere refers to “the captain of the temple guard” and Temple officers ([Luke 22:52](#); [Acts 4:1](#); [Acts 5:24–26](#)).

The exact identity of the guard does not diminish the security of the tomb. **If they were Roman soldiers, they served under the famously severe discipline of the Roman military. If they were Temple guards, they were trained officers acting under the direct authority of the chief priests who had specifically requested that the tomb be secured. Either way, they were not volunteers, frightened disciples, or casual bystanders. They were an authorized security force assigned to prevent the removal of Jesus’ body.**

Roman soldiers did not casually abandon their posts

Roman military discipline was intentionally severe because the effectiveness of the army depended upon soldiers remaining at their assigned posts. **Polybius (c. 200–c. 118 BC), the Greek statesman, military analyst, and historian whose *Histories* provide one of our most important descriptions of the Roman army**, explains that a soldier who failed in night-watch duty could be subjected to the *fustuarium*. The condemned soldier was struck with clubs and stones by his fellow soldiers, a punishment that could result in death. Roman discipline made sleeping on watch, deserting a position, or allowing a prisoner to escape an extremely serious offense ([Polybius, *Histories*, Book 6](#)).

The New Testament itself reflects this military culture. When the apostle Peter miraculously escaped from prison, Herod examined the guards and ordered them to be put to death ([Acts 12:18–19](#)). When the Philippian jailer awoke during an earthquake and believed the prisoners had escaped, he prepared to kill himself rather than face the consequences of losing those entrusted to him ([Acts 16:25–28](#)). These accounts illustrate how seriously ancient authorities treated the loss of prisoners and the abandonment of assigned security responsibilities.

If Roman soldiers guarded Jesus' tomb, therefore, they had powerful reasons to remain awake, maintain their watch, and prevent tampering. The suggestion that the entire guard detail simply fell asleep while frightened disciples approached, moved the stone, removed the body, and carried it away without awakening anyone is historically implausible. Moving a tombstone and extracting a wrapped body would not have been a silent, momentary action.

The later promise by the chief priests to keep the guards “out of trouble” is therefore highly significant. If the soldiers had nothing to fear, no such assurance would have been necessary. The religious authorities recognized that the official explanation they were purchasing placed the guards in danger by requiring them to admit a serious failure of duty.

Temple guards also faced serious punishment

If the guard consisted of Temple officers, the tomb was still protected by disciplined men accustomed to formal watch duty. The Temple was not guarded casually. Jewish tradition describes designated watch stations and regular inspections to ensure that the guards remained vigilant.

The [Mishnah, Middot 1:1–2](#) records that the officer of the Temple Mount made nighttime rounds carrying torches. Every guard was required to rise and identify himself. If a guard failed to respond because he had fallen asleep, the officer could strike him and even set fire to his clothing. People outside the Temple might hear the commotion and be told that it was the sound of a sleeping guard being punished.

This does not mean that Temple guards and Roman soldiers operated under identical rules or received identical penalties. It demonstrates something equally important: sleeping while assigned to guard duty was considered a disgraceful and punishable offense within the Temple security system as well. A Temple guard assigned by the chief priests to protect this highly controversial tomb would have understood that negligence, desertion, or cooperation with the disciples could bring swift punishment from the very authorities who commanded him.

Under either identification, the security argument remains formidable. The guards possessed training, authority, and strong personal incentives to prevent the body from being removed. The religious leaders had specifically warned Pilate about the possibility of theft. Those same leaders then supervised the securing of the tomb. **The very people most determined to prevent a false Resurrection claim had control of the burial site and took deliberate action to close off the theft explanation in advance.**

The official seal made tampering unmistakable

Though I'll deal next with what the “seal” officially intended, suffice to say here: Matthew adds that the authorities sealed the stone. The seal was not intended to make the stone physically heavier. Its

purpose was to place the authority of those who ordered the tomb secured upon its entrance and make unauthorized interference immediately evident.

A cord or other fastening could be stretched across the stone and secured with clay or wax bearing an official impression. Anyone moving the stone would break the seal and openly defy the authority behind it. The sealed tomb therefore created both a physical and legal barrier. Anyone attempting to remove Jesus' body would have to approach an officially guarded site, evade or overpower the guards, break the seal, move the stone, enter the tomb, unwrap or carry away the body, and escape without being identified or captured.

The narrative does not require exaggerated claims about a precise number of soldiers or an exact weight for the stone. Matthew's own description is sufficient: an authorized guard was posted, the entrance was sealed, and the authorities made the tomb "as secure" as they knew how. **The purpose of every measure was unmistakable—to ensure that Jesus' body could not disappear through human interference.**

Dr. William Lane Craig's defense of the guard tradition

Dr. William Lane Craig (born 1949), an American analytic philosopher, Christian theologian, historian of the Resurrection, and Emeritus Research Professor of Philosophy at Talbot School of Theology, published a detailed defense of the guard tradition in the peer-reviewed journal *New Testament Studies*. Craig argues that the account contains indications of earlier tradition and belongs within the historical controversy between Christians and their opponents over the empty tomb ([William Lane Craig, "The Guard at the Tomb," *New Testament Studies*](#)).

The account contains unusual vocabulary and a pattern of controversy that reaches behind Matthew's completed Gospel. The theft accusation, the guards' report, the bribe, and the promise to protect them from the governor form an interconnected explanation for a charge that Matthew says continued to circulate. This is not merely a decorative addition to the Resurrection narrative. It preserves the memory of an early dispute about why Jesus' body was no longer in the tomb.

The guard tradition also fits naturally with the political circumstances. The Jewish leadership had already involved Pilate in Jesus' execution. They feared that a Resurrection proclamation might intensify public unrest during Passover. Their concern that the disciples could remove the body gave them a clear motive to request protection, while Pilate had every reason to authorize a limited security measure that might prevent further disturbances surrounding Jesus.

The theft charge concedes that the tomb was empty

Matthew reports that after the Resurrection, some members of the guard entered Jerusalem and informed the chief priests "of all that had happened." The chief priests met with the elders, distributed a large sum of money to the soldiers, and instructed them to say, "His disciples came by night and stole Him while we were asleep" ([Matthew 28:11–15](#)).

That accusation is enormously revealing. Jesus' enemies did not respond by saying, "His body is still inside the tomb." They did not produce the corpse, direct the public to an occupied grave, or claim that the disciples had visited the wrong burial place. Instead, they advanced an explanation for why the body was missing. **The theft charge is therefore hostile confirmation that the tomb was empty.** The dispute was not whether Jesus' body had disappeared; it was how it had disappeared.

The explanation is also internally self-defeating. If the guards were truly asleep, they could not know who removed the body. Sleeping witnesses cannot identify thieves, describe their actions, or establish when the theft occurred. If even one guard remained awake, he could sound the alarm and summon the others. If the entire detail slept through the moving of the stone and removal of a body, every member had failed the specific duty for which the guard had been posted.

The need for bribery makes the weakness of the story even more conspicuous. Truthful witnesses do not ordinarily need to be paid large sums to repeat what they actually observed. The authorities had to purchase the explanation and promise protection from the governor because the soldiers were being told to confess an offense that could bring severe punishment. The payment and political assurance reveal that the theft story was not the guards' spontaneous report of what they had witnessed. It was a counter-narrative created to suppress the Resurrection proclamation.

The disciples had neither the opportunity nor the character of conspirators

The theft hypothesis also contradicts everything the sources tell us about the disciples immediately after the crucifixion. They were frightened, scattered, grieving, and hiding behind locked doors ([John 20:19](#)). They were not expecting Jesus to rise, and they initially refused to believe the women who reported the empty tomb. Nothing in their behavior suggests a coordinated plan to confront armed guards, violate an official seal, steal a corpse, and construct the most consequential religious deception in history.

Even if the disciples had somehow removed the body, theft would explain only an empty tomb. It would not explain the appearances reported to individuals and groups, the early creed of [1 Corinthians 15:3–8](#), the conversion of the previously unbelieving James, the conversion of the persecutor Paul, the transformation of frightened disciples into public witnesses, or the specifically Jewish proclamation that God had bodily raised Jesus ahead of the resurrection at the end of history.

A conspiracy would also require the disciples to proclaim what they knew to be false while accepting arrest, beatings, persecution, exile, and, for some, death. People may suffer for beliefs that are mistaken, but conspirators know whether they fabricated the event at the center of their own proclamation. The apostles' willingness to suffer does not merely show that they found Christianity meaningful. It demonstrates their sincerity about the foundational claim that they had encountered Jesus alive after His death.

The security measures became evidence against the authorities' explanation

The chief priests and Pharisees asked Pilate to secure the tomb because they feared that a missing body would support a Resurrection proclamation. Pilate authorized the guard. The stone was sealed. The guards assumed their posts. Yet on the third day, the tomb was empty.

The very precautions intended to prevent belief in the Resurrection strengthened the historical case for it. Without a guard, critics could more easily imagine that someone quietly entered the tomb. With an authorized security force, an official seal, a large stone, and severe penalties for failure, the theft theory becomes dramatically more difficult to sustain.

Whether Roman soldiers or Temple officers stood watch, the conclusion remains the same: **the tomb was not left unprotected. It was deliberately secured by Jesus' enemies against precisely the**

explanation they later paid the guards to circulate. The body nevertheless disappeared, and the authorities could neither produce it nor provide a credible account of its removal.

IN SIMPLE TERMS: Jesus’ enemies asked Pilate to make certain that no one could steal His body. Pilate authorized a guard, the tomb was sealed, and trained men were posted outside it. Roman soldiers could face brutal or fatal punishment for abandoning a post, while Temple guards were beaten and publicly disgraced for sleeping during watch duty. Yet the tomb still became empty. The authorities then paid the guards to claim that the disciples stole the body while they slept—a story that defeats itself because sleeping men could not know who removed it. **The guard and seal did not prevent the Resurrection; they prevented a credible claim that frightened disciples secretly stole Jesus’ body. The security measures imposed by His enemies became powerful evidence that the empty tomb could not be explained by ordinary theft.**



7. The Seal: Authority, Security, and What Matthew Actually Claims

Matthew states that after the chief priests and Pharisees obtained Pilate’s authorization, “they went and made the tomb secure with the guard, sealing the stone” ([Matthew 27:62–66](#)). The verb translated “sealing” is the Greek *sphragizō*, which means to seal, authenticate, certify, or mark something as secured under recognized authority.

In the ancient world, a seal was far more than an ornamental symbol. Seals were widely used to authenticate documents, identify ownership, protect shipments, close containers, secure storerooms, and reveal unauthorized entry. A seal communicated that the object behind it had been officially secured and that anyone disturbing it was challenging the authority represented by the seal.

Matthew’s point is therefore direct: **Jesus’ tomb was not merely closed; it was officially secured against tampering.** The stone created the physical barrier, the seal created an identifiable administrative and legal barrier, and the guard supplied active human enforcement.

How ancient seals worked

Ancient seals took many forms. A person in authority might possess a signet ring, cylinder seal, or stamp seal engraved with a distinctive design. The seal could be pressed into clay, wax, or another impressionable material attached to a document, cord, container, door, or entrance. The impression identified the official or institution responsible for securing it.

The seal did not have to make entry physically impossible. Its purpose was to make unauthorized entry unmistakable. If someone moved the protected object, untied the cord, opened the door, or broke through the secured entrance, the seal would be damaged. That damage immediately revealed that the protected area had been disturbed without authorization.

The closest modern comparison would be official evidence tape placed across a door or container. The tape does not create an indestructible physical barrier, but it identifies the authority controlling the site, warns against unauthorized entry, and makes tampering obvious. An ancient seal performed a similar function, though within a world in which challenging a ruler's or governor's authority could carry far more severe consequences.

The precise material used at Jesus' tomb is not described because Matthew's readers already understood what an official sealing represented. A cord may have been stretched across the stone and fastened with clay or wax impressions at one or more points, but the text does not require us to reconstruct the exact arrangement. What matters historically is the recognized function: **the tomb had been placed under authority, and the stone could not be moved without visibly breaking that security.**

Seals represented the authority behind them

The Hebrew Scriptures contain several important examples of seals representing royal or governmental authority. When Queen Jezebel wrote letters in King Ahab's name, she sealed them with the king's seal, thereby investing the documents with royal authority ([1 Kings 21:8](#)). In the book of Esther, an edict written in the king's name and sealed with his signet ring could not simply be ignored or casually revoked ([Esther 8:8](#)).

The closest biblical parallel to Jesus' tomb appears in the account of Daniel. After Daniel was placed inside the lions' den, "a stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den; and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the signet rings of his nobles, so that nothing would be changed regarding Daniel" ([Daniel 6:17](#)). The stone formed the physical obstruction, while the seals declared that the entrance had been secured under royal authority and could not lawfully be disturbed.

Matthew's language evokes the same administrative world. A stone stood across the entrance, an official seal disclosed any interference, and guards watched the site. The three measures worked together. The stone impeded entry, the seal identified tampering, and the guard was present to prevent anyone from attempting it.

Archaeology confirms the practical use of seals

Dr. Marta Ameri, an art historian and archaeologist specializing in the art, archaeology, and sealing practices of ancient South Asia and the broader ancient world, coedited the major

scholarly volume *Seals and Sealing in the Ancient World*. That study brings together archaeological research from the ancient Near East, Egypt, the Aegean world, and South Asia.

Ameri and her fellow scholars explain that ancient seals could be used to “sign documents, seal containers, and lock doors.” They functioned within economic, political, religious, and state-level administrative systems, providing recognizable marks of authority and control ([*Seals and Sealing in the Ancient World*, Cambridge University Press](#)). The practice was geographically widespread and deeply rooted in the administrative life of ancient societies.

The importance of that background for Matthew is considerable. His reference to sealing the stone is not an imaginative flourish disconnected from ancient practice. It belongs to a well-established world in which officials sealed doors, storerooms, containers, and other protected spaces to certify that they were closed and to expose unauthorized opening.

Dr. Geoffrey Yeo, a British archivist, historian of recordkeeping, and Honorary Senior Research Fellow in Information Studies at University College London, has likewise examined the function of seals within early societies. Yeo notes that sealings were designed so that “unauthorized opening was detectable” and that they were used to secure storeroom doors as well as documents and containers ([*Geoffrey Yeo, Record-Making and Record-Keeping: Marks of Ownership and Sealing*](#)).

The [*Metropolitan Museum of Art’s archaeological description of ancient door sealings*](#) explains the same practice in material terms. Clay sealings bearing stamp impressions were attached to doors and storage containers “in order to prevent tampering.” If the door or container was opened, the sealing was broken, leaving physical evidence that someone had violated the secured area.

These archaeological and administrative studies illuminate Matthew’s account. A sealed tomb was not simply a tomb with a symbolic mark placed nearby. It was a controlled site whose entrance had been officially secured and whose unauthorized opening would be immediately detectable.

Whose authority stood behind the tomb seal?

Matthew places the sealing within a clear chain of authority. The chief priests and Pharisees approached Pontius Pilate and requested that the tomb be secured. Pilate authorized them to use a guard and commanded, “Go, make it as secure as you know how.” They then secured the tomb by sealing the stone and posting the guard.

Whether the seal bore Roman authority directly or was applied by the Jewish authorities under Pilate’s authorization, it represented official action recognized by the governing powers involved. It was not placed there by Joseph of Arimathea, the disciples, or Jesus’ grieving family. It was imposed by the very authorities determined to prevent anyone from removing the body and proclaiming that Jesus had risen.

Breaking the seal would consequently be more than moving a stone. It would constitute deliberate interference with a protected burial site, defiance of the officials who had secured it, and confrontation with the armed guards assigned to enforce that security. Anyone planning to steal Jesus’ body would have to accept all of those risks.

The seal and guard formed a unified security system

The seal should not be separated from the other security measures described by Matthew. A seal without a guard could reveal tampering after it happened. A guard without a seal could protect the entrance but might not leave an official indication that the stone had been disturbed. Together, however, the large stone, official sealing, and stationed guard formed a unified system intended both to prevent and expose interference.

The guard could observe the tomb and stop anyone approaching it. The stone made removal of the body physically difficult. The seal warned that the entrance was under authority and made any movement of the stone discoverable. Each element reinforced the others.

This combination is why Matthew repeatedly emphasizes security. The religious authorities asked that the tomb “be made secure.” Pilate instructed them to make it “as secure as you know how.” Matthew then reports that they “made the tomb secure” by sealing the stone with the guard present. The repetition is deliberate. Matthew wants the reader to understand that ordinary human precautions had been taken to prevent precisely what Jesus’ enemies later claimed had occurred.

The seal makes the theft explanation even more difficult

For the disciples to steal the body, they would have needed to approach a known and guarded tomb, evade or overpower the guards, break an official seal, move the stone, enter the burial chamber, remove Jesus’ body, and carry it away without being captured. They would then have needed to maintain a lifelong conspiracy while proclaiming appearances they knew had never occurred.

The broken seal would immediately expose the intrusion. The guards would know that the tomb had been violated, the religious authorities would be notified, and those responsible would face the combined power of the Temple leadership and the Roman governor. The disciples—who had fled at Jesus’ arrest and were later hiding behind locked doors—are not portrayed as men preparing to confront armed authorities and violate an officially protected grave.

The authorities themselves had anticipated the theft theory before it could happen. They had warned Pilate that the disciples might steal the body and claim that Jesus had risen. They then implemented the very measures designed to prevent such a deception. When the tomb nevertheless became empty, they could not honestly claim that they had been caught unprepared.

The security measures became part of the evidence

Matthew’s account presents a striking reversal. The chief priests and Pharisees attempted to prevent any future Resurrection proclamation by taking control of the tomb. Yet the measures they imposed became evidence against their own later explanation.

The tomb was known. The stone was sealed. The guards were posted. The authorities were watching. Nevertheless, the body was gone. Jesus’ enemies did not produce it, point to an occupied tomb, or deny that the burial place had become empty. Instead, they paid the guards to circulate the claim that the disciples had stolen the body while the guards slept ([Matthew 28:11–15](#)).

That response confirms the very situation the seal was intended to prevent: the tomb was empty and an explanation was required. Yet the explanation was internally contradictory. Sleeping guards could not

identify the people who supposedly removed the body, while waking guards would have stopped them. The official seal, stationed guard, and physical stone make an unnoticed theft extraordinarily implausible.

Matthew does not portray the empty tomb as the result of an unsecured grave, a careless burial, or confused visitors wandering to the wrong location. He portrays an identifiable tomb deliberately protected by hostile authorities who possessed every motive to keep Jesus' body inside it. **The tomb became empty despite—not because of—the security measures surrounding it.**

IN SIMPLE TERMS: An ancient seal functioned like official evidence tape backed by governmental authority. It warned everyone that the tomb was protected and ensured that moving the stone would leave unmistakable evidence of tampering. Jesus' tomb had a large stone, an official seal, and a trained guard because His enemies were determined to prevent anyone from stealing His body. Yet the tomb still became empty. **The seal proves that the burial site was not casually abandoned or easily disturbed. It was deliberately secured against theft, making the later claim that frightened disciples secretly removed Jesus' body profoundly unconvincing.**



The Megiddo mosaic, discovered in 2005, belongs to an early Christian worship setting in Roman Palestine and reflects explicit devotion to Jesus.

8. The Shockingly Early Worship of the Risen Jesus—and the First Day

My earlier treatment correctly recognized that something dramatic happened to Christian worship after the Resurrection, but the history can now be stated with greater precision. Jewish followers of Jesus did not all instantly abandon Sabbath observance, and the New Testament records Jewish believers continuing to visit the Temple, attend synagogues, and participate in elements of traditional Jewish life. The far stronger historical point is that **first-day Christian gathering and Resurrection-centered worship emerged extraordinarily early within a movement born entirely inside Judaism.**

For centuries, the seventh-day Sabbath had been woven into Israel's identity. It was grounded in the creation account, commanded in the Decalogue, reinforced in Israel's covenant law, and observed from Friday evening through Saturday evening. It distinguished the Jewish people from their pagan neighbors and reminded them weekly that the God of Israel was both Creator and Redeemer ([Genesis 2:2–3](#); [Exodus 20:8–11](#); [Deuteronomy 5:12–15](#)).

Yet almost immediately, something new appeared alongside this ancient rhythm. Jewish followers of Jesus began attaching unique importance to **the first day of the week**—Sunday—because that was the day on which they proclaimed that God had raised Jesus from the dead. They did not choose Sunday because it was convenient, culturally prestigious, or inherited from the surrounding pagan world. They gathered because Easter had given that day an entirely new meaning.

The Resurrection occurred on the first day of the week

All four Gospels agree that the empty tomb was discovered on the first day of the week ([Matthew 28:1–10](#); [Mark 16:1–8](#); [Luke 24:1–12](#); [John 20:1–18](#)). That agreement supplies the historical foundation for the new weekly pattern.

John reports that Jesus appeared to the gathered disciples on the evening of that same first day ([John 20:19–23](#)). He then appeared to them again eight days later, when Thomas was present ([John 20:26–29](#)). The Resurrection, the first gathering of the disciples around the risen Christ, and the subsequent appearance to Thomas all became associated with this new first-day rhythm.

The significance of Sunday therefore began with the event itself. The first Christians did not select a day and later attach Resurrection symbolism to it. They commemorated the day on which they believed the tomb became empty and Jesus appeared alive.

The New Testament records an established first-day pattern

The book of Acts describes Christians in Troas gathering “on the first day of the week” to break bread and hear Paul's teaching ([Acts 20:7](#)). The breaking of bread in this setting carries unmistakable communal and Eucharistic significance. Believers assembled, received apostolic instruction, and shared the meal associated with the Lord Jesus.

Paul likewise instructed the Corinthian believers that “on the first day of every week” each person should set aside a contribution for the suffering Christians in Jerusalem ([1 Corinthians 16:1–2](#)). This instruction presupposes a regular weekly rhythm already understood across churches separated by considerable geographical distance.

The book of Revelation later refers to “the Lord's Day” ([Revelation 1:10](#)). By this period, the expression appears without explanation, indicating that its meaning was familiar to the Christian audience. The day belonging uniquely to the risen Lord had become part of the Church's recognized devotional vocabulary.

These passages do not describe a practice slowly invented centuries after the apostles. They place first-day gathering inside the New Testament itself, while the original apostolic generation was still alive and the Christian movement remained closely connected to its Jewish birthplace.

The earliest Christians worshiped Jesus as Lord

The first-day pattern is only one part of an even larger historical transformation. The earliest Christian communities did not merely remember Jesus as a deceased teacher whose sayings deserved preservation. They gathered in His name, baptized converts in relation to Him, celebrated a sacred meal centered upon His death, invoked Him in prayer, sang hymns about Him, confessed Him as Lord, and ordered their moral lives around His return.

Paul's letters, written during the AD 50s, already assume these practices. Christians were baptized into Christ's death and raised to live in newness of life ([Romans 6:3–5](#)). They gathered to celebrate the Lord's Supper in remembrance of Jesus' body and blood and to proclaim His death until He returned ([1 Corinthians 11:23–26](#)). They confessed that "Jesus is Lord" and believed that God had raised Him from the dead ([Romans 10:9–13](#)). They invoked Jesus in the Aramaic prayer *Maranatha*—"Our Lord, come" ([1 Corinthians 16:22](#)).

Paul's preservation of the Aramaic expression is particularly significant. It points behind the Greek-speaking churches to the earliest Aramaic-speaking Christian community in Jerusalem. Devotional invocation of Jesus as the returning Lord did not emerge only after Christianity moved into the wider Greco-Roman world. It belonged to the Church's earliest Jewish setting.

Dr. Larry Hurtado and the "mutation" in Jewish devotion

Dr. Larry W. Hurtado the Professor Emeritus of New Testament Language, Literature, and Theology at the University of Edinburgh, spent decades documenting this constellation of practices.

Hurtado identified prayer in Jesus' name, invocation of Jesus, hymns about Him, baptism connected with Him, the sacred meal celebrated around Him, prophetic speech spoken in His name, and the confession of Jesus as Lord as evidence of an extraordinarily early devotional pattern. He argued that robust devotion to Jesus did not develop gradually over several centuries. It erupted within the earliest years of the Christian movement and represented a profound innovation within Jewish monotheistic devotion ([Larry W. Hurtado, "Early Jesus-Devotion: Critical Engagement"](#)).

Hurtado described this as a "mutation" in Jewish devotional practice—not because the first Christians believed they had abandoned the God of Israel, but because they now included Jesus within the worship, confession, and religious devotion offered to the one God. The conviction driving this transformation was that God had raised Jesus, exalted Him, and installed Him as Lord ([Larry W. Hurtado, "Early Jesus-Devotion: Underscoring Key Points"](#)).

This historical development is astonishing. The earliest followers of Jesus were not religiously casual pagans accustomed to adding another deity to an expanding collection. They were Jews formed by the confession, "Hear, Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!" ([Deuteronomy 6:4](#)). Yet these same Jewish believers began invoking Jesus as Lord, celebrating sacred meals in His honor, baptizing in His name, and gathering around the proclamation of His Resurrection.

Only an overwhelming conviction that God Himself had vindicated and exalted Jesus adequately explains why Jewish monotheists made this extraordinary devotional transition.

The Resurrection reshaped the weekly calendar

Dr. Richard G. Swinburne, the British analytic philosopher, Fellow of the British Academy, influential philosopher of religion, and Nolloth Professor Emeritus of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion at the University of Oxford, includes Sunday observance among the later historical evidence supporting the Resurrection.

The point is not merely that Christians eventually attended church on Sunday. The evidential force lies in the origin, timing, and meaning of the practice. The first Christians were overwhelmingly Jewish, and their ancestral calendar centered upon the seventh-day Sabbath. Nevertheless, the first day acquired a distinct Christian identity because it was connected with Jesus' Resurrection.

This development did not require every Jewish believer immediately to cease all Sabbath observance. Acts records Jewish Christians continuing to participate in Temple life, while Paul regularly entered synagogues on the Sabbath to preach. The earliest period could include both continuing Jewish customs and the emergence of specifically Christian first-day worship. What requires explanation is why Sunday became so important so quickly and so widely.

The answer supplied by the earliest Christians was consistent: **Sunday was the day of the Resurrection.** It marked the beginning of the new creation inaugurated when Jesus emerged from the grave. The weekly gathering was therefore a repeated historical confession. Every first-day assembly proclaimed that the crucified Jesus was alive.

The Witness of the Didache

The *Didache*, or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, is an early Christian manual commonly dated to the late first or early second century AD, with portions possibly preserving still earlier material. It provides instructions about Christian morality, baptism, fasting, prayer, leadership, and worship.

Its fourteenth chapter commands believers to gather on the Lord's Day, break bread, give thanks, confess their sins, and reconcile with one another ([Didache 14](#)). This instruction reveals that regular Lord's Day worship was not confined to one isolated church. It had become an established pattern communicated through an early Christian teaching document.

The *Didache* connects the Lord's Day with corporate gathering, Eucharistic thanksgiving, confession, reconciliation, and the purity of Christian worship. Sunday was already functioning as a distinctively Christian day of assembly before the Church possessed political power, social prestige, dedicated public buildings, or freedom from persecution.

Ignatius and life according to the Lord's Day

Ignatius of Antioch (c. AD 35–c. 107), an early Christian bishop, disciple of the apostolic generation, and martyr who wrote a collection of letters while being transported to Rome for execution, provides another exceptionally early witness.

In his *Letter to the Magnesians*, Ignatius contrasts continued "Sabbatizing" with living according to the Lord's Day—the day upon which Christian life arose through Jesus and His death ([Ignatius, Letter to the Magnesians, chapter 9](#)). His language shows that by the opening years of the second century, the

Lord's Day was already closely associated with the new life created by Christ's death and Resurrection.

Ignatius was not writing centuries after the apostles. His life overlapped with the apostolic age, and Antioch had been an important Christian center since the earliest missionary expansion recorded in Acts. His testimony demonstrates that Resurrection-centered first-day identity belonged to the Church's earliest post-apostolic memory.

Pliny discovered Christians worshipping Christ

Pliny the Younger (c. AD 61–c. 113), a Roman senator, lawyer, author, and provincial governor of Bithynia-Pontus, wrote to Emperor Trajan around AD 112 seeking guidance about how to prosecute Christians. Pliny was not defending Christianity; he was interrogating its adherents on behalf of Rome.

Pliny reported that Christians customarily met on a “fixed day” before dawn and sang responsively “a hymn to Christ as to a god.” He also described their moral pledge against theft, fraud, adultery, and other wrongdoing. Although Pliny does not identify the fixed day explicitly as Sunday, his testimony confirms that by the early second century Christians met according to an established weekly rhythm and offered worship to Christ.

This is extraordinarily early outside confirmation. A Roman governor encountered communities worshipping Jesus as divine within approximately eighty years of the crucifixion—and the Christian sources demonstrate that this devotional pattern began considerably earlier. The worship of Jesus was not a theological development introduced by imperial councils centuries later. Roman officials were already confronting it near the beginning of the second century.

Justin Martyr explains why Christians gathered on Sunday

Justin Martyr (c. AD 100–165), an early Christian philosopher, apologist, and martyr who addressed defenses of Christianity to the Roman world, provides the clearest second-century explanation of Sunday worship.

In his *First Apology*, written around AD 155, Justin describes Christians from cities and rural districts gathering together on Sunday. They read from the apostles and prophets, received instruction, prayed, celebrated the Eucharist, and collected assistance for widows, orphans, prisoners, strangers, and others in need.

Justin explicitly explains why Sunday mattered. It was the first day on which God began creation, and it was the day on which Jesus Christ rose from the dead ([Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, chapter 67](#)). Christian Sunday worship therefore united the original creation with the new creation inaugurated by the Resurrection.

By Justin's time, Sunday gathering was geographically widespread, theologically understood, and connected directly with Easter. Yet Justin did not invent the practice. He explains a pattern already visible in the New Testament, the *Didache*, Ignatius, and the earliest worship traditions examined by Hurtado.

Worship as cumulative historical evidence

Dr. Glenn B. Siniscalchi, a systematic theologian, scholar of Christian apologetics and Resurrection history, and Assistant Professor of Theology and Religious Studies at Rosemont College, argues that early Christian worship deserves far greater attention within the historical case for Jesus' Resurrection.

Siniscalchi brings together two fields that are too often treated separately: historical apologetics for the Resurrection and scholarly research into earliest Christian worship. The empty tomb and appearances explain why the first Christians came to worship Jesus, while their remarkably early devotional practices provide historical consequences requiring an adequate cause ([Glenn Siniscalchi, "Early Christian Worship and the Historical Argument for Jesus' Resurrection," *New Blackfriars*](#)).

Sunday worship is not an isolated mathematical proof detached from the rest of the evidence. It is a powerful part of the cumulative historical case. The empty tomb, appearances, early creed, transformation of the disciples, worship of Jesus, Lord's Supper, baptismal identity, prayer in Jesus' name, and first-day gathering all point in the same direction.

A legendary Resurrection invented generations later could not travel backward in time to create the practices already embedded in Paul's undisputed letters. By the AD 50s, Resurrection was not a decorative appendix to Christianity. It already structured Christian preaching, baptism, ethics, worship, prayer, hope, fellowship, and the central confession that Jesus is Lord.

The first Christians did not gather around a shrine containing Jesus' remains. They did not make pilgrimages to honor the tomb of a dead founder. They gathered around a meal proclaiming His death "until He comes," invoked Him in prayer, and assembled on the day associated with His victory over the grave. Their entire worshiping life announced the same conviction: **the crucified Jesus was no longer dead. He had risen and now reigned as Lord.**

IN SIMPLE TERMS: Jesus' first followers were Jews whose sacred weekly calendar had centered upon the Saturday Sabbath for centuries. Yet immediately after Easter, the first day of the week gained extraordinary Christian importance because Jesus rose on that day. Christians gathered on Sunday, celebrated the Lord's Supper, baptized in Jesus' name, prayed through Him, sang to Him, and confessed Him as Lord. These practices were already established in the earliest Christian communities, long before Christianity gained political power or cultural acceptance. **A Resurrection legend invented generations later could not create worship practices already documented in the AD 50s. The earliest Christians worshiped Jesus and gathered on the first day because they were convinced that God had truly raised Him from the dead.**



9. The Empty Tomb, the Silent Grave, and the Birth of the Church

The ninth pillar brings several powerful strands of evidence together. Christianity did not begin with the sentimental claim that Jesus’ teachings remained inspiring after His tragic death. It began with the public announcement that God had decisively reversed the judgment of the cross: **the Jesus who had been crucified, buried, and sealed inside a tomb was alive again.** The earliest Christian message was not merely, “His influence continues,” but “This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses” ([Acts 2:32](#)).

Dr. N. T. Wright observes that no form of earliest Christianity known to historians lacks the foundational affirmation that God raised Jesus from the dead. Resurrection was not added to Christianity generations later; it was the event around which Christianity was organized from its beginning. The historian must therefore explain why a Jewish movement centered upon a publicly crucified Messiah arose so rapidly—and why it arose in precisely this resurrection-centered form ([N. T. Wright, “Christian Origins and the Resurrection of Jesus”](#)).

The Burial Tradition Identifies a Real Tomb

The evidence begins with Jesus’ burial. All four Gospels report that Jesus was buried, and the earliest confession preserved by Paul declares that Christ “died for our sins,” “was buried,” “was raised on the third day,” and then appeared to numerous witnesses ([1 Corinthians 15:3–8](#)). Burial and Resurrection stand side by side in one of Christianity’s earliest summaries of the Gospel.

The Gospel tradition does not describe Jesus’ body being discarded anonymously. It identifies **Joseph of Arimathea**, a member of the Jewish council, as the man who requested Jesus’ body from Pilate and placed it in a rock-cut tomb. Mark further reports that Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus watched where Jesus was laid ([Mark 15:42–47](#)). The women who returned after the Sabbath were

therefore not wandering through Jerusalem looking for an unknown burial place. They had observed the burial and knew the tomb to which they were returning.

This creates an important historical anchor. The burial place was associated with a named and identifiable person, Joseph of Arimathea; women had witnessed the interment; and the proclamation of the Resurrection began while the location and circumstances of Jesus' burial could still be investigated.

The Women Found the Tomb Empty

The four Gospels independently preserve the central fact that women—most prominently Mary Magdalene—visited the tomb and found it empty ([Matthew 28:1–10](#); [Mark 16:1–8](#); [Luke 24:1–12](#); [John 20:1–18](#)). As previously established, women did not possess the same public, social, or judicial standing as men in that patriarchal culture. Their prominent place in the account therefore carries the unmistakable appearance of faithfully preserved memory. If the Church had invented a persuasive apologetic story, it would have been far more natural to place Peter, John, or another respected male apostle at the tomb first.

Dr. William Lane Craig has presented a substantial historical defense of the empty tomb. Among the evidence he identifies are the early burial tradition, the discovery by women, the Jewish character of the narratives, the Jerusalem setting of the original proclamation, and the earliest opposing explanation that the disciples had removed the body ([William Lane Craig, “The Historicity of the Empty Tomb of Jesus,” *New Testament Studies*](#)).

Paul's Resurrection Language Requires an Empty Grave

Paul's letters provide an additional and especially early line of evidence. **Dr. James P. Ware, a living American New Testament scholar, specialist in Paul and early Christianity, and Professor Emeritus of Religion at the University of Evansville**, argues that Paul's declaration that Jesus was “raised” cannot naturally be separated from the absence of Jesus' body from the grave. Ware's study of ancient Jewish and pagan resurrection language demonstrates that Paul was speaking of the raising and transformation of the dead person—not merely the survival of Jesus' spirit, the preservation of His memory, or a visionary conviction among His followers ([James P. Ware, “Resurrection in Paganism and the Question of an Empty Tomb in 1 Corinthians 15,” *New Testament Studies*](#)).

This is especially important because Paul wrote 1 Corinthians in the AD 50s and was transmitting a resurrection confession he had received much earlier. The bodily meaning of the Resurrection therefore does not originate in a late Gospel legend. It is embedded within the earliest recoverable Christian proclamation: Jesus died, was buried, was raised, and appeared.

Jerusalem Was the Most Dangerous Place to Proclaim a Resurrection

The apostles did not first announce the Resurrection in a distant country where their claims could not be examined. According to Acts, they proclaimed it publicly in **Jerusalem—the city where Jesus had been arrested, tried, crucified, and buried**. Peter declared that although Jesus had been put to death, “God raised Him from the dead,” and that the apostles were witnesses of that fact ([Acts 2:22–36](#); [Acts 4:8–12](#)).

If Jesus' body had remained inside an identifiable tomb, the claim could have been decisively answered. The authorities could have directed the public to the occupied grave or produced the

remains. Yet no ancient source records anyone successfully doing so. Instead, Matthew preserves the opposing explanation that the disciples stole the body while the guards slept ([Matthew 28:11–15](#)). That accusation is historically revealing because it attempts to explain **why the tomb was empty**. It does not claim that Jesus' body remained inside it.

This creates a dilemma for the opponents of the Resurrection. If the tomb still contained Jesus' body, there was no need to accuse the disciples of stealing it. If someone else had moved the body, producing it would have destroyed the Christian proclamation. If the disciples had stolen it, they would have known that their testimony was fraudulent—yet they publicly endured threats, imprisonment, beatings, persecution, and, in the cases of several leading witnesses, martyrdom while continuing to proclaim that they had seen the risen Christ.

Where Is the Venerated Occupied Tomb of Jesus?

One of the most penetrating questions from my earlier investigation deserves to be restored: **Where is the venerated occupied tomb of Jesus?**

Ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman societies knew how to honor the burial places of prophets, teachers, martyrs, rulers, and holy men. Tombs could become places of remembrance, reverence, pilgrimage, and religious identity. If Jesus had remained dead, His followers had every reason to preserve and honor His resting place. He was their beloved Teacher, their hoped-for Messiah, and the center of their community.

Yet the earliest Church did not organize itself around Jesus' bones, a coffin, an occupied grave, or a shrine preserving His remains. Its message was that the grave had lost its prisoner. Christians gathered around the Lord's Supper, baptism, apostolic testimony, and the announcement that Jesus was alive—not around the remains of a departed founder. Even the later Christian reverence for the site traditionally associated with Jesus' burial centered upon the remembrance of an **empty tomb**.

The silence of an occupied grave is therefore significant. There is no ancient countertradition identifying a tomb that continued to contain Jesus' body. There is no record of Christians venerating His bones. There is no surviving report that Jewish or Roman authorities displayed His corpse. The historical record instead presents an empty-tomb proclamation, alleged appearances to individuals and groups, and a rapidly expanding community worshipping Jesus as the risen Lord.

The Evidence Converges Like Testimony in a Courtroom

Dr. John Warwick Montgomery (1931–2024), an American attorney, legal scholar, Lutheran theologian, university professor, and leading evidential Christian apologist, approached the Resurrection in the manner of a courtroom investigation. The question is not whether one isolated fact must carry the entire case, but whether several independent and mutually reinforcing lines of evidence converge upon the same conclusion.

Drawing upon **Thomas Sherlock (1678–1761), the English theologian, Christian apologist, and successive Bishop of Bangor, Salisbury, and London**, Montgomery emphasized that resurrection is **“a Fact to be proved by Evidence.”** Witnesses were capable of recognizing the difference between the Jesus they had seen crucified and buried and the living Jesus whom they subsequently claimed to have encountered ([John Warwick Montgomery, “The Jury Returns: A Juridical Defense of Christianity”](#)).

The cumulative case includes:

- Jesus' public execution and confirmed death.
- His burial in an identifiable tomb.
- Women observing the burial and returning to the same location.
- The discovery that the tomb was empty.
- The authorities' inability to produce Jesus' body.
- The opposing theft accusation, which presupposes a missing body.
- The extremely early confession that Jesus was buried, raised, and seen.
- Appearances reported by individuals, groups, believers, skeptics, and former enemies.
- The transformation of frightened disciples into courageous public witnesses.
- The absence of any occupied-tomb or relic cult centered upon Jesus' remains.
- The sudden birth of a Resurrection-centered Church in the very city where Jesus had been crucified.

Dr. Dale C. Allison Jr., the American New Testament historian, specialist in the historical Jesus and early Christianity, and Richard J. Dearborn Professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, has devoted extensive attention to the burial, empty-tomb, and appearance traditions ([Dale C. Allison Jr., *The Resurrection of Jesus: Apologetics, Polemics, History*](#)). When the evidence is considered as a unified historical whole, the empty tomb stands as a well-grounded part of the earliest Easter testimony.

The naturalistic alternatives divide the evidence into disconnected fragments. The wrong-tomb theory does not adequately account for the women who witnessed the burial or for Joseph's identifiable tomb. The theft theory cannot explain the appearances, the transformed witnesses, or their willingness to suffer for what they knew they had not fabricated. Hallucination theories cannot empty a grave and do not adequately explain the variety of individual and group encounters. Legendary-development theories collide with the early creed, Paul's testimony, and the public proclamation in Jerusalem. The Resurrection, by contrast, brings the evidence together in one coherent explanation.

The birth of the Church is therefore inseparable from the empty tomb. A publicly executed Messiah should have produced a defeated movement. Instead, within weeks His followers were publicly declaring in Jerusalem that He had conquered death. They baptized converts, celebrated the Lord's Supper, worshiped Jesus as Lord, endured persecution, and carried the message throughout the Roman world. **The Church did not create the Resurrection to preserve itself; the Resurrection created the Church.**

IN SIMPLE TERMS: Jesus was publicly killed, buried in a known tomb, and discovered missing from that tomb by women who knew where He had been laid. His followers immediately began preaching in Jerusalem that God had raised Him bodily from the dead. The authorities never produced His body; instead, the earliest opposing explanation accused the disciples of taking it, thereby acknowledging that the tomb was empty. The disciples then proclaimed that they had personally seen Jesus alive, even when doing so brought persecution and death. No occupied tomb, body, or collection of Jesus' remains became the center of Christianity. Instead, the empty grave, the eyewitness appearances, and the risen Christ became the foundation of the Church. **The tomb was silent because Jesus was no longer there—and the Church was born because His witnesses knew He was alive.**



Caravaggio's Crucifixion of Saint Peter (1601) dramatizes the ancient tradition of Peter's martyrdom. The historical argument should distinguish early attestation from later details.

10. From Fearful Disciples to Suffering Witnesses

The tenth and final pillar is among the most personal and powerful pieces of the historical case. The Passion narratives do not portray the disciples as fearless heroes preparing to establish a worldwide religion. When Jesus was arrested, “all the disciples left Him and fled” ([Matthew 26:56](#)). Peter denied three times that he even knew Jesus ([Luke 22:54–62](#)). After the Crucifixion, the disciples hid behind locked doors “for fear of the Jews” ([John 20:19](#)). The two disciples traveling toward Emmaus spoke in the defeated past tense: “We were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel” ([Luke 24:21](#)).

Everything about their behavior communicated collapse. Their Messiah had been publicly humiliated, crucified by Rome, and sealed inside a tomb. In their Jewish world, a crucified Messiah was not a victorious Messiah. Jesus' death appeared to have disproved their hopes and exposed them to the possibility that they had misunderstood Him completely.

Yet these same men were soon standing publicly in Jerusalem, announcing that Jesus had risen bodily from the dead and that they had personally seen Him alive. Peter, who had trembled before a servant girl, confronted the very authorities involved in Jesus' condemnation and declared, “The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you put to death by hanging Him on a cross” ([Acts 5:30–32](#)). When ordered to remain silent, Peter and John answered, “We cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard” ([Acts 4:18–20](#)).

That transformation demands an explanation. Cowards became courageous witnesses. Men hiding for their lives became missionaries willing to surrender their lives. Something powerful convinced them that Good Friday had been overturned by Easter morning. Their own explanation was consistent and emphatic: **they had encountered the risen Jesus.**

What Do We Know About the Deaths of the Twelve Apostles?

Dr. Sean McDowell (born 1976), an American Christian apologist, Biola University professor, and specialist in the historical evidence concerning the apostles' martyrdom, has conducted one of the most extensive modern investigations of this subject. His revised study evaluates New Testament testimony, first- and second-century Christian writings, early church historians, regional traditions, and later martyrdom accounts. His conclusion is not dependent upon treating every later detail as equally early. Rather, the evidence establishes a powerful overall pattern: **the apostles sincerely believed that they had seen the risen Jesus, openly proclaimed that testimony despite persecution, and willingly placed their lives in danger rather than deny it** ([*Sean McDowell, The Fate of the Apostles: Examining the Martyrdom Accounts of the Closest Followers of Jesus, 2nd ed.*](#)).

The historical record concerning the Twelve may be summarized as follows:

Peter—martyred in Rome, traditionally by crucifixion. Peter's martyrdom rests upon particularly strong early testimony. Jesus foretold that Peter would one day be taken where he did not wish to go, which John explicitly identifies as a reference to "the kind of death by which he would glorify God" ([*John 21:18–19*](#)). **Clement of Rome (c. AD 35–99), an early Christian leader traditionally identified as a bishop of Rome,** wrote near the end of the first century that Peter endured repeated suffering before giving the ultimate testimony of his faith. Clement placed Peter's suffering alongside that of Paul, making this evidence especially important because it comes from the Roman Christian community within living memory of the events ([*Clement of Rome, First Letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 5*](#)).

Tertullian (c. AD 155–220), the influential North African Christian theologian and defender of Christianity, later wrote of Peter suffering a death resembling the Lord's in Rome. **Origen of Alexandria (c. AD 185–253), the prolific early Christian biblical scholar and theologian,** reported that Peter was crucified head downward at his own request. That particular detail comes from later tradition, but the central testimony that Peter was executed in Rome for his apostolic witness is early, widespread, and deeply rooted.

Andrew—martyred by crucifixion, traditionally in Achaia. Ancient Christian tradition consistently presents Andrew, Peter's brother, as a missionary who carried the Gospel beyond Judea. **Eusebius of Caesarea (c. AD 260–339), the bishop and pioneering historian commonly called the "Father of Church History,"** preserved the earlier tradition that Andrew preached in Scythia, a region north of the Black Sea. Subsequent traditions place his death at Patras in Achaia, in modern Greece, where he was crucified after refusing to abandon his proclamation of Christ. The familiar description of an X-shaped cross developed later, but the ancient tradition remains clear in its central claim: Andrew continued preaching the risen Christ until that witness cost him his life.

James the son of Zebedee—executed by the sword under Herod Agrippa I. James' martyrdom is reported directly in the New Testament and therefore belongs among the best-attested apostolic deaths. Around AD 44, Herod Agrippa I "had James the brother of John put to death with a sword" ([*Acts 12:1–2*](#)). James was not killed in a distant land generations after Easter. He died within approximately fourteen years of the Crucifixion, during the earliest expansion of the Church, because he remained publicly identified with the Christian movement and its resurrection proclamation.

John the son of Zebedee—persecuted, exiled, and ultimately dying at an advanced age. John appears to have been the prominent exception among the apostles because ancient tradition indicates that he died naturally rather than by execution. That does not mean his testimony was cost-free. Acts

records his arrest, interrogation, imprisonment, and beating alongside Peter ([Acts 4:1–21](#); [Acts 5:17–42](#)). Revelation identifies its author as John and states that he was on the island of Patmos “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” ([Revelation 1:9](#)).

Irenaeus of Lyons (c. AD 130–202), the early Christian bishop, theologian, and student of Polycarp, wrote that John remained in Ephesus into the reign of the Roman emperor Trajan, which began in AD 98. John’s long life therefore strengthens rather than weakens the argument: for decades he had opportunities to retract, correct, or deny the Resurrection testimony associated with the apostles. Instead, he endured persecution and remained faithful to the proclamation that Jesus had risen.

Philip—associated with Hierapolis and remembered as a faithful witness until death. Early Christian testimony places Philip in Hierapolis in Asia Minor. Eusebius preserves a letter from **Polycrates of Ephesus (c. AD 125–196), a second-century bishop with knowledge of the churches of Asia Minor**, who refers to Philip as one of the great witnesses who had “fallen asleep” in Hierapolis. Later traditions describe his martyrdom by crucifixion or hanging. Although the precise method is reported differently, the traditions agree that Philip carried the Gospel into Asia Minor and remained faithful to Christ until death.

Bartholomew—missionary and martyr, traditionally in Armenia. Eusebius reports an ancient tradition that Bartholomew traveled as far as India, where a Hebrew copy of Matthew’s Gospel was reportedly associated with his ministry. Armenian Christian tradition strongly connects him with missionary work in Armenia and remembers him as having been executed for converting people to Christ. Later accounts describe him as flayed and then beheaded. The form of execution is secondary to the central historical memory: Bartholomew undertook dangerous missionary work and died as a faithful witness to the risen Jesus.

Matthew—missionary beyond Judea and traditionally martyred. Early sources agree that Matthew preached first among Jewish audiences before carrying the Gospel elsewhere. Traditions place his later ministry in regions variously identified as Ethiopia, Persia, or lands south and east of the Roman Empire. Several ancient accounts remember him as having died violently because of his missionary work, although they differ concerning the location and method. What remains consistent is the memory of Matthew leaving his former life, preaching Christ in hostile territories, and remaining faithful until death.

Thomas—missionary to the East and traditionally martyred in India. Thomas is especially significant because John portrays him initially refusing to believe the Resurrection without direct physical evidence: “Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails ... I will not believe.” When confronted by the risen Jesus, Thomas answered, “My Lord and my God!” ([John 20:24–29](#)). That former skeptic subsequently became one of Christianity’s most courageous missionaries.

Ancient Syriac traditions connect Thomas with Edessa and lands farther east, while the historic “Thomas Christian” communities of India preserve the memory of his ministry on the subcontinent. The ancient tradition reports that Thomas was killed with spears near Mylapore, in modern Chennai. His case is particularly compelling: the disciple remembered for demanding evidence became the missionary remembered for carrying the Gospel farther east than any other member of the Twelve and surrendering his life for the Christ he once doubted.

James the son of Alphaeus—faithful apostolic witness remembered in early Christian tradition. James the son of Alphaeus must be distinguished from James the brother of Jesus and from

James the son of Zebedee. Later traditions connect him with missionary activity in Syria, Persia, or Egypt and describe him as dying violently for his faith, sometimes by stoning or crucifixion. The surviving details are not as extensive as those concerning Peter or James the son of Zebedee, but the ancient Church consistently remembered him among the apostolic witnesses who carried the Gospel into dangerous territory and remained faithful.

Thaddaeus, also called Judas the son of James—missionary to Syria and Mesopotamia, traditionally martyred in Persia. Thaddaeus must not be confused with Judas Iscariot. Early Syriac Christianity associates him with the evangelization of Edessa, although some traditions distinguish the apostle from another early missionary named Addai. Other accounts describe Thaddaeus ministering alongside Simon the Zealot and being killed in Persia after refusing to worship pagan gods. His traditional instrument of death was a club or axe.

Simon the Zealot—missionary and martyr, traditionally in Persia. Traditions concerning Simon's geographical ministry include Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia, and Persia. A prominent stream of church tradition places him with Thaddaeus in Persia, where both were executed for preaching Christ and opposing idolatry. Some later accounts describe Simon being cut with a saw. While the exact method is less important than the larger historical memory, the tradition consistently presents Simon as a missionary who accepted mortal danger for the Christian proclamation.

Matthias—chosen to replace Judas Iscariot and traditionally martyred after missionary service. Judas Iscariot died before the Resurrection proclamation began, leaving a vacancy among the Twelve. The remaining apostles selected Matthias, who had accompanied Jesus' followers from the baptism of John through the Ascension and could therefore join them as "a witness with us of His resurrection" ([Acts 1:15–26](#)). Traditions place Matthias' ministry in Judea, Cappadocia, or regions near the Black Sea. He is generally remembered as having been stoned and then beheaded, although other accounts locate his death elsewhere. The testimony uniformly presents him as remaining faithful to the apostolic message entrusted to him.

Paul and James: Two Former Skeptics Who Died for the Risen Jesus

Two additional witnesses stand beside the Twelve and make the transformation argument even stronger.

Paul the apostle—executed in Rome, traditionally by beheading. I will deal with more of Paul's evidence in a "BONUS" point momentarily, but suffice to say: Paul was not psychologically prepared to believe in the Resurrection. He was actively persecuting Christians and attempting to destroy the Church. He explains that he had violently opposed the faith until the risen Jesus appeared to him ([Acts 9:1–22](#); [1 Corinthians 15:8–10](#)). Afterward, Paul endured beatings, imprisonment, stoning, shipwreck, hunger, exposure, and repeated threats of death ([2 Corinthians 11:23–28](#)).

Clement of Rome wrote near the end of the first century that Paul endured repeated imprisonment, exile, and suffering before giving his final testimony. Eusebius later preserved the established tradition that Paul was beheaded in Rome during the persecution of Emperor Nero, probably in the mid-to-late AD 60s. Paul surrendered social standing, religious prestige, physical security, and eventually life itself because he was convinced that the Jesus whose followers he had persecuted had personally appeared to him alive.

James the brother of Jesus—executed in Jerusalem around AD 62. During Jesus' earthly ministry, His brothers did not believe in Him ([John 7:5](#)). Yet Paul's early list of Resurrection appearances

specifically states that the risen Jesus appeared to James ([1 Corinthians 15:7](#)). James subsequently emerged as a leading elder of the Jerusalem church.

His death is reported by **Flavius Josephus (c. AD 37–100), the first-century Jewish priest, military commander, and historian writing under Roman patronage**. Josephus states that the high priest Ananus convened the Sanhedrin and brought before it “the brother of Jesus who was called Christ, whose name was James,” after which James and certain others were condemned and stoned. This non-Christian testimony establishes that Jesus’ formerly unbelieving brother became so publicly identified with the Christian movement that he was executed by Jerusalem’s religious authorities.

The Testimony of the Earliest Church

The evidence is not built upon medieval legends. The New Testament itself repeatedly records beatings, imprisonments, threats, and executions during the Church’s earliest decades. Acts reports the death of James the son of Zebedee, the attempted execution of Peter, repeated imprisonments, and the apostles’ rejoicing that they had been “considered worthy to suffer shame for His name” ([Acts 5:40–42](#)).

Clement of Rome provides first-century testimony concerning Peter and Paul. Ignatius, Polycarp, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, and Eusebius preserve an expanding stream of testimony connecting the apostles with missionary labor, persecution, and martyrdom. These sources arise from different times and geographical regions, yet they preserve the same central memory: **the men commissioned to testify that Jesus had risen did not abandon that testimony when it became costly**.

Dr. Richard Bauckham (born 1946), the distinguished British New Testament scholar, historian of early Christianity, and Professor Emeritus at the University of St Andrews, has argued that the Gospel tradition remained closely connected to named eyewitnesses who served as authoritative sources within the early Christian community. The Christian proclamation was not an anonymous rumor gradually detached from its origins. It was publicly associated with identifiable witnesses whose names, ministries, and sufferings were remembered by the churches ([Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*](#)).

Dr. Gary R. Habermas, the American philosopher, Resurrection historian, Distinguished Research Professor at Liberty University, and leading authority on the historical evidence for Easter, and **Dr. Michael R. Licona (born 1961), an American New Testament historian, Christian apologist, and professor at Houston Christian University**, emphasize that the apostles’ suffering is particularly significant because these were not later believers dying for inherited religious teachings. They were the original witnesses whose proclamation was founded upon what they said they had personally seen and experienced ([Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*](#)).

What Do Their Suffering and Deaths Prove?

The apostles’ suffering establishes several important historical conclusions.

First, it demonstrates that **they genuinely believed Jesus had risen**. Their proclamation was not a casual theological preference. It became the organizing truth of their lives and the message for which they accepted rejection, beatings, imprisonment, exile, and death.

Second, it decisively undermines the theory of **deliberate apostolic fraud**. The apostles were in a unique position to know whether they had invented the appearances, stolen the body, or conspired to manufacture a resurrection story. If they had constructed the deception, persecution would have exposed the emptiness of their claim. They had nothing earthly to gain by maintaining it. The Resurrection message did not bring them wealth, governmental authority, military protection, comfortable homes, or social prestige. It brought danger and suffering.

Third, their perseverance demonstrates that **they did not recant when the cost became severe**. The New Testament records the authorities repeatedly commanding them to stop preaching. Their answer remained, “We must obey God rather than men” ([Acts 5:29](#)). No surviving early source records any of the apostles repudiating the Resurrection to save his life.

Fourth, the conversions of **James and Paul** show that resurrection belief was not confined to Jesus’ grieving followers. James had not believed in Jesus during His public ministry, and Paul was an active enemy of the Church. Neither man was expecting or desiring an experience that would confirm Christian faith. Yet both became leading witnesses, and both ultimately died because of their identification with the risen Christ.

Fifth, the apostles’ transformation becomes exceptionally powerful when placed within the entire cumulative case. Their courage does not stand alone. It follows Jesus’ confirmed death and burial, the discovery of the empty tomb, the early creed, the appearances to individuals and groups, the conversion of skeptics, the Jewish mutation in resurrection belief, and the sudden worship of Jesus as the risen Lord.

It is true that people sometimes die for false beliefs they sincerely accept. But that comparison misses the apostles’ unique position. Modern religious martyrs generally die for teachings received from someone else. **The apostles died for testimony they claimed to know firsthand**. They were not merely trusting a report that Jesus had risen; they were declaring that they had personally seen, heard, touched, eaten with, and spoken with Him after His death ([Luke 24:36–43](#); [John 20:19–29](#); [1 John 1:1–3](#)).

Their martyrdom does not stand as an isolated mathematical proof, but it does prove something historically indispensable: **the original witnesses were not knowingly promoting a hoax. They sincerely believed that Jesus had conquered death because they were convinced they had encountered Him alive**. Once deliberate fraud is removed, the investigator must still explain the empty tomb, the individual and group appearances, the conversions of James and Paul, and the explosive birth of the Church. The Resurrection explains all of these facts together.

IN SIMPLE TERMS: Before Easter, the disciples were frightened, scattered, and hiding. Afterward, they boldly announced in the very city where Jesus had been crucified that they had personally seen Him alive. Their message brought them beatings, imprisonment, exile, and, for many, violent death. Peter and Paul were executed in Rome; James the son of Zebedee was killed by Herod; James the brother of Jesus was stoned in Jerusalem; and strong ancient traditions remember Andrew, Thomas, Bartholomew, and other apostles dying during their missionary service. John endured persecution and exile and remained faithful into old age. These men gained no earthly advantage from their testimony, and none is recorded as denying it to escape suffering. Their deaths prove that the Resurrection proclamation was not a fraud they knowingly invented. **The apostles went from running away from danger to carrying the Gospel directly into it because they were convinced beyond doubt that they had seen the crucified Jesus alive again.**



Traditional Christian art remembers Paul's costly witness and martyrdom; the historical argument begins earlier, with his own testimony that the risen Jesus appeared to him.

Bonus Pillar: Paul — The Enemy Who Became A Witness

Paul is too important to leave buried inside another argument. Unlike Peter and the Twelve, he did not begin as a grieving disciple predisposed to vindicate Jesus. By his own testimony, he persecuted the church of God (Galatians 1:13; 1 Corinthians 15:9; Philippians 3:6). Yet within a few years of the crucifixion, the persecutor had become the missionary whose letters would become our earliest surviving Christian writings. He explains the reversal with one claim: the risen Jesus appeared to him.

Historians can describe Paul's experience in different ways, but the conversion itself is not a late church legend dependent solely on Acts. Paul testifies to it in his own undisputed letters. Dr. Alan Segal's study of Paul's resurrection thinking notes that Paul understood his discipleship and apostolate in terms of a vision of the risen and exalted Christ ([Alan F. Segal, "Paul's Thinking about Resurrection in its Jewish Context," New Testament Studies](#)). Dr. Larry Hurtado likewise stresses that Paul's Christ-centered devotion is not a marginal feature of his thought but lies at the center of his religious life ([Larry W. Hurtado, "Paul's Christology," in The Cambridge Companion to St Paul](#)).

Paul does not by himself prove the empty tomb, but he is devastating to any theory that reduces Easter belief to a closed circle of bereaved friends reassuring one another. Something happened that convinced an opponent that the crucified Jesus was not cursed and defeated but alive and Lord. Any successful alternative to Resurrection must explain **Paul as well as Peter**.



What the Resurrection Proves

The ten historical pillars bring the investigation to its decisive question: **If Jesus truly rose from the dead, what does that event prove?** The New Testament does not present Easter as an inspiring appendix to Jesus’ teachings or as a religious symbol that may be separated from history. It presents the Resurrection as God’s decisive act within history—the event that identifies Jesus, vindicates His claims, confirms His saving work, defeats death, guarantees the believer’s future resurrection, and announces that the new creation has already begun.

The Resurrection does not merely suggest that Jesus’ influence continued after His death. It declares that **Jesus Himself lives**. The One who was publicly executed under Pontius Pilate, buried in Joseph’s tomb, and mourned by His followers was raised bodily and transformed by the power of God. That is why the apostles did not preach merely the moral teachings of Jesus. They proclaimed an event: “This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses” ([Acts 2:32](#)).

The Resurrection Proves That Jesus Is Who He Claimed to Be

Paul opens Romans by declaring that Jesus was descended from David according to the flesh and “declared the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead” ([Romans 1:3–4](#)). The Greek verb *horizō* can carry the sense of designating, appointing, marking out, or declaring. Paul is not teaching that Jesus was merely a man whom God adopted as His Son on Easter morning. The New Testament identifies Jesus as the Son before His birth, throughout His earthly ministry, and before the creation of the world ([Luke 1:35](#); [John 1:1–3, 14](#); [John 17:5](#)).

Romans 1:4 means that the Resurrection publicly revealed and enthroned Jesus as **the Son of God in power**. During His earthly ministry, the eternal Son accepted humiliation, weakness, suffering, and death. Through the Resurrection, He entered the exalted and powerful phase of His messianic reign.

The empty tomb did not make Jesus divine; it triumphantly manifested, vindicated, and confirmed the identity and authority He already possessed.

Dr. Thomas R. Schreiner (born 1954), an American New Testament scholar, Pauline theologian, and James Buchanan Harrison Professor Emeritus at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, explains that Romans 1:4 does not teach an adoptionist Christology. Jesus did not become God's Son for the first time at His Resurrection. Rather, He was installed and revealed as **Son of God in power**, entering the exalted exercise of the authority that followed His humiliation ([Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament](#)).

This is why the Resurrection constitutes God's answer to the human verdict pronounced against Jesus. The Jewish leadership condemned Him for blasphemy. Rome treated Him as a rejected messianic claimant. The crowds mocked Him, and the cross displayed Him publicly as defeated. But God overturned every human verdict by raising Him from the dead. Humanity said, "Crucify Him." God answered, **"This is My Son."**

The Resurrection Proves That Jesus Is Lord and Messiah

On the Day of Pentecost, Peter announced that the Jesus whom the people had crucified had been raised and exalted to the right hand of God. He concluded, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified" ([Acts 2:22–36](#)).

Once again, Peter was not saying that Jesus began to exist as Lord on Easter morning. He was announcing Jesus' public enthronement as the crucified, risen, and exalted Messiah. The One rejected by earthly rulers now occupies the position of supreme authority at the Father's right hand. The Resurrection and Ascension demonstrate that Jesus is not merely one religious teacher among many. He is the reigning Lord before whom every knee will ultimately bow and every tongue will confess that He is Lord ([Philippians 2:5–11](#)).

Dr. C. H. Dodd (1884–1973), the influential Welsh New Testament scholar, Congregationalist theologian, and former Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity at Cambridge University, identified this pattern at the heart of the earliest apostolic preaching. In his classic study of the Christian *kerygma*—the foundational message publicly proclaimed by the apostles—Dodd showed that the sermons preserved in Acts repeatedly follow the same historical sequence: Jesus ministered among the people, was rejected and crucified, God raised Him, He appeared to chosen witnesses, He was exalted, and those witnesses were commissioned to call people to repentance and faith ([C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments*](#)).

Dodd's analysis demonstrates that the Resurrection was not a theological decoration added after Christianity had already formed. **The Resurrection was the event that formed Christianity's proclamation.** Remove Easter from the apostolic sermons, and their entire message collapses.

The Resurrection Proves That the Cross Accomplished Salvation

The cross and empty tomb must never be separated. Jesus' death paid the price for sin, while His Resurrection publicly demonstrated the victory of that saving work. Paul writes that Jesus "was delivered over because of our wrongdoings, and was raised because of our justification" ([Romans](#)

[4:25](#)). The Resurrection confirms that Christ's sacrificial death was accepted and that sin's condemning claim has been answered.

Paul makes the connection unmistakable in 1 Corinthians 15: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins." But Paul immediately overturns that dreadful possibility: "But the fact is, Christ has been raised from the dead" ([1 Corinthians 15:17–20](#)). Because Christ has risen, the believer is no longer left beneath the condemnation of sin. The sacrifice has been accepted, the debt has been paid, and the Savior who bore sin now lives to apply His saving work to His people.

Dr. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (born 1936), an American Reformed theologian, specialist in Pauline theology, and Professor Emeritus of Biblical and Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, emphasizes that Christ's Resurrection is not merely an impressive miracle following the work of salvation. It is an inseparable part of Christ's redemptive accomplishment. The death and Resurrection of Jesus form one saving movement: He died under the judgment borne for His people and rose into the justified, death-conquering life that they will share with Him ([Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul's Soteriology*](#)).

The Resurrection is therefore God's public declaration that the Cross was not a tragic failure. Jesus did not die as a helpless victim of forces beyond His control. He voluntarily laid down His life as the atoning sacrifice for sin and then took it up again, just as He had promised ([John 10:17–18](#)).

The Resurrection Proves That Death Has Been Defeated

Every other religious founder and political ruler eventually submitted to the same enemy: death. Their teachings may have survived, monuments may preserve their names, and followers may continue their movements, but their bodies returned to the dust. Christianity makes a radically different claim about Jesus. He did not merely teach people how to face death; **He entered death, passed through it, and emerged victorious over it.**

Peter declared that God raised Jesus because "it was impossible for Him to be held in its power" ([Acts 2:24](#)). Paul announces that the risen Christ will never die again and that death no longer exercises mastery over Him ([Romans 6:9–10](#)). Revelation presents the risen Jesus declaring, "I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades" ([Revelation 1:17–18](#)).

Jesus' Resurrection was not merely a return to mortal life like the raising of Lazarus. Lazarus was restored to ordinary human existence and would eventually die again. Jesus rose in a glorified, immortal body over which death would never again exercise authority. Easter therefore marks the beginning of death's final destruction.

The Resurrection Guarantees the Bodily Resurrection of Believers

Paul calls the risen Christ the "firstfruits of those who are asleep" ([1 Corinthians 15:20](#)). In ancient Israel, the firstfruits were the first portion of the harvest presented to God and the pledge that the full harvest would follow. By applying that image to Jesus, Paul teaches that Christ's Resurrection is not an isolated miracle benefiting Him alone. It is the beginning and guarantee of the resurrection harvest still to come.

Dr. N. T. Wright has emphasized that the early Christian meaning of resurrection was bodily life after bodily death—not the mere survival of the soul, the continuation of influence, or a spiritual experience

in the hearts of the disciples. In his extensive historical study, Wright argues that the Resurrection of Jesus was understood as the unexpected arrival, in the middle of history, of the bodily resurrection that Jewish expectation had normally placed at the end of the age ([N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*](#)).

Jesus' Resurrection therefore reveals what God intends to do for His people. Believers are not destined to remain disembodied spirits forever. Christ "will transform the body of our lowly condition into conformity with His glorious body" ([Philippians 3:20–21](#)). What is presently perishable will be raised imperishable; what is sown in dishonor will be raised in glory; and what is sown in weakness will be raised in power ([1 Corinthians 15:42–44](#)).

Christians do not merely hope that something survives death. They possess the promise that the God who raised Jesus will also raise those who belong to Him. **His empty tomb is the preview and pledge of theirs.**

The Resurrection Proves That Jesus Is the Appointed Judge

The Resurrection is not only a message of comfort; it is also a summons to accountability. Speaking in Athens, Paul announced that God "has set a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all people by raising Him from the dead" ([Acts 17:30–31](#)).

The Greek word translated "proof" or "assurance" conveys the idea of a guarantee provided to all humanity. By raising Jesus, God has publicly identified the One through whom final judgment will occur. The risen Christ is not only Savior; He is King and Judge. Every person will ultimately answer to the Jesus whom God raised and exalted.

This explains why the apostolic proclamation always included a call to repent. Easter is wonderful news because forgiveness and eternal life are offered through Christ. It is also an urgent warning because the risen Jesus possesses universal authority. Neutrality toward Him cannot remain forever. The Resurrection announces that the crucified Savior will return as the righteous Judge.

The Resurrection Proves That a New Creation Has Begun

The Resurrection did not merely resuscitate Jesus within the old creation. It introduced the first reality of the creation to come. The risen Christ possesses an immortal, glorified body suited to the new heavens and new earth. In Him, God's promised restoration has already begun.

Wright describes Easter as the beginning of God's new world within the old one. The Jews expected God to renew creation at the end of history, but the Resurrection announced that this renewal had already begun in Jesus. The future invaded the present. One human being had passed through death and emerged on the other side, possessing the kind of embodied life that will characterize the restored creation.

Paul therefore connects Christ's Resurrection with the renewal of all things. Creation presently groans beneath corruption, suffering, and death, but it awaits liberation when God's children are raised and glorified ([Romans 8:18–23](#)). Revelation brings that promise to its climax with a new heaven and new earth in which death, mourning, crying, and pain have passed away ([Revelation 21:1–5](#)).

Easter is therefore God's pledge that He will not abandon the world He created. Sin, suffering, decay, injustice, Satan, and death will not have the final word. The God who raised Jesus will complete the restoration that His Resurrection inaugurated.

The Resurrection Proves That History Has a Lord and a Destination

If Jesus remained dead, Christianity's central proclamation would be false. Paul openly acknowledged that consequence: "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, your faith also is in vain," and the apostles would be false witnesses concerning God ([1 Corinthians 15:14–15](#)). Christianity places its truth claim upon the reality of an event in history.

But Christ did not remain dead. The historical case leads through His execution, confirmed death, honorable burial, secured tomb, early creed, empty grave, appearances to individuals and groups, transformation of the disciples, conversion of James and Paul, earliest worship, and the explosive birth of the Church. These lines of evidence converge upon the proclamation made by the original witnesses: **"God has raised this Jesus to life."**

Dr. Gary R. Habermas argues that the Resurrection provides the explanation that brings the central historical facts into a single coherent account. The disciples' experiences, Paul's conversion, James' transformation, the empty tomb, and the rise of Resurrection-centered Christianity are not unrelated mysteries. They are the historical consequences of the event the witnesses proclaimed ([Gary R. Habermas and Michael R. Licona, *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*](#)).

If Jesus rose, history is not a closed material system moving blindly toward extinction. It has a Creator, a Redeemer, a reigning Lord, and an appointed conclusion. The Resurrection declares that evil will be judged, death will be destroyed, creation will be restored, and those who belong to Christ will share His everlasting life.

IN SIMPLE TERMS: The Resurrection proves that Jesus was not merely a good teacher, defeated prophet, or tragic religious martyr. God raised Him from the dead and publicly vindicated His identity as the divine Son, promised Messiah, reigning Lord, and coming Judge. Easter confirms that His death paid for sin, that His promises can be trusted, that death has been defeated, and that everyone who belongs to Him will one day be raised with a glorified body. It also announces that God has already begun His new creation and will ultimately restore everything sin has broken. **If the tomb is empty, Jesus is alive; if Jesus is alive, He is Lord; and if He is Lord, then forgiveness, resurrection, judgment, and the restoration of all things are not religious wishes—they are the certain future toward which history is moving.**



The “So What?” — What Resurrection Power Means FOR YOU!

Historical evidence brings us to the threshold, but the New Testament will not allow us to leave the Resurrection inside a museum display case. The empty tomb is not merely an ancient curiosity to be studied, debated, and then returned to the past. In a theological sense, it is the “Big Bang” of God’s new creation—the decisive moment when death’s seemingly unbreakable dominion was invaded and defeated.

Paul understood that everything rests upon whether Jesus actually rose. “If Christ has not been raised,” he wrote, “your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins.” Yet Paul immediately moves from that devastating hypothetical to the historical declaration at the center of Christianity: “But the fact is, Christ has been raised from the dead” ([1 Corinthians 15:17, 20](#)). If that declaration is true, the Resurrection changes not merely what we believe about Jesus, but how we understand forgiveness, suffering, death, courage, transformation, history, and our own eternal future.

1. Your sins can truly be forgiven

The first and most staggering consequence of the Resurrection is that forgiveness is not religious wishful thinking. The Cross and the empty tomb belong together. Jesus “was delivered over because of our wrongdoings, and was raised because of our justification” ([Romans 4:25](#)). His Resurrection publicly vindicated His identity and confirmed the saving sufficiency of the sacrifice He offered upon the Cross.

The Resurrection does not mean that Jesus needed to continue paying for sin after Calvary. On the Cross, He declared, “It is finished” ([John 19:30](#)). Easter is God’s triumphant confirmation that death could not hold His sinless Son and that Christ’s atoning work had accomplished its purpose. The risen Jesus is therefore the living guarantee that those who belong to Him have been justified and reconciled to God.

Because Christ lives, the believer's debt has been stamped "Paid in Full." We do not stand before God on the strength of our moral record, religious performance, or ability to repair our own past. We stand in the righteousness of Christ. Therefore, "there is now no condemnation at all for those who are in Christ Jesus" ([Romans 8:1](#)). Shame need not pronounce the final verdict over the person whom God has forgiven.

2. His Resurrection assures your resurrection

Jesus' Resurrection was not presented as an isolated miracle that happened only to Him. Paul calls Christ "the first fruits of those who are asleep" ([1 Corinthians 15:20](#)). In the agricultural world of the New Testament, the first fruits were the opening portion of a greater harvest still to come. Christ's bodily Resurrection is therefore both the pattern and the guarantee of the future resurrection of His people.

Jesus told Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life; the one who believes in Me will live, even if he dies" ([John 11:25–26](#)). Christian hope is not merely the survival of an immaterial soul or an escape from the physical world. It is the redemption of the whole person and, ultimately, the renewal of creation itself. God does not abandon what He created; He rescues, renews, and glorifies it.

These aging bodies—burdened by weakness, disease, disability, and decay—are not our final condition. The risen Christ "will transform the body of our lowly condition into conformity with His glorious body" ([Philippians 3:20–21](#)). At the resurrection, the dead will be raised imperishable ([1 Corinthians 15:42–44, 52–53](#)). What is sown in weakness will be raised in power. Believers will receive glorified bodies no longer subject to pain, deterioration, aging, or death.

3. Fear can give way to steadfast courage

Because Jesus rose, death has been dethroned. It remains an enemy and still brings genuine sorrow, but it is a defeated enemy whose final destruction has already been guaranteed. For the Christian, death is no longer an impenetrable darkness into which we disappear. Christ has entered it, passed through it, and emerged victorious on the other side.

That certainty changes how a believer can live. It does not encourage carelessness or a reckless disregard for life, which is God's gift. Instead, it produces steadfast courage—the freedom to obey God, defend truth, love sacrificially, and remain faithful even when doing so carries a cost. Human rulers, hostile cultures, illness, persecution, and death itself cannot reverse the verdict God pronounced when He raised Jesus from the grave.

Paul could therefore cry out, "Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting?" ([1 Corinthians 15:54–55](#)). He then immediately turned that victory into a mandate for present faithfulness: "Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be firm, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord" ([1 Corinthians 15:58](#)). Because Christ rose, nothing faithfully done for Him is ultimately wasted.

4. Resurrection power is available for living and transformation today

The Resurrection is not concerned only with what will happen to believers after they die. It introduces a new kind of life that begins now through union with the risen Christ. Paul described this reality personally: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me"

([Galatians 2:20](#)). The Christian life is therefore more than an attempt to imitate the teachings of a departed religious founder. It is life joined spiritually to a living Lord.

This new life is made present through the Holy Spirit—the same Spirit whom Paul connects directly with the Resurrection: “If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you” ([Romans 8:9–11](#)). Every genuine believer has become a temple of the Holy Spirit ([1 Corinthians 6:19–20](#)).

This does not mean Christians instantly become perfect or never struggle with temptation. Sanctification ordinarily unfolds across a lifetime as the Spirit transforms believers increasingly into the likeness of Christ ([2 Corinthians 3:18](#)). Nevertheless, the Christian is no longer left to confront sin entirely through unaided willpower. The risen Christ supplies spiritual power to resist old patterns, practice obedience, forgive others, pursue holiness, and live from a new identity.

The evidence of His transforming presence is what Paul calls “the fruit of the Spirit”—“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” ([Galatians 5:22–23](#)). Jesus promised His followers, “I am with you always, to the end of the age” ([Matthew 28:20](#)), while Hebrews assures believers, “I will never desert you, nor will I ever abandon you” ([Hebrews 13:5](#)).

Changed lives should not be treated as a substitute for the historical evidence of the empty tomb and Resurrection appearances. Human transformation can have more than one psychological, social, or religious explanation. Yet the worldwide and centuries-long testimony of people who have experienced conviction, forgiveness, moral renewal, sacrificial love, and enduring communion with Christ remains significant experiential evidence consistent with the apostolic declaration that Jesus is not merely a dead teacher remembered by His followers, but the living Lord who continues His work within them.

Christianity’s distinctive claim is not simply that God is present everywhere or that human beings possess a divine element. It is that the personal Holy Spirit—the Spirit of the Father and the Son—comes to indwell everyone who belongs to Christ, uniting that believer to the crucified and bodily risen Jesus. Through Him, believers are adopted into God’s family and can cry, “Abba! Father!” ([Romans 8:14–16](#)).

Other religions contain important but fundamentally different understandings of divine presence and human transformation. Islam teaches that Allah is near in knowledge, power, and sovereignty, but it does not teach that believers are united to a crucified and risen Son of God or permanently indwelt by the Holy Spirit in the New Testament sense. Calling God “Father” and believers His adopted children is also foreign to Islamic theology.

The Hebrew Scriptures record the Spirit empowering prophets, judges, kings, and others for particular purposes, while also anticipating a day when God would place His Spirit within His people ([Ezekiel 36:26–27](#); [Joel 2:28–29](#)). Christianity claims that this promised New Covenant outpouring was inaugurated through the death, Resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus and manifested publicly at Pentecost ([Acts 2:32–33](#)).

This is substantially different than all other world religions. Certain Hindu traditions speak of the divine as dwelling within or identify the deepest self with ultimate reality, while Sikhism strongly emphasizes God’s immanence and the Divine Light. Buddhism generally does not teach a personal Creator God, and Taoism emphasizes alignment with the Tao. Zoroastrianism stresses the moral

struggle between truth and falsehood, the Bahá'í Faith describes the soul as reflecting divine attributes, and Confucianism emphasizes moral cultivation and harmony with Heaven's order. None proclaims the specifically Christian reality of personal union with the incarnate (Son of) God who was crucified, rose bodily from the dead, and now indwells His people by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

5. Suffering is real, but it will not have the final word

The Resurrection does not promise that Christians will escape grief, persecution, sickness, disappointment, or loss in this present age. Jesus openly told His disciples, "In the world you have tribulation." Yet He immediately added, "Take courage; I have overcome the world" ([John 16:33](#)). Christianity neither denies suffering nor asks believers to disguise it with shallow optimism. At its center stands a crucified Savior bearing wounds in His resurrected body.

Easter declares, however, that suffering and death cannot write the final chapter. God raised the crucified Jesus, demonstrating that He can bring life out of death and vindication out of apparent defeat. Paul therefore wrote that "the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us" ([Romans 8:18](#)). He similarly described present affliction as preparing "an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" ([2 Corinthians 4:16–18](#)).

This does not make present pain imaginary or insignificant. It means that every tear of the believer has an expiration date. God may bring redemption from suffering during this earthly life, but the complete answer awaits the resurrection, when everything sin and death have damaged will finally be placed under Christ's victorious rule.

6. The empty tomb announces Christ's final victory

The Resurrection is both a promise and a mandate. Because Jesus is alive, His people are called to carry the Gospel into the world, make disciples, practice sacrificial love, defend truth, confront evil, and remain faithful until He returns. Christian mission did not begin as an effort to preserve the memory of a deceased teacher. It began with witnesses announcing that the crucified Jesus had risen and had commissioned them to proclaim forgiveness and salvation in His name ([Luke 24:46–49](#); [Matthew 28:18–20](#)).

The empty tomb also announces Jesus' victory over the spiritual powers of darkness. Through the Cross, Christ "disarmed the rulers and authorities" and "made a public display of them, having triumphed over them" ([Colossians 2:15](#)). Evil continues to operate within the present age, but its final fate has already been determined. Satan's ultimate judgment is depicted in [Revelation 20:10](#), and death itself will finally be abolished ([1 Corinthians 15:24–26](#)).

History is therefore not wandering aimlessly toward extinction. It is moving toward the return of the risen King. Revelation portrays Jesus coming in triumph as "King of kings and Lord of lords" ([Revelation 19:11–16](#)). Zechariah anticipates the Lord standing upon the Mount of Olives ([Zechariah 14:3–5](#)), while Jesus spoke of the gathering of His elect from the ends of the earth ([Matthew 24:30–31](#)).

The biblical story does not end with souls floating forever in an immaterial realm. It ends with resurrection, judgment, restoration, and a New Heaven and New Earth. God will dwell among His redeemed people, and "there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or

crying, or pain” ([Revelation 21:1–5](#)). The Paradise lost through humanity’s rebellion will be surpassed by the renewed creation secured through Jesus Christ.

This is the breathtaking conclusion of the Resurrection story: the God who created the world has not abandoned it. The Christ who stepped out of the tomb will return, raise His people, judge evil, end war and death, and restore everything sin has broken. The Resurrection is therefore not merely evidence that Jesus survived the grave. It is God’s guarantee that darkness will not win, death will not reign forever, and the long history of redemption will end in the complete victory of the risen King.

Jesus’ question to Martha consequently survives every historical argument and reaches every reader personally: “I am the resurrection and the life; the one who believes in Me will live, even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?” ([John 11:25–26](#)).



A Final Word from A Former Atheist

When I first encountered the claim that Jesus Christ had risen from the dead, I did not approach it with Christian assumptions. I had grown up in an atheist household, and Christianity was not the framework through which I understood reality. Christmas had largely meant Santa Claus, Easter meant the Easter Bunny, and Jesus was little more than a distant religious figure from an ancient and, I assumed, scientifically unenlightened world.

Like many modern skeptics, I believed the intellectual world had already settled the question. Dead people remain dead. Miracles belong to mythology. The Resurrection sounded like precisely the kind

of ancient religious story that educated people were expected to dismiss without serious investigation. I assumed that Christianity survived because people needed comfort, inherited their beliefs from their families, or had never examined the evidence critically.

But assumptions are not evidence.

The more closely I examined Christianity, the more I discovered that the historical questions surrounding Jesus would not disappear. Christianity had arisen too early, in too Jewish a setting, with too specific a proclamation, and around too many identifiable witnesses to be dismissed casually as legend. The original message was not that Jesus' teachings remained inspiring or that His followers sensed His presence in their hearts. It was the unmistakable declaration that the Jesus who had been publicly crucified, confirmed dead, and buried had been raised bodily from the grave—and that numerous people had encountered Him alive.

I began to realize that the first Christians had placed themselves in an extraordinarily vulnerable position. They located their claim in recent history, tied it to a known Roman governor, connected it to an identifiable burial, named individuals and groups as witnesses, and proclaimed it publicly in Jerusalem, the very city where Jesus had been condemned and crucified. They did not move the Resurrection into some distant land or remote mythical past where their testimony could not be investigated. They announced it where hostile authorities had both the motive and opportunity to disprove it.

What began for me as skepticism gradually became an investigation. That investigation did not end with one emotional experience or one dazzling argument. It developed through the growing realization that the evidence formed a cumulative historical pattern that demanded an explanation.

Jesus was publicly crucified under Pontius Pilate and buried. The earliest Christian creed proclaimed that He died, was buried, was raised, and appeared to named witnesses. Women who knew where He had been laid discovered the tomb empty. Individuals and groups reported encounters with Him alive. His frightened disciples were transformed into courageous public witnesses. James, His previously unbelieving brother, became a leader of the Jerusalem church. Paul, an active persecutor of Christians, became the greatest missionary of the faith he had attempted to destroy. Jewish resurrection expectations were dramatically rearranged around one man raised in the middle of history. Jesus was worshiped as Lord with astonishing speed, and the original witnesses accepted persecution, imprisonment, and death rather than deny their testimony.

No single strand stands alone. Like separate pieces of a great historical mosaic, they reinforce one another. The Crucifixion establishes that Jesus truly died. The burial identifies what happened to His body. The secured tomb answers the possibility of casual interference. The empty grave confronts us with the absence of the body. The appearances explain why the disciples believed He was alive. The early creed demonstrates that resurrection proclamation began at Christianity's foundation. The conversions of James and Paul extend the testimony beyond Jesus' devoted followers. The transformation and suffering of the apostles reveal the depth and sincerity of their conviction. The sudden birth of the Church shows the historical force released by the events of Easter.

For more than forty years, I have continued studying these questions. I have returned to the biblical texts, historical sources, archaeological discoveries, medical discussions, philosophical objections, and competing explanations. I have read scholars who believe and scholars who do not. I have examined the strongest objections I could find because truth has nothing to fear from honest investigation.

Those decades of study have not weakened my confidence in the Resurrection. They have strengthened it.

Careful scholarship has helped me distinguish the essential evidence from unnecessary embellishments. The case does not depend upon knowing the precise weight of the tombstone, the exact number of guards, or every physical detail of the Crucifixion. It does not require every later tradition concerning an apostle's death to possess the same historical strength. Christianity does not need exaggerated claims because the central evidence is already powerful.

Remove every unnecessary embellishment and the historical mountain remains. Jesus was crucified and buried. Resurrection belief appeared at the very beginning of Christianity, not generations later. The earliest witnesses proclaimed that they had encountered Him alive. The empty-tomb tradition arose in the same environment in which Jesus had been executed. Jewish expectations were dramatically transformed. Worship of Jesus emerged within the heart of Jewish monotheism. Skeptics and enemies became proclaimers. Frightened disciples became fearless witnesses. The Church was born around the declaration that **God had raised Jesus from the dead.**

The alternatives fail because each explains only a fragment of the evidence. Legend does not explain the early creed. Hallucination does not empty a grave. Theft does not explain appearances to individuals and groups, much less the transformations of James and Paul. A wrong tomb does not explain the women who witnessed the burial or the authorities' inability to produce the body. Deliberate fraud does not explain why the original witnesses willingly suffered for what they would have known they had fabricated.

The Resurrection brings the entire historical pattern together. It explains the empty tomb, the appearances, the transformed disciples, the conversions of skeptics, the mutation of Jewish expectations, the earliest Christian proclamation, the worship of Jesus, and the explosive birth of the Church. The explanation given by the witnesses themselves continues to possess greater historical reach, coherence, and explanatory power than the alternatives:

God raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

But this investigation cannot end as an abstract contest between historical theories. If Jesus remained in the grave, He may still be studied as a religious teacher, moral philosopher, or tragic figure from history. If He rose, however, He cannot be confined to a museum, a textbook, a stained-glass window, or an Easter tradition. A risen Jesus is not merely someone to be analyzed. **He is the living Lord to whom every person must respond.**

The Resurrection means that Jesus' claims have been vindicated. It means the Cross truly accomplished the forgiveness of sin. It means death has been defeated rather than merely accepted. It means final judgment is real, but so are mercy, reconciliation, and eternal life. It means our suffering is not meaningless, our failures need not define us, and the grave will not have the final word. It means history is not moving blindly toward extinction but toward the return of the King and the restoration of all things.

For the believer, Easter means that no darkness is absolute. The same God who brought life out of the sealed tomb can bring hope into despair, courage into fear, purity into brokenness, and purpose into suffering. The Resurrection does not promise that Christians will avoid pain. It promises that pain will not win. It does not deny the reality of death. It announces that death has met its Conqueror.

For the skeptic, the Resurrection presents an invitation and a challenge: examine the evidence for yourself. Do not reject Jesus merely because resurrection lies outside ordinary experience. Of course it does. Christianity is not claiming that dead people naturally recover. It is claiming that the Creator of life acted uniquely and decisively in history. The question is not whether resurrection ordinarily happens. The question is whether it happened to **Jesus**.

Do not allow inherited unbelief, intellectual fashion, personal disappointment, religious hypocrisy, or fear of what faith might require to decide the verdict before the evidence is heard. Follow the historical trail. Read the earliest sources. Examine the empty tomb, the appearances, the early creed, the transformed witnesses, and the birth of the Church. Ask which explanation accounts for the evidence most completely and honestly.

Yet recognize what is ultimately at stake. Jesus does not merely ask whether you find the evidence interesting. He asks whether you will entrust yourself to Him. Christianity is not simply the conclusion that a miracle happened long ago. It is reconciliation with the living Christ—repenting of sin, receiving His forgiveness, surrendering to His lordship, and entering the new life made possible by His Resurrection.

Jesus placed that question before Martha as she stood in the shadow of death. He did not merely offer her a doctrine about the distant future. He directed her attention to Himself:

“I am the resurrection and the life; the one who believes in Me will live, even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25–26)

After more than forty years of examining the evidence, living the faith, studying the objections, and witnessing the transforming presence of the risen Christ, my answer is more certain today than when this journey began.

I do.

The historical investigation has brought you to the same question Jesus asked Martha. No scholar, pastor, parent, church, or author can answer it for you. The empty tomb demands a verdict, and the living Christ invites a response.

Do you?

If your heart is telling you that it is time to respond to the risen Christ, please do not walk away from that invitation. You do not need to repair your life before coming to Him, nor can good works, religion, or human effort erase the guilt of sin. Jesus has already done what you could never do for yourself: He died in your place, rose from the grave, and now offers forgiveness, reconciliation with God, and everlasting life to everyone who turns to Him in repentance and faith.

The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association explains this decision through **Four Steps to Peace With God**: God created you for peace and life; sin has separated you from Him; Jesus Christ is God’s remedy through the Cross and Resurrection; and you must personally respond by repenting, believing, and receiving Christ as Savior and Lord. If you are ready to take that step—or simply need help understanding what it means—I warmly invite you to continue here:

COMING NEXT TUESDAY—THE FINAL INSTALLMENT!

WHY? The Question That Started Everything

Next Tuesday, the entire Evidence Trail reaches its most personal, surprising, and unforgettable conclusion. We will step back from the empty tomb and return to where my search first began—not in a church, seminary, or theology classroom, but with a sixteen-year-old atheist sitting alone in a neighborhood park, holding an acoustic guitar, staring into a sky filled with stars, and wrestling with one question that would not leave him alone: **Why?**

Why does anything exist? Why is the universe intelligible? Why are human beings conscious of themselves and capable of reason, sacrificial love, moral judgment, creativity, forgiveness, beauty, worship, and the search for meaning? Science can tell us an astonishing amount about how the physical universe operates, but can it finally tell us what human life is *for*? What happens when science reaches the boundary between describing life and explaining its ultimate purpose?

In this concluding installment, I will retrace the entire forty-year Evidence Trail—from atheism, science, and the danger of scientism to philosophy, comparative religion, the Bible, archaeology, Jesus Christ, and the Resurrection. But this will be far more than a summary of arguments. It is the personal story of how one persistent question led me to Bass Lake, an awkward prayer on a mountainside, an inscription scratched into the fresh paint of a water tank—“**TD → JC 1/1/81**”—and a letter from a young woman named Tracy who had been praying that God would reveal Himself to me.

For the first time in this series, I will also show you actual photographs of that Bass Lake water tank and the weathered inscription that remains visible more than forty years later. You will be able to see the real location where a young atheist surrendered his life to Jesus Christ—and the simple etching that silently marked the beginning of everything that followed.

Tracy became my wife. Together we raised a family, entered a lifetime of research, writing and ministry, and began returning to that same mountain with our children and grandchildren. Today, our family still climbs the hill, searches through decades of accumulated graffiti, and finds those fading characters holding their place on the aging metal. What began as one young man’s private decision has become a physical marker connecting generations.

The final installment will bring together the evidence and the personal journey in a way none of the earlier installments could. It begins beneath the stars, travels through more than four decades of questions, and returns to that weathered water tank with the family that did not yet exist when the original inscription was made.

Do not miss the final chapter of this investigation. You have followed the evidence for God, the Bible, Jesus, and the Resurrection. Next Tuesday, you will discover where the entire trail ultimately led—and why one apparently quiet decision on a lonely mountainside changed the direction of my marriage, my family, my ministry, and my life.

The answer to **WHY?** is not merely an argument, an equation, a religious system, or a philosophical proposition. **The answer ultimately leads to a Person—Jesus Christ.**

COMING NEXT TUESDAY!!

SELECTED SCHOLARLY WORKS USED THROUGHOUT THIS CHAPTER

- [Gary R. Habermas — Publications, including On the Resurrection: Evidences and Refutations \(2024\)](#)
- [N. T. Wright — “Jesus’ Resurrection and Christian Origins”](#)
- [John Granger Cook — “Crucifixion and Burial,” New Testament Studies](#)
- [Dale C. Allison Jr. — The Resurrection of Jesus: Apologetics, Polemics, History](#)
- [Richard Swinburne — The Resurrection of God Incarnate, Oxford University Press](#)
- [Sean McDowell — The Fate of the Apostles, 2nd ed. \(2025\)](#)
- [Jake H. O’Connell — “Jesus’ Resurrection and Collective Hallucinations”](#)
- [James Ware — “The Resurrection of Jesus in the Pre-Pauline Formula of 1 Cor 15.3–5”](#)
- [Larry W. Hurtado — “Earliest Jesus-Devotion and Putative Parallels”](#)
- [William Lane Craig — “The Historicity of the Empty Tomb of Jesus”](#)
- [Jodi Magness — “What Did Jesus’ Tomb Look Like?”](#)
- [Edwards, Gabel & Hosmer — “On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ,” JAMA](#)

