

An Historian Looks at Easter

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1 Corinthians 15:1-26 ESV

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you--unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been

raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

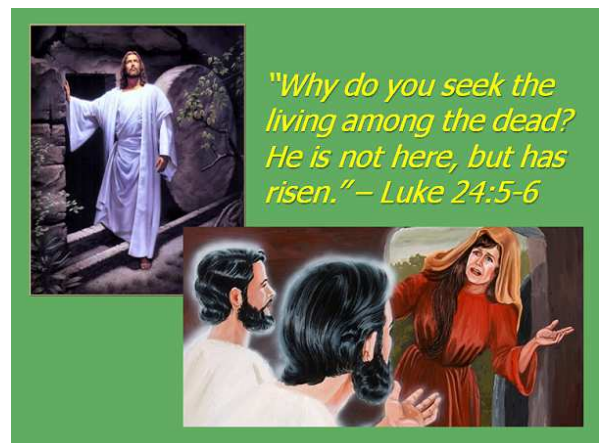
But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

Luke 24:1-12 ESV

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.

While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise."

And they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home marveling at what had happened.



Let me take you back in time, about 45 years, to a scene in a university classroom on the East Coast. The class is a course in the New Testament, and the young instructor is attempting to explain the resurrection to

his students, many of whom are Jewish and all of whom are sharp, or they wouldn't be there. The resurrection of Jesus, says the instructor, isn't really an event that took place. Instead, it's something the church began to teach about a generation after the crucifixion. When Christians gathered in remembrance of Jesus, they somehow felt his presence with them. So they began to tell stories about how Jesus was alive, after all, and eventually these stories made their way into what we call the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament. But the real resurrection wasn't something that happened to Jesus, who just died like any other man. The real "resurrection" was *the church itself*, the body of people who followed Jesus and told the stories about Jesus and what his life and teachings meant to them. That's what this instructor told his students, and nobody objected or raised questions about his theory. It seemed reasonable enough to them, and the instructor felt that by offering this explanation of the resurrection he had made Christianity more believable to thinking people in the twentieth century.

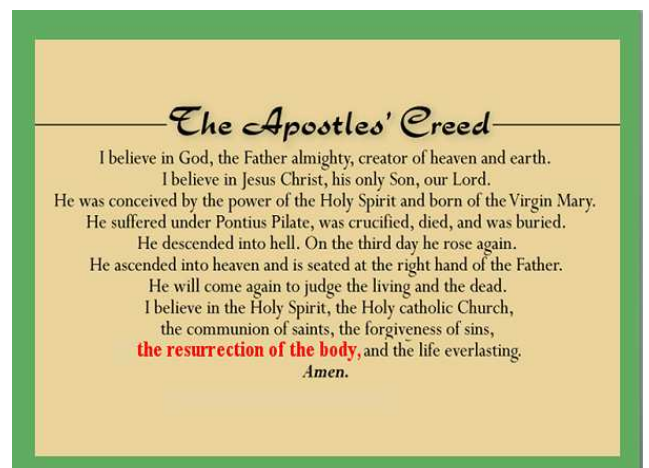


As I'm sure you've guessed, I was that instructor. At the time I was a graduate student at Boston University in the Ph.D. program. The head of the religion department of the undergraduate College of Liberal Arts, a man named Dr. Kim, had asked me to become one of his "lecturers," as they were called — graduate students hired to teach some of his classes at, of course, a much lower pay grade than what a full faculty member would have received! I had taken a class from Dr. Kim in the Greek New Testament, so he

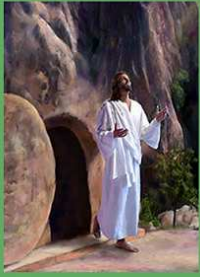
said to me, in his Korean accent, "You took my class, you just close your eyes, you can teach." So for several years I taught Old and New Testament to undergraduates at Boston University, and I've just related to you something of the kind of things I taught, especially about the resurrection of Jesus.

Obviously, I've changed my mind about the resurrection over the years. In those days I wasn't a believer, even though I was a Ph.D. candidate in Bible. How that ever came about, and then how I eventually became a believer, is another story and there's not time to tell it today. I want to focus, instead, on the resurrection of Jesus. If, five decades ago, I didn't believe in it, what might my reasons have been? And what might have been the reasons my students in that liberal eastern university probably couldn't believe it, either? Why don't many people — your own friends and neighbors and, perhaps, family members — believe in the resurrection today? Because, if they did, they would be here with us this morning to celebrate it, or in some other Bible-believing church. So we're going to take a look at reasons why people reject the resurrection, and why those reasons *don't stand the test of solid inquiry*. In particular, we're going to look at historical evidence for the resurrection.

First of all, though, what do we mean by "resurrection?" Let's be clear that, for all New Testament believers, resurrection means resurrection *in a body*, just as the Apostles' Creed states, "I believe in the resurrection of the body." Resurrection isn't a kind of ghostly immortality, which is what Plato and other ancient Greeks believed — the idea that, somehow, the "soul" is immortal and doesn't die when the body dies. That's not New Testament belief. So resurrection doesn't mean "going to heaven," as if that's where our story will end and we'll be there for eternity. The Bible always looks to the "new heaven and the new earth" — just read the final pages of the Revelation and you'll see what I mean. Resurrection is being raised to new life in a body like Jesus in his resurrection, which we also will have when he appears upon this earth, *if we belong to him*. So let's not be confused about what the Bible teaches, or what we're talking about today.



Resurrection:



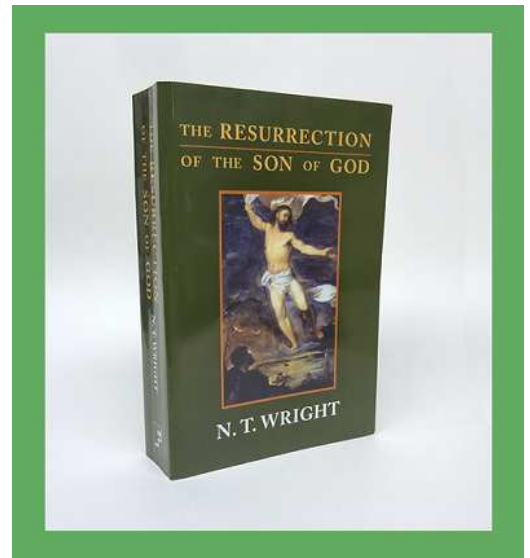
- God is renewing his creation
- We live in Jesus until the day of resurrection
- Jesus is the Messiah of Israel
- Jesus is Lord of all nations

What does Jesus' resurrection mean to the people who experienced it in the New Testament? Several things. It means God has begun to fulfill his plan for the renewal of his creation, which has been marred and stained by human sin and disobedience. It means that what we do to build toward God's kingdom now won't be lost, because it will come to completion in the "day of the Lord." It means the promise of life with Jesus after this life, as we await the day of resurrection. And for the earliest Christians, the resurrection means that, contrary to all previous thinking, Jesus of Nazareth is indeed the Messiah, the long hoped-for Redeemer of Israel. As Peter stated on the Day of Pentecost, "Therefore God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified." And, as Scripture

makes clear, if Jesus is the Messiah of Israel he is also Lord of all nations. These are the things we're celebrating today, because Jesus has been raised from the dead.

Let's have a look, then, at why the resurrection makes sense, and why objections to it *don't* make sense. We're going to examine the evidence, especially the historical evidence. I'm not a professional historian, but I'm relying on sources such as this book by New Testament scholar N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* — 840 pages surveying what resurrection meant for Jews of the first century and why the New Testament accounts of Jesus' resurrection are historically reliable. Astronomer Carl Sagan famously said, "Extraordinary claims demand extraordinary evidence." That's a logical absurdity. Extraordinary claims demand *the same kind of evidence as any other claim*. We will examine the ordinary evidence to counter disbelief in the resurrection.

1. *The unbelievability objection.* The first objection is that resurrection from the dead is simply unbelievable; it just can't happen. In the seventeenth century a movement began which historians call the Enlightenment. Science, rather than religious tradition, became the norm by which all events came to be judged; and that science was limited to the world we can "see," that is, it can be detected through direct observation or with scientific instruments. "Seeing is believing," as they say. According to this worldview resurrection can't happen, and people began to say that the writers of the New Testament were gullible because they believed the unbelievable. But the fact is that the news of the resurrection of Jesus was *just as unbelievable* to his own disciples as it is to many today; Luke tells us it seemed like "an idle tale," the fantasy of some emotional women. People in the ancient world knew very well that dead people don't rise; the gospel of Jesus' resurrection went against their prejudices, just as it does ours.



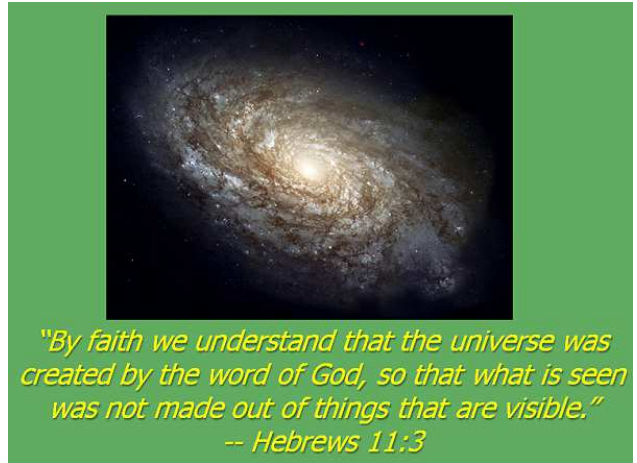
Objections to the Resurrection

1. Unbelievable: Resurrection can't happen.

Scientists are learning today that this universe we live in isn't as simple as people thought it was a hundred years ago. Do you realize, for example, that most of the matter, the "hard stuff" we deal with, is just *space*? That applies to our bodies, along with everything else. The distances between the atomic and subatomic particles that make up the "stuff" we see can be compared, at that level, to the distances between the sun and the planets of our solar system. But in a collapsed star, called a "black hole," all that stuff is pulled together with such a great density that even light cannot escape, and time stands still. Observations of distant parts of the universe suggest to astronomers, on the basis of gravitational effects on light, that 95% of the universe is made up of "dark matter" and "dark energy" — stuff that can't be detected by instruments. Some physicists, pondering what matter is basically made of, have come up with "string theory," the concept that

the foundation of everything isn't "stuff" at all, but vibrations of different frequencies operating across as many as eleven dimensions at all points in the universe. Now, vibrations, or frequencies, are what we call *words*; if string theory is correct, everything we see about us, and we ourselves, are actually made from *words*. And if most of this universe is invisible — well, the Letter to the Hebrews states, "By faith we understand that the universe was created by the *word* of God, so that what is seen was *not made out of things that are visible*" (Hebrews 11:3). Scientists appear to be catching up with the Bible.

That's our universe; and in such a universe, who's to say what's possible and what's not? This world is a place of great mystery and immense possibility. There's plenty of room for the Creator to be at work in ways we don't normally see in our limited four-dimensional space — to heal people, even to raise them up and give them resurrection bodies. To deny the resurrection of Jesus because "such things simply don't happen" isn't just unbelief; it's *outdated science*.



Objections to the Resurrection

1. Unbelievable: Resurrection can't happen.
2. **Jesus didn't die on the cross.**

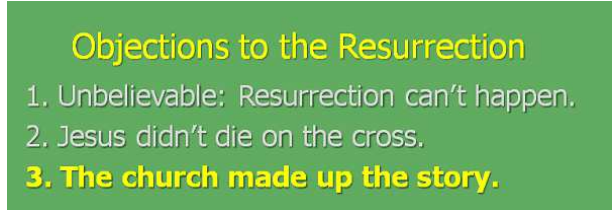


2. *Jesus didn't really die.* A second objection to the resurrection is the argument that Jesus didn't really die on the cross; he just fainted, and the disciples stole his body so that he could reappear three days later. Such an objection hardly merits refuting. Tell me that a man nailed up to a cross, suffering the wounds, the pain, the asphyxiation, is going to be strong enough three days later to stand up, roll aside a big stone, and walk out of a tomb! The Romans knew how to kill people who got in their way; you can believe they made sure Jesus was dead, just as the Gospels tell us. This objection is similar to what Islam claims, that it wasn't Jesus who died but an imposter who took his place on the cross. So tell me the disciples, or Jesus' mother, kneeling at the

foot of the cross, didn't recognize that the man hanging there wasn't the Jesus they had known and loved! It's more believable to accept what the Gospels tell us, that Jesus died and God raised him up on the third day.

3. *The "made-up story" theory.* Another theory is that because Jesus had made such a strong impression in his followers, whenever they got together after his crucifixion they felt his presence so strongly that they made up the story that he had been raised, and began to announce it to others. Wishful thinking on the part of his disciples produced the accounts of the resurrection, so those accounts can't be trusted. But put yourself in the disciples' place. You know the trouble they got into because they proclaimed Jesus risen from the dead, the Messiah of Israel, a "rival King," as it were, to Caesar. Would the apostles have made up a story they didn't really believe themselves, knowing it would put their own lives in danger? They died for their conviction that Jesus is alive; they must have been sure of their facts.

Jesus wasn't the only man to come forward as Messiah in the ancient world. In the hundred years on either side of his crucifixion as many as ten would-be Messiahs appeared. All were speedily put down by the Romans or other authorities. When that took place their movements died out, except in a few cases where a family member took over the role of Messiah and carried on. That could have happened with Jesus, because he had brothers who could have stepped into his place. But neither James, nor Joses, nor Judah, nor Simon, ever came forward as his replacement. Indeed, James and Jude became apostles of Jesus and wrote books in our New Testament because Jesus was their Lord. Why did Jesus' movement continue, but his family produced no





"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. . . . My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory." – James 1:2-3; 2:1

consensus is that the Gospels appeared in their present form from forty to sixty years after the crucifixion, after the accounts of Jesus' life had circulated by word of mouth and had been translated from the original Aramaic or Hebrew into Greek. Personally, I believe they were produced earlier, but let's accept the general conclusion that they appeared later in the first century. Is that enough of an argument to invalidate them as historical sources for the resurrection?

We need to consider the Jewish culture in which Jesus lived and taught, and within which the events we read about in the Gospels took place. It was an *oral culture*; that is, most people couldn't read or write, so there was a great emphasis on committing things to memory. People who witnessed what Jesus did and said remembered those things and retold them, again and again. And there was a *community* of followers who remembered these things, not just an isolated person here and there; if you started to tell the story the wrong way, somebody else in your Christian group would correct you. In such an environment you couldn't just change the story, or make up something that never happened, without being "called" on it. Of course, different eyewitnesses told their stories in their own way with differing details within their own Christian circles, which is why the four Gospels differ in their accounts. But that doesn't mean the events they describe never took place; just think about an auto accident case, for example, where different witnesses tell a slightly different story, but nobody denies that the accident happened.



"For I delivered to you what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time. . . . Last of all, he appeared also to me." – 1 Corinthians 15:3-6, 8

successor? The logical answer is that Jesus was in fact raised from the dead, appeared to his followers, and by his Holy Spirit *continued to lead them*, right down to the present day. We're looking at history here, and history offers no room for the idea that Jesus' followers just invented the story of his resurrection, out of either delusion or wishful thinking.

4. *The late-source objection.* An often-cited objection to the New Testament accounts of Jesus' resurrection claims that we can't believe them because they were written much later, and they only record legends about Jesus that developed over a period of time as the memory of the original events faded. Nobody knows exactly when most of the New Testament documents were written, but a general

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The late-sources objection doesn't hold water for another reason. The New Testament sources for the life of Jesus are much closer to the original events than the sources for almost any event in the ancient world. Nobody doubts that Alexander the Great built up a great empire in the fourth century BC, but the earliest source historians have for Alexander was written at least three centuries later. A similar situation is true for other commonly accepted events of the ancient world, yet only for the events of Jesus' life do some people raise the objection that the New Testament sources are late!

Gary Habermas has developed another approach countering the "late sources" objection. Jesus was crucified and raised in about the year 30; how close can we get to those events? The apostle Paul, in the passage we read

from 1 Corinthians 15, says, "I handed down to you *what I received* about the resurrection of Jesus" — and then adds that Jesus also appeared to him. Paul first handed down this account to the Corinthians in the years 51 or 52. We know Paul came to Corinth at that time, because the Book of Acts mentions that Corinth's Roman governor then was Gallio, and a stone has been found there with Gallio's name and date. But Paul, himself, had to receive the account of Jesus' resurrection, and from evidence in the Book of Acts and his letter to the Galatians we know that had to happen some seventeen years earlier. Paul says he "received" the account, indicating that by the time it was given to him it had already become a "tradition" or standard account that was often retold in the church; that's what the word "received" means here, a tradition. It takes a while for such a standard narrative to develop, and this takes us back to a time within a few years, or even months, of the resurrection. Plenty of people were around, even when Paul wrote to the Corinthians, who knew what had happened and could have corrected a mistaken account. What Paul told the Corinthians about the resurrection isn't a late source at all; in fact, it's a very early source, going back almost to the event itself.

Outside the New Testament there are non-Christian sources for the Christian belief in the resurrection. The Jewish historian Josephus, the Roman historian Tacitus, and the Roman official Pliny the Younger all refer to the resurrection of Jesus as the common, established belief among Christians. It was not something they had recently made up. The idea that the New Testament accounts of the resurrection were invented and developed over a long period of time, so they can't be trusted, just goes against the evidence of history.

5. *The inconsistencies objection.* Finally, let's look at the argument that says the Gospel accounts of the resurrection can't be trusted because the details they present are inconsistent. Yes, the details do differ, just as the testimony of several eyewitnesses to an accident might differ. How many women went to the tomb on Easter morning? How many messengers, or angels, told them Jesus had risen? (And, by the way, if you were going to invent a story that Jesus rose from the dead, you would never let on that women were the first witnesses, because in that culture women weren't considered credible witnesses.) Did the disciples run to the tomb to see for themselves, or did Jesus meet them on the way?

The Gospels tell slightly different stories, and we've already discussed why this is so. But consider the alternative: what would an historian think, today, if we had only one Gospel, one "standard" history of those events? Remember what the Soviets did to rewrite history, and how revised history is being taught in our schools today to exclude the role of Christianity in shaping the life of our nation. When we find a standard, "official" history with no inconsistent details we know the history is suspect; someone in control has "scrubbed it" and established a "party line." The church didn't do that with the Gospels; it allowed them to stand as original witnesses. Their differing details show that their sources are original, and go back to a time before a "party line" could be established.

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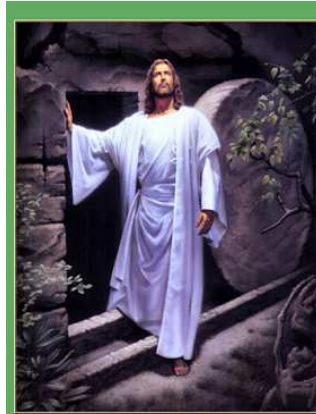
6. Volitional doubt: Some just don't want to believe.

6. *Volitional doubt.* We've looked at five objections to the truth of Jesus' resurrection: (1) resurrection is unbelievable, it can't happen; (2) Jesus didn't really die on the cross; (3) the disciples just invented the resurrection by wishful thinking; (4) the sources for the resurrection are too late; and (5) the accounts of the resurrection are inconsistent and, therefore, not trustworthy. I believe we've presented a reasonable answer to each of these arguments. But the fact is that none of our reasons will make any difference for someone who *just doesn't want to believe* Jesus lives today. Most people's doubt about

the resurrection isn't based on the lack of historical evidence. Most doubt is what authorities on this topic call *volitional doubt*; people *choose not to believe*, in spite of the evidence, because to believe the resurrection would require *a change in their priorities* and the way they live. So even some people who accept all this historical evidence will sometimes remain skeptics about the resurrection. Even some, in fact, who teach the Bible remain atheists or agnostics, as you could say I was during those years at Boston University. And why is that? Because when you deny the resurrection you can just go on living the way they want to, without reference to God or the revelation he has left us in Holy Scripture. If people really believed Jesus rose from the dead and lives today, the media would be telling a different story about our world. We wouldn't be wrapped up in selfishness and greed, or giving a pass to immoral behavior, or considering false religions to be just as valid as Christian faith.

Let's you and me not make that mistake, the one I was making so many years ago that eventually had some serious consequences for my life. We can trust the gospel of the resurrection: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures." Because that's true, we know that God has already established his kingdom, his new creation, in the earth, and that's a much better place to be living in than a world without God.

And we don't have to wait for heaven to live in that place; we can live in it right now. As Paul wrote to the Romans, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3-4) And to the Colossians he wrote, "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (Colossians 3:1). When a family goes on a vacation trip, the children in the back seat will often pipe up, "Are we there yet?" The New Testament's answer is, "Yes!" The resurrection, God's new creation, is here now, and if you're living in Jesus *you're there*.



"But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep."

-- 1 Corinthians 15:20

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