

“We Are Witnesses of These Things”

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois — April 12, 2015

Mark 16:1-8 NIV

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away.

As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"

Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.



Acts 5:17-19, 25-33 NIV

Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. . . .

Then someone came and said, "Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people." At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them. Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest.

"We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," he said. "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood."

Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men! The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead — whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

33 When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death.



When we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, we rejoice in the hope it gives us that our life for Christ, here and now, is not wasted. Because Jesus has been raised, the firstborn of many brothers and sisters, we too have the promise of our resurrection in the last day. And the deeds we do in the name of Christ are building toward the renewing of God's good creation, when we receive the incorruptible body like the body of the risen Jesus. As Paul wrote to the Philippians, "We eagerly await a Savior from [heaven], the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (Philippians 3:20-21 NIV). Death is the denial of God's goodness in creation; resurrection is the *affirmation* of God's purpose in creating a world that he called "good." The resurrection fulfills the plan God has always had for this world he loves.

Unlike other ancient peoples like the Greeks and Romans, the Jews believed in the resurrection from the dead. Some ancient people believed that after death there was simply nothing — some people believe that today. Others believed that after death a person goes into some kind of immortal, disembodied state — as some people also believe today. Still others believe in reincarnation, return as another person or an animal. Those are all *heathen ideas*. The Jews, or the faithful among them, had a different belief. They expected a

resurrection of the same person to a new body on this earth. Jesus stated it this way, in John 5:28-29: "Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment." But for most Jews, that event was to happen in, perhaps, the far distant future when their oppressive enemies had been defeated by the long-awaited Messiah.

After-Death Options:

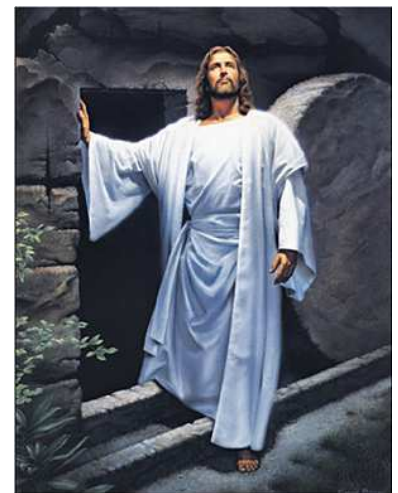
- **Nothing**
- **Immortality in a disembodied State**
- **Reincarnation**
- **Resurrection of the body**

The astonishing testimony of the first Christians is that *this resurrection has already occurred for one man:* Jesus of Nazareth. And this event not only certifies that Jesus is Israel's Lord and Messiah, but it also opens up the pathway to resurrection for all people who belong to Jesus — "the first-born among many brethren" (Romans 8:29) as Paul calls him. If that's true, then this world is a different place from what it

was before. If Jesus is alive, then the authorities and ideologies that claim supremacy over people's lives today are only temporary. They're just poor imitations of the real power and authority that govern this universe, to be revealed in glory on the day of resurrection. Here's what Paul says about it in 1 Corinthians 15:20-27 (RSV):

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits 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 first fruits, 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. For God has put all things in subjection under his feet.

In sending his disciples out with the gospel message, Jesus declared, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). This conviction is what gave the first Christians the power to stand up to opposition and persecution by those determined to stamp out their message. When Peter and the other apostles were told to stop preaching about Jesus, their answer was, "We must obey God rather than men." Because Jesus is alive and ruling at God's right hand, Christians cannot respect any earthly authority that opposes the way of Christ. Each week we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The will and authority of God are to prevail *here and now*, in whatever you and I do to build toward the day when God brings his new creation into its fullness.



But we know there are many people in this world who don't believe Jesus has been raised from the dead, and who therefore don't understand that he has all authority. We, ourselves, may have some doubts about the resurrection because of the way we've been brought up, in a culture that denies that miracles could happen or people could rise from the dead.

Before we pat ourselves on the shoulder for our enlightened sophistication, and write off ancient people as ignorant and prone to believe anything they're told, let's remind ourselves that people in the ancient world knew, just as well as we do, that *when people die they stay dead.* The Jews, unlike the Greeks and Romans, believed in resurrection as a *future possibility*, but they would have been as skeptical as we if someone claimed they had *already* seen someone raised from the dead. Luke's Gospel records that when the women who went to Jesus' tomb found it empty, and two angels told them he's been raised, they reported this to

All Authority

in heaven and on earth

the disciples. And what was the disciples' reaction? "These words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them" (Luke 24:11). Jesus' resurrection was such a strange, unexpected event that even his disciples needed solid evidence before they could believe it.

So let's go back to those words with which Peter replied to the high priest: "We must obey God rather than men! The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead — whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. *We are witnesses of these things*, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him" (Acts 5:29-32). Peter's certainty about Jesus' being raised from the dead was based on the fact that *he was a witness to it*. He and the other apostles had the evidence, and not even the authority of the Jewish high priest or, eventually, the authority of the Roman Caesar himself, could stop them from declaring that Jesus Christ is Lord. They knew it to be the truth, because they had the evidence.



So what I want to do today is just to take a quick look at some of the historical evidence for the resurrection, and respond to some objections to it. Of course, our main historical sources are the four Gospels themselves, along with other writings of the New Testament. There are historical sources outside the Bible that verify that Christians believed in the resurrection, but the evidence for the resurrection itself comes only from the New Testament.

That brings us to our first piece of evidence. Skeptics attack the Christian belief in the resurrection because, they say, the only evidence for it is in Christian writings, and Christians could have just made up the story later on. But the gospel of Jesus' resurrection is what got the early Christians in trouble, and even cost many of them their lives (as it still does today). Why would you make up a story, and stick to it when you know it isn't true, if it was just going to put your life in danger? There's no way to explain the origin of the Easter story on that basis. The only logical explanation is that it happened, and the followers of Jesus had to deal with it because, as Peter said, "We are witnesses of these things."



Another problem with that skeptical theory is that the accounts of Jesus' resurrection seem to have taken the form in which we have them fairly soon after the event. As you know, it's generally understood that the Gospel narrative of Jesus' life was handed down by word of mouth, and translated from

Aramaic into Greek, before anyone wrote it down. That process was going on for several decades, but at the time the Gospels were put into writing people were still alive who had been with Jesus and had witnessed what had occurred. You couldn't change the story at a later date because someone could always say, "No, it didn't happen that way." A growing community of believers had the story, and even a Gospel author couldn't change what had been passed down from very early on. Just try reading a familiar story to your small grandchildren, and then change the way it turns out. You'll see what I mean.

And here's a third aspect to the Gospels' resurrection account. Each of the four Gospels tells a slightly different story of what happened. For example, Mark lists three women who went to the tomb and found it empty. Matthew mentions only two. Luke says they were women from Galilee, and names three of them, plus other unnamed women, but one of the ones he names is different from the one Mark names. And John only names Mary Magdalene, who appears in the other Gospels also. Skeptics claim these inconsistencies invalidate the story. The truth is that the differences between the Gospel accounts make them *more believable*. If everyone told the same story, it would look like Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John got together and said, "Let's be sure to each put out the same 'party line.'" If the Gospels were like that, they would be less believable, not more.

And if you've ever been involved in an auto accident, you know that the same event can easily be reported in different ways by the people involved. Imagine a traffic court judge saying, "This driver says it happened this way, and this other driver says it happened another way, so I guess there wasn't any accident, after all." Even if different people tell it in a different way, no one doubts that the incident occurred.

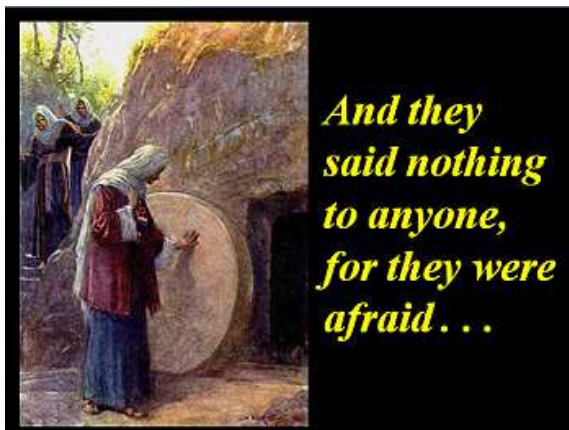
While we're talking about the number of women at the tomb, let's remind ourselves of this fact: in the ancient world, women weren't regarded as credible witnesses. If you were going to invent a story about Jesus being raised from the dead and leaving behind an empty tomb, the last thing you would put into your story is that the first witnesses to this event were women. The presence of the women in all four Gospels tells us that these accounts weren't made up later, but all come from the time of the event itself. When Paul tells the story later on, in 1 Corinthians 15, he mentions Jesus' appearances to Peter and the apostles, to James the brother of Jesus, and to 500 brethren, but he leaves out the women. But he adds that many of the first witnesses are still around, so you can check the story with them.

Here's another interesting feature of the Gospel accounts of the resurrection. Throughout the whole story of Jesus' life and ministry the Gospel writers point to Scripture passages in the Old Testament that Jesus fulfills. For example, when Jesus enters Jerusalem riding on a donkey — what we call Palm Sunday — Matthew indicates this fulfills the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9 about the coming of Israel's king. But in the Gospel narratives of the resurrection we don't find these references to the Old Testament. The event occurred, and the account of it was formed by the various witnesses, before the early church had time to reflect on the Scriptures and realize how Jesus' resurrection fulfilled what had been written. Later, in chapter 2 of the Book of Acts for example, Peter is able to quote from Psalm 16 and Psalm 110 as foreseeing the resurrection of Jesus, but in the Gospels this doesn't happen. The eyewitness accounts of the resurrection are fresh, told just as the surprising and unexpected event must have occurred, before the theological experts had a chance to go over them and show how they fit with what had been prophesied in the Scriptures. This is just another example of the kind of evidence a serious historian uses in concluding that the New Testament narratives of Jesus' resurrection originated soon after the event, and can be trusted as eyewitness accounts. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John — even if they wrote some time after the resurrection — wrote down what they heard, just as it came to them from the original eyewitnesses.



People who want to discredit the Christian faith will always find ways, no matter how ridiculous, to question the Gospel accounts of the resurrection. Some have claimed that Jesus didn't really die on the cross, but just fainted and after a few days recovered enough to appear to his followers. If you know anything about Roman crucifixion methods you understand how unbelievable that theory is. Anyone who had endured what Jesus suffered on the cross, and then somehow survived, could hardly have presented himself within a few days as the victorious, authoritative figure of the risen Jesus, commanding worship and allegiance. Without the incorruptible body of his resurrection, Jesus would have appeared a sorry figure indeed, hardly one able to inspire his disciples to proclaim a message that would put their own lives in jeopardy.

But why would anyone want to discredit the Gospel accounts of the resurrection? Isn't it good news for anyone who is looking for hope, both in this life and the life beyond? The announcement that God's renewal of creation has begun in the rising from the dead of one man, Messiah Jesus, should be "good news," or gospel, for billions of people around the globe — and we believe it is. But there are people who fight it tooth and nail, and ridicule or persecute Christians for believing it. Why is that?



To begin to answer this question, let's go back to that passage we read from the end of the Gospel of Mark. Biblical scholars have long puzzled over that strange ending of verse 8, because the most ancient and trustworthy manuscripts stop right there: "And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, *for they were afraid.*" The sentence ends with a word that, in Greek, is never used at the end of a sentence. That's an odd way to end a Gospel, and if you look at your printed Bible

right there: "And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, *for they were afraid.*" The sentence ends with a word that, in Greek, is never used at the end of a sentence. That's an odd way to end a Gospel, and if you look at your printed Bible

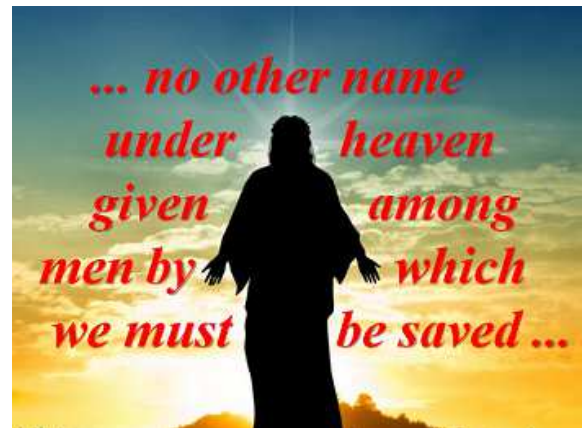
you might find that other ancient manuscripts provide two different endings for Mark. The longer one is printed as verses 9-20, but your Bible's footnotes might give you an alternate, shorter ending. What happened?

The first Christians lived under persecution from both Jewish and Roman authorities, as we read in our selection from Acts. Sometimes they were on the run, enduring the most difficult of conditions. It wasn't easy to preserve their manuscripts, such as the Gospel the apostle Mark had written for them. The earliest New Testament writings were rolls of parchment, and as the manuscript was rolled up the last page would have been on the outside. It could very easily be damaged or lost during difficult conditions of travel, or flight from persecutors. A scribe, copying out the Gospel of Mark and coming to that damaged ending, might be tempted to fill in the ending from other sources, and perhaps that's what we have printed in our Bibles.

But the oldest and most trustworthy manuscripts have neither of the alternate endings. They simply end with the last words of verse 8. And even if that ending is incomplete, it still proclaims a compelling truth. "And they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid." Mark 16:8 reminds us that there's *a strange side to resurrection* — the *astonishing* side, the *totally unexpected* side, even the *fearful* side!

Is that why some people oppose our faith? For many people the resurrection of Jesus is a comforting, hopeful truth. But for others the idea that Jesus is alive today might be a fearful thought. After all, if you want to live in total disregard of the values the Bible teaches — values like integrity, and forgiveness, and compassion, and respect for human life, and marriage as God created it between male and female — if you don't like those values then you don't like the Christian faith that teaches them. So you don't want to hear that Jesus, the man at the center of that faith, has conquered death and is alive today with "all authority in heaven and earth." That message *ought* to strike fear into your heart!

And suppose you're an adherent of another religion, such as Islam or Hinduism. You don't want to hear that Jesus has been raised from death and declared to be Messiah, the Son of God. That's why Muslims, for example, deny that Issa (as they call him) was even crucified; they claim someone else died in his place, so that when he reappeared he had never endured the cross. If God has vindicated Jesus by raising him from the dead, then biblical faith is *the only true religion*. All other religions are false, and need to be confronted so that people in bondage to them can be released from their grip. If we decide that some other religion, such as Islam, is as valid for some people as Christian faith is for us, then we're denying that God raised Jesus from the dead. We would be throwing away the historical evidence for the resurrection that the Gospels, and the writings of Paul, are presenting to us. As the apostle Peter declared, in Acts 4:12, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." It's as simple as that.



A song we like to sing says, "You ask me how I know he lives? He lives within my heart." But can we trust our hearts? Jeremiah reminds us, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). I can't depend on my heart, or my emotions, to tell me what's real. But I don't have to depend on my feelings to believe in the resurrection. You ask me how I know Jesus lives? Because *reliable witnesses saw him, and spoke with him, and their testimony is recorded in Scripture*. As Peter said, "We are witnesses of these things."

Because Jesus lives we can meet him today, listen to his voice, and sense his love for us, his brothers and sisters in God's new creation. Meet him here at his table, as we share the emblems of his presence with us, the bread of life and the cup of salvation.

Text ©2015 Richard C. Leonard
Images from Internet sources