

Important Truths

for

NEW BELIEVERS

Essential Lessons for the Christian Life

Stanford E. Murrell

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1

The Case for Christianity

“And it came to pass the day after, that he went into a city called Nain; and many of his disciples went with him, and much people. ¹² Now when he came nigh to the gate of the city, behold, there was a dead man carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow: and much people of the city was with her. ¹³ And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her, and said unto her, Weep not. ¹⁴ And he came and touched the bier: and they that bare him stood still. And he said, Young man, I say unto thee, Arise. ¹⁵ And he that was dead sat up, and began to speak. And he delivered him to his mother. ¹⁶ And there came a fear on all: and they glorified God, saying, That a great prophet is risen up among us; and, That God hath visited his people. ¹⁷ And this rumour of him went forth throughout all Judaea, and throughout all the region round about” (Luke 7:11-17).

LOCATED SIX MILES SOUTHWEST of Nazareth, constructed on a rocky ledge along the northern descending slope called the Hill of Moreh, in the Valley of Jezreel, is an attractive town called Nain.

During His earthly ministry, in the providence of God, the good citizens of Nain were visited by the Lord Jesus Christ after He had delivered the Sermon on the Mount, and healed a multitude of people.

The mountain in view is traditionally known as Mount Eremos, which has been honored as the place of the Sermon on the Mount for more than 1,500 years. This mount is positioned on Galilee’s northwest shore between the cities of Gennesaret and Capernaum.

In the 4th century A.D. a Byzantine church structure was placed near this mount. Tragically, the only pieces of the church that remain from this building are fractions of a cistern and a monastery. During the Third Crusade in 1187, the ruthless military leader Saladin and his Moslem forces completely defeated the crusaders at Mount Eremos. This victory compelled him to take the city of Jerusalem in October of the same year. In 1938, the Roman Catholic Church built a chapel near the famous mount blessed so long ago by Jesus.

As Christ left the region of Mount Eremos, His travels brought Him, along with His disciples and curious onlookers, to the town of Nain.

As Jesus came near the gate of the city, a noise could be heard. It was the distinct sound associated with individuals attending a Jewish funeral. There was loud weeping and the sound of wailing.

Suddenly, the body of a dead man being carried was brought into view. The details of the funeral procession were communicated to Christ as the crowd paused to listen.

The deceased man was the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. Having lost her husband, the lady had now lost her son to the Grim Reaper whose job is to harvest all souls since, as the Scripture points out, "It is appointed unto men once to die" (Heb. 9:27).

While the mind must rationally accept the fact of death, it does not make the ordeal any easier to bear, and so the mother wept and mourned the passing of her only son.

As Jesus watched the grieving mother, His heart was moved with compassion at her plight. After a brief pause, Jesus spoke softly and tenderly to the woman saying, "Weep not." Suddenly, the anguish of the mother was lessened. A Stranger had spoken to comfort her. The voice of the Stranger had the power of authority. There was majesty in the voice of Christ as well as tenderness. As the weeping mother began to wipe the tears from her eyes, she was able to see, in utter amazement, what happened next. Others also watched in astonishment.

Deliberately moving towards the bier on which the young man was being carried, the hand of Jesus was raised in a royal command. Those who were carrying the body stopped. Then the Lord touched the bier on

which the deceased son was laying. Jesus spoke saying, “Young man, I say unto thee, Arise.”

There was not a moment of hesitation. New life entered into the body of the young man on the bier, and “he that was dead sat up and began to speak.”

A collective utterance of astonishment rose from the crowd. There was a mixture of fear and wonder. It would have been difficult to believe this had happened had individuals not seen it with their own eyes. But there was no denying the facts. A funeral was in full procession. A young man was dead. His body was being taken to be buried. Now, he was *alive and talking*.

Truly, the Man who had caused this to happen was the Son of God. A holy fear came upon the crowd as the people glorified God saying, “That a great prophet is risen up among us.” Others said, “That God hath visited his people.”

Time has passed, but succeeding generations must still make an evaluation of the Jewish Rabbi who once went forth ministering throughout Palestine. Familiar questions still demand an answer:

- Do you believe that Jesus was a Prophet of God?
- Do you believe that He was the Son of God?
- Do you believe He had power to raise the dead?
- Do you believe that one day He Himself rose from the dead?

According to Christian theology a person’s eternal destiny hinges on the answer to these questions. Central to the Christian faith is the idea of the *bodily* resurrection of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul put it this way:

“And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain. ¹⁵ Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ: whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not. ¹⁶ For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised: ¹⁷ And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins” (1 Cor. 15:14-17).

Because of the importance of the resurrection of Jesus, attention is moved from the resurrection of the son of the widow of Nain, to the resurrection of Christ Himself. To prove the resurrection of Jesus is to make the case for Christianity. That is the objective in this message.

In the New Testament, there are several converging lines of evidence proclaiming the resurrection. Each line of evidence deserves careful consideration. The first line of evidence for the resurrection is the *life of Jesus Christ Himself*.

The four Gospels give the story of the resurrection as the completion of the picture of Jesus Christ. Resurrection would be a proper ending to the narrative of a perfect life lived on earth.

There is no question but that Christ anticipated His own resurrection. At first Jesus used only vague terms, such as, "Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (Mark 14:58). But later, as His ministry climaxed, Jesus spoke plainly about the matter, and when He mentioned His death, Christ added, "The Son of man . . . must be raised the third day" (Luke 9:22).

These references are too numerous to be overlooked. The veracity of Christ is at stake if He did not rise from the dead. Either Jesus lied about His resurrection, and thus forfeited being a good and righteous Man, or, He told the truth.

A second line of evidence for the resurrection of Christ is the *fact of the empty grave and the absence of the body*. That Jesus died and was buried, and that on the third morning the tomb was empty, cannot seriously be challenged. The theory that Christ merely swooned on the Cross and recovered in the coolness of the tomb is impossible. The Roman soldiers who crucified Christ had stared death in the face too often. They would never have allowed the body of Jesus to be taken from the Cross unless Christ was truly and verifiably dead.

Moreover, at Christ's burial a stone was rolled before the tomb. The gravesite was sealed, and guards were placed before it. Yet on the third morning the guards were gone, the body had disappeared, and the tomb was empty.

There are only two alternatives. His body must have been taken out of the grave by human hands, or else by superhuman power. If the hands that took the body of Jesus from the tomb were human, they must have been those of His friends, or those of His enemies. If the friends of Jesus had wished to take the body of Christ out of the tomb, the question immediately arises whether they could have done so in the face of the massive stone, the official seal, and the Roman guards.

If the opponents of Jesus had wished to remove His body from the tomb, the question arises whether they would seriously have even considered doing that. For what purpose? It is a thought that borders on the absurd. Why should the enemies of Jesus do the very thing that would be most likely to spread the report of His resurrection and establish His credibility? What's more, the death of a would-be messiah or a prophet who gathered a following would certainly *not* be considered the long-awaited Messiah. No first-century Jew could envision the Messiah dying at the hands of pagans. Quite the opposite. If a messiah was killed by pagans, it marked the end of his ministry and proved to be one of the surest signs that he was a *false* messiah. The death of Jesus at the hands of Roman officials was verification, even in the minds of his own followers at that point in time, that He was *not* the true Messiah. Stated another way, the enemies of Christ did not remove His body, because they had no reason to do so. His claims of messiahship were already disproved (or so they thought) with his death.

The third line of evidence to be considered for the resurrection of Jesus is the *transformation of the disciples*.

After initially fleeing into the night following the Lord's arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, some of the disciples returned to the area to witness the death of Jesus. By witnessing the actual crucifixion of Christ, any flickering vestige of hope was extinguished since the true Messiah, they believed, would certainly never die. Yet hope returned three days later.

On the day of the crucifixion the disciples were filled with sadness, despair, and utter confusion. But, on the first day of the week these same disciples, who feared for their own safety, were suddenly bursting with

gladness. At the site of the crucifixion the disciples were hopeless. However, on the first day of the week their hearts glowed with certainty. Jesus was alive!

When early reports of the resurrection initially came, the disciples were incredulous. They were reluctant to believe that Jesus was alive. But, once the disciples became individually assured the resurrection was true, they never doubted again.

The question naturally arises: “What could account for the astonishing change in the disciples of Jesus in so short a time?”

The mere removal of the body from the grave could never have transformed their spirits and characters (especially given the fact that Christianity is grounded in both truth and morals, which includes *honesty*). That act of deception by stealing the body would only have made them more depressed. Besides, who wants to experience the burial of a loved one time and again? There is something comforting in finding a final resting place.

So, there is nothing more striking in the history of early Christianity than the marvelous change in the disciples by their belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

From this fact of the transformation of the personal lives of the disciples in a short space of time, we proceed to the fourth line of evidence for the resurrection of Christ which is *the existence of the early church*.

There is no doubt that the early church believed in the resurrection of Jesus. It is a fact of history that the church of Christ came into existence as the result of a belief in the bodily resurrection of Christ.

When we consider the beginning of the church, as recorded in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, we see two simple facts. First, individuals were attracted to Christianity by apostolic preaching. Second, the message that was proclaimed was the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

These facts become even more remarkable when it is remembered that Jesus Christ had been put to death on a cross. Devout Jews would have viewed Him as accursed of God (Deut. 21:23). Yet multitudes of Jews were led to worship Jesus, and a great company of priests were compelled to obey Him (Acts 2:41; 6:7).

The only explanation for these events is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead (Acts 2:36). Nothing short of a verifiable bodily resurrection could have led devout Jews to accept Jesus Christ as their Messiah.

The apostolic church was a result of a belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and that belief was based upon a historical fact, not a teary-eyed myth. “As the church is too holy for a foundation of rottenness, so she is too real for a foundation of mist.”¹

“If Easter be not true,
Then all the lilies low must lie;
The Flanders poppies fade and die;
The spring must lose her fairest bloom
For Christ were still within the tomb—
If Easter be not true.

“If Easter be not true,
Then faith must mount on broken wings;
Then hope no more immortal spring;
Then love must lose her might urge;
Life prove a phantom, death a dirge—
If Easter be not true.

“If Easter be not true.
’Twere foolishness the cross to bear;
He died in vain Who suffered there;
What matter though we laugh or cry,
Be good or evil, live or die,
If Easter be not true?

“If Easter be not true—
But it is true, and Christ is risen!
And mortal spirit from its prison
Of sin and death with Him may rise!
Worthwhile the struggle, sure the prize,

¹ Archbishop Alexander, *The Great Question*.

Since Easter, aye, is true!”¹

There is another line of evidence for the resurrection of Christ, and that is the witness of Saul of Tarsus who became the apostle Paul. As a member of the famed and powerful Sanhedrin, as a “Pharisee of the Pharisees,” Saul was openly hostile to Christ—until he met the Majestic Master personally, and his heart was changed (Acts 9). He who persecuted the faith began to preach, and then to publish the gospel message abroad through the power of his pen for all men to read. “Many people have seen the resurrected Christ,” said Paul. “And I have seen him too.”

“Christ the Lord is risen today,
Alleluia!
Sons of men and angels say
Alleluia!
Raise your joys and triumphs high;
Alleluia!
Sing, ye heavens, and earth reply,
Alleluia!”²

There is yet another line of evidence for the resurrection of Christ, and that is the record of the Gospels.

By some defenders of the Christian faith, appealing to the Gospel records should be the first line of defense, but it is proper that an appeal to the Gospel records be placed last—and for this reason. The Christian church believed in the resurrection for many years *before* the Gospels were written.

According to the Gospel narratives there are two sets of appearances of the resurrected Christ. Jesus appeared to His followers in Jerusalem. He also appeared to some of His disciples in Galilee.

While time does not permit an examination of each resurrection appearance in detail, attention can be called to two.

¹ Henry H. Barstow

² Charles Wesley

The first is the story of the walk to Emmaus, as set forth in Luke 24:13-33. The second is the visit of Peter and John to the tomb as recorded in John 20:1-10.

“And, behold, two of them went that same day to a village called Emmaus, which was from Jerusalem about threescore furlongs. ¹⁴ And they talked together of all these things which had happened. ¹⁵ And it came to pass, that, while they communed together and reasoned, Jesus himself drew near, and went with them. ¹⁶ But their eyes were holden that they should not know him. ¹⁷ And he said unto them, What manner of communications are these that ye have one to another, as ye walk, and are sad? ¹⁸ And the one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answering said unto him, Art thou only a stranger in Jerusalem, and hast not known the things which are come to pass therein these days? ¹⁹ And he said unto them, What things? And they said unto him, Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, which was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people: ²⁰ And how the chief priests and our rulers delivered him to be condemned to death, and have crucified him. ²¹ But we trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel: and beside all this, today is the third day since these things were done. ²² Yea, and certain women also of our company made us astonished, which were early at the sepulchre; ²³ And when they found not his body, they came, saying, that they had also seen a vision of angels, which said that he was alive. ²⁴ And certain of them which were with us went to the sepulchre, and found it even so as the women had said: but him they saw not. ²⁵ Then he said unto them, O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: ²⁶ Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? ²⁷ And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. ²⁸ And they drew nigh unto the village, whither they went: and he made as though he would have gone further. ²⁹ But they constrained him, saying, Abide with us: for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent. And he went in to tarry with them. ³⁰ And it came to pass, as he sat at meat with them, he took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them. ³¹ And their eyes were opened, and they knew him; and he vanished out of their sight. ³² And they said

one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures? ³³ And they rose up the same hour, and returned to Jerusalem, and found the eleven gathered together, and them that were with them.” (Luke 24:13-33).

“The first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, when it was yet dark, unto the sepulchre, and seeth the stone taken away from the sepulchre. ² Then she runneth, and cometh to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and saith unto them, They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulchre, and we know not where they have laid him. ³ Peter therefore went forth, and that other disciple, and came to the sepulchre. ⁴ So they ran both together: and the other disciple did outrun Peter, and came first to the sepulchre. ⁵ And he stooping down, and looking in, saw the linen clothes lying; yet went he not in. ⁶ Then cometh Simon Peter following him, and went into the sepulchre, and seeth the linen clothes lie, ⁷ And the napkin, that was about his head, not lying with the linen clothes, but wrapped together in a place by itself. ⁸ Then went in also that other disciple, which came first to the sepulchre, and he saw, and believed. ⁹ For as yet they knew not the scripture, that he must rise again from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples went away again unto their own home” (John 20:1-10).

It is impossible to read these narratives and not be convinced of the literal truthfulness of the resurrection. Either the resurrection is true, or Luke, in particular, was “a greater poet, a more creative genius, than Shakespeare”¹

In the narratives provided by Luke and by John, there is the uniform testimony to the two facts: the empty grave and the live appearance of Christ to His disciples on the third day.

When we examine carefully all the converging lines of evidence, when we endeavor to give weight to all the known facts of history, it seems impossible to escape the truth that a physical miracle of a resurrection took place more than two millennia ago in Jerusalem.

¹ Bishop Moule, *Meditations for the Church's Year*, 108.

It was the miracle of the bodily resurrection of Jesus which caused the apostles to believe in Him afresh, and to die for Him.

Tragically, multitudes today refuse to accept the miraculous. Even Christians within the professing Church are told that they are not required to believe in the *bodily* resurrection of Christ, or even their own future resurrection. One reason for such blatant unbelief is failure to comprehend that God can make all things new. But He can, and He does, and He will.

Here then, is the conclusion of the matter. The bodily resurrection of Christ is not difficult to believe when a person is willing to let God be God—the sovereign Worker of miracles.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE RESURRECTION

There are some important practical reasons for believing in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

First, the resurrection is important in order to establish the validity of the work of Christ at Calvary. Jesus did not die in vain. The resurrection is the proof of the atoning character of the death of Christ, and of His Deity and divine exaltation. Jesus is openly “declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead” (Rom. 1:4).

Second, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is important for evangelistic efforts. The New Testament Church was built upon belief in the resurrection of Jesus, thereby proving the assurance of divine redemption. The hope of eternal life and a future resurrection is a powerful message to offer the world.

“Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; ² By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. ³ For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; ⁴ And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:1-4).

The apostle Paul also provides us assurance by declaring that Jesus “was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification” (Rom. 4:25).

Third, the resurrection of Christ is important for spiritual maturity. The resurrection is regarded as the source and standard of the holiness of the believer. Every aspect of the Christian life, from the beginning to the end, is associated with the resurrection of Jesus Christ (Rom. 6).

Finally, the resurrection of Christ becomes the basis for all future eschatology. The resurrection is the guaranty and model of the believer’s resurrection (1 Cor. 15).

As the bodies of the saints arose, so our bodies are to be brought back from the dead, and made like Christ’s glorified body (Matt. 27:52; Rom. 8:11; Phil 3:21).

We invite you to continue to study the doctrine of the resurrection, and then set before others the case for Christianity. Let us go forth saying,

“Lives again our glorious King;

Alleluia!

Where, O death, is now thy sting?

Alleluia!

Where thy victory, O grave?

Alleluia!”