

12

THE RESURRECTION, PART TWO

In this lesson we will consider eight distinct lines of evidence, all pointing to the truth of one vital fact — that Jesus arose from the dead. These eight converging lines of evidence will be more than sufficient to prove the resurrection of Jesus beyond any reasonable doubt.

1. We have excellent eyewitness testimony.

a. The number of witnesses is more than adequate. This can be seen from the partial list of witnesses which Paul provided for us:

and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still

living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born (I Cor. 15:5-8).

Note especially the appearance to over five hundred people at one time. Paul invites his readers to talk to the eyewitnesses themselves, by advising them that most of the witnesses are still alive.

b. The witnesses were in a position to know the facts. All these witnesses listed by Paul were eyewitnesses. Many of them were in close contact with the risen Lord. They talked to Him, touched Him, and ate with Him. Their observation was sufficient for them to know what they were talking about.

c. The witnesses were competent. They were grown men and women of normal intelligence. The records that we have of their actions and accounts show that they were not easily misled. They were sensible fishermen, practical housewives, and even one tax collector. Their number even included one whose dubiousness was so pronounced, that he was ever after known as "Doubting Thomas."

d. The witnesses were honest and truthful men and women. This is especially important, because it is an accepted rule of evidence that proof that a witness' character for truth and veracity is bad is admissible for the purpose of impeaching his testimony. On this point, we refer to "The Testimony of the Evangelists," written by Simon Greenleaf, Royal Professor of Law at Harvard Law School, and one of the greatest authorities on the law of evidence that the world has known.

And first, as to their honesty. Here they are entitled to the benefit of the general course of human experi-

ence, that men ordinarily speak the truth, when they have no prevailing motive or inducement to the contrary. This presumption, to which we have before alluded, is applied in courts of justice, even to witnesses whose integrity is not wholly free from suspicion; much more is it applicable to the evangelists, whose testimony went against all their worldly interest. The great truths which the apostles declared, were that Christ had risen from the dead, and that only through repentance from sin, and faith in Him, could men hope for salvation. This doctrine they asserted with one voice, everywhere, not only under the greatest discouragements, but in the face of the most appalling terrors that can be presented to the mind of man. Their master had recently perished as a malefactor, by the sentence of a public tribunal. His religion sought to overthrow the religions of the whole world. The laws of every country were against the teachings of His disciples. The interests and passions of all the rulers and great men in the world were against them. The fashion of the world was against them. Propagating this new faith, even in the most inoffensive and peaceful manner, they could expect nothing but contempt, opposition, revilings, bitter persecutions, stripes, imprisonments, torments and cruel deaths. Yet this faith they zealously did propagate; and all these miseries they endured undismayed, nay, rejoicing. As one after another was put to a miserable death, the survivors only prosecuted their work with increased vigor and resolution. The annals of military warfare afford scarcely an example of the like heroic constancy, patience and unblenching courage. They had every possible motive to review carefully the grounds of their faith, and the evidence of the great facts and truths which they asserted; and these motives were pressed upon their attention with the most melancholy and terrific frequency. It was therefore impossible that they could have persisted in affirming the truths they have narrated, had not Jesus actually risen from the dead, and had they not known this fact as

certainly as they knew any other fact. If it were morally possible for them to have been deceived in this matter, every human motive operated to lead them to discover and avow their error. To have persisted in so gross a falsehood, after it was known to them, was not only to encounter, for life, all the evils which man could inflict, from without, but to endure also the pangs of inward and conscious guilt; with no hope of future peace, no testimony of a good conscience, no expectation of honor or esteem among men, no hope of happiness in this life, or in the world to come.

Never before or since have so many witnesses been so powerfully motivated to be completely honest and truthful in their testimony as were these witnesses to the resurrection. Only a stubborn prejudice against anything supernatural, or a deliberate disregard for the accepted elements of proof, could cause anyone to reject their testimony.

2. The radical change in the lives of the apostles and other early Christians.

When Jesus was arrested, His disciples deserted Him and fled. After His crucifixion they were in hiding, torn by fear and despair. Yet, only a few weeks later, they were going all over Jerusalem, fearlessly proclaiming that Jesus was the Christ, and that He had been raised from the dead. They had been transformed from trembling cowards, into men of the utmost courage. What could have produced such a change? Certainly not a dead Jesus. Only the resurrection of their Master from the dead; only their sure knowledge that He was alive and had given them the victory over death, can explain such a radical change.

Nor was this transformation limited to the apostles.

Many others had suddenly changed from timid followers into bold leaders. Even after persecution of the Church began, and men and women were being dragged off to prison, we are told that Christians preached the Word wherever they went (Acts 8:4). The Roman historian, Tacitus, confirms that after Christ was put to death, the "pernicious superstition" broke out afresh and spread not only through Judea, but even throughout Rome itself.

What motivated these people? To what can we attribute such a radical change? That many of them had seen the risen Christ; that all of them knew the tomb was empty; that they were convinced that their Master was alive and was the Son of God; certainly that would have been motivation enough. Anything less is hard to believe. Here indeed, is compelling evidence, pointing to the truth of the resurrection.

3. The conversion of many of His enemies.

The Lord's Church began at Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, just 50 days after the crucifixion. Just outside the city gates had stood the cross to which Jesus had been nailed. Nearby was the tomb, now empty, in which His body had been laid. It was here at this very place and at this very time, that the Christian Gospel was preached. It was a message concerning facts; recent, public events that many of the hearers had witnessed — the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. The audience was composed of Jewish men and women, many of whom had participated in the death of Jesus. The apostles didn't mince words:

Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36).

The response by these Jewish audiences to the apostles preaching, is extremely important to us today. That response was immediate and it was amazing:

Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day(Acts 2:41).

But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand(Acts 4:4).

Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number (Acts 5:14).

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7).

Both the Roman historian, Tacitus, and the Jewish historian, Josephus, confirm that large numbers of Jews, in and around Jerusalem, became Christians in the very earliest days of the Church. Remember, that the message being preached to them centered on certain events that had recently occurred, the key event being that Christ had arisen from the tomb. Remember, that the tomb was just outside the city gates, and that among them were many persons who claimed to have seen the risen Lord.

If we can be certain of anything, we can be certain of this: before those people gave up their jobs, their property, their family and friends, their whole way of life, and became persecuted outcasts, they had checked the tomb and knew it was empty, and they had checked the witnesses and found them to be

truthful, and they were convinced beyond a reasonable doubt that Jesus had risen from the dead, and was indeed the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Especially can we be thankful for the Jewish priests, a "large number" of whom were "obedient to the faith." These were intelligent, educated men. They held positions that commanded great respect and that gave them lifetime security. Before they gave up all this, how thoroughly they must have investigated the evidence, and how completely convinced they must have been of its truth. They investigated the whole resurrection story for us, and if they were convinced beyond a reasonable doubt of its truth, we too should be so convinced.

4. The empty tomb.

As we saw in Lesson Eleven, even unbelievers have been forced to admit that the tomb was empty. The question is "Why was it empty?" We have already examined every possible explanation that unbelievers could come up with, and have seen that none of them are worthy of belief. The only explanation that is reasonable is the one that the apostles and the other witnesses gave — that He arose from the dead.

One fascinating circumstance concerning the empty tomb, is that the arch-enemies of Jesus, the Chief Priests and Pharisees, themselves took action which served greatly to strengthen the evidence in favor of the resurrection.

The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. "Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.' So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until

the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first." "Take a guard," Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard (Matt. 27:62-66).

By this action, the enemies of Jesus were used by God to make the evidence of the empty tomb more convincing for us. They made certain that the body could not be stolen or secretly moved, and thus made certain that the only reasonable explanation of the empty tomb is the resurrection of Jesus by the supernatural power of God.

5. Evidence from secular history and archaeology.

By far the best, the most accurate, and the most credible accounts of the resurrection, are those found in the Bible. No historians were ever more thoroughly tested and found to be true, than were Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, and Peter. But ancient records of the resurrection are not limited to the Bible. Despite the scarcity of writings this old, we do have several documents and inscriptions from first century writers that confirm the historical fact of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Clement of Rome was a Christian writer, born about A.D. 30 and died about A.D. 100. He knew the Apostle Paul and heard him preach. Clement wrote about the suffering and the faithful preaching of the apostles, saying, "For, having received their command, and being thoroughly assured by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, they went abroad, publishing that the kingdom of God was at hand."

Polycarp was a Christian writer, born about A.D. 70 and martyred at Smyrna about A.D. 155. He was a disciple of the Apostle John. He wrote about the humility, patience, sufferings, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. Irenaeus wrote that he had heard Polycarp say that his information about Jesus came from eyewitnesses.

Ignatius, another Christian writer, was martyred at Antioch about A.D. 116. He wrote of the resurrection; he wrote that the first day of the week was called the Lord's Day and kept in commemoration of the resurrection; he wrote that the apostles ate and drank with the risen Lord and touched Him; and he attributed to the resurrection the courage and perseverance of the apostles, saying, "They believed, being convinced both by His flesh and spirit; for this cause they despised death, and were found to be above it."

Josephus (A.D. 37-100) was a Jewish historian. As quoted in Lesson Nine, he wrote about Christ as follows,

... and when Pilate, at the instigation of the chief men among us, had condemned Him to the cross, they who before had conceived an affection for Him did not cease to adhere to Him; for on the third day He appeared to them alive again, the divine prophets having foretold these and many wonderful things concerning Him.

Another piece of non-Christian evidence, an archaeological find, is described by Michael Green, Registrar, London College of Divinity, in his book, *Man Alive*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1967, as follows:

The other piece of pagan evidence is even earlier than Josephus. It is called the Nazareth Inscription, after

the town where it was found. It is an imperial edict, belonging either to the reign of Tiberius (A.D. 14-37) or of Claudius (A.D. 41-54). And it is an invective, backed with heavy sanctions, against meddling around with tombs and graves! It looks very much as if the news of the empty tomb had got back to Rome in a garbled form (Pilate would have had to report: and he would obviously have said that the tomb had been rifled). This edict, it seems, is the imperial reaction.

Further archeological evidence of the resurrection, is also reported by Michael Green in another book, *Runaway World*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1968.

A third fascinating piece of very early evidence must have a mention. It has elicited considerable scholarly discussion, but has had little other publicity. The Israeli Professor Sukenik discovered in 1945 a sealed tomb outside Jerusalem, in a suburb called Talpioth. It had escaped spoliation, and its contents were intact. There were five ossuaries, or bone caskets, in the tomb, and the style of their decoration confirmed the indication of a coin found there that the tomb was closed in approximately A.D. 50. On two of these ossuaries the name of Jesus appears clearly; one reads in Greek, 'Jesus, help', the other, in Aramaic, 'Jesus, let him arise'. The theological implications of these crudely scratched inscriptions, written within twenty years of the crucifixion, are truly remarkable. They point to Jesus as the Lord of life, who can help even when a loved one has died. They point to Jesus as the risen Son of God, who can raise the Christian dead from their graves. It would be difficult to imagine any archeological finds which could more clearly illustrate the burning faith of the early church in the Jesus whom many of them had known personally as a historical figure walking the streets of Palestine a few years previously.

In addition to these confirmations from secular

history and from archaeology, it should be noted that no writer or historian of the time, Christian or pagan, recorded any evidence contrary to the resurrection.

6. The Church's existence and practices.

The Christian Church can be traced back to the time of Christ. It began suddenly, shortly after His death, and grew rapidly. It grew in spite of powerful opposition and brutal suppression. The fundamental conviction and message of the Church was that Jesus is the Son of God and is risen from the dead. What motivated these people? Where did they get this message? What caused many of them to change completely their way of life? What caused them to deny themselves and place Jesus first in all that they did? Certainly it was not a dead Jewish rabbi. Without the resurrection none of this could be explained. It would be an effect without a cause.

Furthermore, the new Church met for worship on the first day of the week. They did this because that was their great day – the day Jesus arose from the tomb. Remember these first Christians were Jews, and the Jewish day of rest and worship, going back for many centuries, was the seventh day of the week, because that was the day God rested after finishing the creation. What could have motivated a momentous change such as this? Few tasks are more difficult than changing a deeply ingrained religious practice, and it is hard to imagine a practice more deeply ingrained than the Jewish Sabbath. This was possible only because these people were absolutely certain of the resurrection.

But that is not all. The new Church practiced two very important rites – baptism and communion –

both of which point clearly to the resurrection. Baptism in water pictured the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life (Rom. 6:3-4).

The communion bread and wine pictured the broken body and shed blood of Jesus, yet, instead of being observed with sorrow and weeping, it was shared joyfully with the living Lord. What transformed the sorrow of the Last Supper and the anguish of the Cross into the joy of Communion? Nothing less than the sure knowledge that, because of the resurrection, the cross represented not a defeat, but an eternal victory.

Independence Day is observed in the United States every fourth of July as the anniversary of the adoption by the Continental Congress of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. The day was first observed in Boston in 1783, and soon spread to other cities and states until it became a national holiday.

Suppose, back in 1783, the city fathers of Boston had declared a holiday to commemorate the Declaration of Independence, when, in fact, there had been no Declaration of Independence. Of course, the holiday would not have been honored because most people alive would have known it was based on a lie. Or suppose, that in 1876, it was declared that the observance of the holiday would be continued as it had been for the past one hundred years, when, in

fact, it had never been observed before. Again, the holiday would not have been honored because most people alive would know that it had not been observed before.

But, since the celebration of Independence Day began when many people were alive who knew that the Declaration of Independence actually happened, and since that celebration has continued every year since then, the fact that we observe Independence Day today is proof that the Declaration of Independence did happen.

Baptism, communion, and Sunday worship are monuments to Christ and His resurrection from the dead. They began with the Church back when many people were alive who had known Jesus and knew the truth of His resurrection from the dead. For nearly 20 centuries, Christians have continued to observe these sacred rites, and they stand today as living proof that Jesus is the Son of God and is risen from the dead. Thus, their continued observance today is proof that Christ did arise from the grave.

7. The internal evidence of the resurrection accounts.

Each of the four Gospels gives an account of that first Easter Sunday when Jesus arose from the tomb. When we first read these accounts it appears they are in hopeless contradiction. Matthew says it was Mary Magdalene and the other Mary who went out to the tomb. Mark says it was Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome. Luke says it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them, and John mentions only Mary Magdalene. Furthermore, they all mention different people to whom Jesus appeared on that day.

Does this mean that these are false reports, made-up by dishonest men to deceive us? On the contrary, this is good evidence that these are truthful accounts, because people who conspire to testify to a falsehood rehearse carefully to avoid contradictions. False testimony appears on the surface to be in harmony, but discrepancies appear when you dig deeper. True accounts may appear on the surface to be contradictory, but are found to be in harmony when you dig deeper.

Such is the case with these Gospel accounts. With further study, the apparent contradictions disappear. For example, all four accounts are in harmony with the following sequence of events: Very early a group of women, including Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Salome, and Joanna set out for the tomb. Meanwhile two angels are sent; there is an earthquake and one angel rolls back the stone and sits upon it. The soldiers faint and then revive and flee into the city. The women arrive and find the tomb opened; without waiting, Mary Magdalene, assuming someone has taken the Lord's body, runs back to the city to tell Peter and John. The other women enter the tomb and see the body is gone. The two angels appear to them and tell them of the resurrection. The women then leave to take the news to the disciples. Peter and John run to the tomb with Mary Magdalene following. Peter and John enter the tomb, see the grave clothes, and then return to the city, but Mary Magdalene remains at the tomb weeping, and Jesus makes His first appearance to her. Jesus next appears to the other women who are on their way to find the disciples. Jesus appears to Peter; He appears to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus; and then appears to a

group of disciples including all of the Eleven except Thomas.

Each of the four Gospel writers simply wrote what he had seen and heard or had learned from witnesses and what the Spirit directed. Had it been their purpose to perpetrate a fraud, they would have been concerned about any apparent contradictions. But since they were concerned only with telling the truth, they did not worry about what others were writing.

Another sure mark of the truth, which we find in the Gospel accounts of the resurrection, are the numerous details of the very type that false accounts would be careful to avoid. For example, it is related of the Lord's appearances to His followers, that at first they did not recognize Him. A false story would never have been made up this way, because it is obvious that this would support an argument that the disciples were mistaken and didn't see Jesus at all. Why did the Gospel writers tell it this way? Because their purpose was simply to tell what happened, and that is the way it happened.

The Gospel accounts tell us that Jesus did not appear to any of His enemies, only to His friends. If these had been written by forgers some two or three centuries after the fact, as has been claimed, they would surely have sought to bolster their case by having Jesus appear to the Chief Priests or Pilate or other witnesses who could not have been accused of prejudice in the Church's behalf. Why does the Bible tell us that He appeared only to His followers? Simply because that is the way it happened.

According to the Bible, the risen Christ only appeared occasionally to His followers over a period of forty days. Surely a forger would have bolstered his

case by having Jesus stay with them the whole time. But that isn't the way it happened, so that is not the way the Gospel writers recorded it. When Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, He told her, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father." Down through the centuries, Christians have wondered just what Jesus meant by this. No forger would have included such a statement without any attempt to explain its meaning. As with all these details, the Gospel writers did not worry about the effect, but simply about telling the truth.

Still another mark of the truth of the Gospel accounts, are the numerous "true to life" details that a forger would not have thought of. John outrunning Peter to the tomb, but Peter going in first; John recognizing Jesus from the boat, but Peter jumping in and swimming to shore; the head cloth lying by itself; the two men returning from Emmaus at night; Mary Magdalene asserting that she would carry the body away; the angel instructing the women to tell the disciples "and Peter." All these are evidence of eyewitness accounts that were truthfully reported.

As Dr. R.A. Torrey once wrote, sometimes in a court of law, the story a witness tells is so artless, so straightforward, so natural, and there is such an entire absence of any attempt at coloring or effect, that his testimony bears weight independently of anything we may know of the character or previous history of the witness. As we listen to his story, we say to ourselves, "This man is telling the truth." The weight of this kind of evidence is greatly increased and reaches practical certainty when we have several independent witnesses of this sort, all bearing testimony to the same essential facts, but with varieties of detail, one omit-

ting what another tells, and the third unconsciously reconciling apparent discrepancies between the two. This is the precise case with the four Gospel narratives of the resurrection of Christ. The Gospel writers do not seem to have reflected at all upon the meaning or bearing of many of the facts which they relate. They simply tell right out what they saw in all simplicity and straight forwardness, leaving the philosophizing to others.

8. The resurrection was a fulfillment of prophecy.

The fact that the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ were foretold in prophecy, is evidence that it all happened according to God's plan, and that His supernatural power was involved, and thus that the resurrection did happen. That these great events did happen according to the scriptures is affirmed by Paul.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures (I Cor. 15:3-4).

In Lesson Ten we discussed the detailed descriptions of Christ's suffering and death written by the prophet Isaiah (Isa.53) and by King David (Ps.22). King David also foretold the resurrection, a thousand years before it happened:

Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay (Psa. 16:9-10).

In his great sermon on the day of Pentecost, Peter

emphasized the importance of this prophecy. Because the Holy Spirit had caused David to write this, it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Jesus.

But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. David said about him: "I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will live in hope, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.' Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact (Acts 2:24-32).

Isaiah, after describing the suffering and death of Jesus in amazing detail, also foretold His return to life:

After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities (Isa. 53:11).

During His earthly ministry, Jesus repeatedly warned His followers of His coming death and resurrection:

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and

THE RESURRECTION, PART TWO

teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life (Matt. 16:21).

In fact, Christ's prediction of His resurrection was well known, even to His enemies:

The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. "Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again' " (Matt. 27:62-63).

It has been claimed that the resurrection of Christ was a human invention, dreamed up by His followers in order to salvage the movement after their Leader's unexpected death. But the undeniable fact that the resurrection was prophesied hundreds of years before it happened, and the fact that Jesus openly and repeatedly predicted the resurrection, are proof that it was not a human invention, but was a vital part of God's eternal plan. Truly, as Peter said, it was impossible for death to keep its hold on Him. Truly, Christ is risen!

Study Questions

1. What evidence do we have that the witnesses of the resurrection were truthful?
2. What effect did the resurrection have on the lives and conduct of Jesus' followers?
3. Why is the fact that many of the enemies of Jesus became Christians proof of the resurrection?
4. What did the chief priests and Pharisees do that strengthened the evidence of the empty tomb?
5. What reason did Ignatius give for the apostles' fearless attitude toward death?

6. What is the significance of the recent archeological find of a tomb near Jerusalem?

7. Why is the rapid growth of the early Christian Church strong evidence for the resurrection?

8. Why are Sunday worship, baptism, and communion evidence for the resurrection?

9. Why are the apparent contradictions in the four Gospel accounts of the resurrection, actually evidence for the resurrection?

10. Why are the prophecies of the resurrection proof that it was not a human invention?