

# CHRIST'S BODILY RESURRECTION

by D.W. Cloud

“The tomb was empty; and the foes of Christ were unable to deny it” (Ernest Kevan, *The Resurrection of Christ*, 1961, p. 14).

“I know pretty well what evidence is; and I tell you, such evidence as that for the resurrection has never been broken down yet” (Lord Lyndhurst or John Singleton Copley, Attorney General of Great Britain, Lord Chancellor of England, High Steward of the University of Cambridge, original source probably from Theodore Martin, *A Life of Lord Lyndhurst*).

“Let it simply be said that we know more about the details of the hours immediately before and the actual death of Jesus, in and near Jerusalem, than we know about the death of any other one man in all the ancient world” (Wilbur Smith, *Therefore Stand*, p. 360).

“Non-miraculous explanations of what happened at the empty tomb have to face a cruel choice: either they have to rewrite the evidence in order to suit themselves or they have to accept the fact that they are not consistent with the present evidence. The only hypothesis that fits the evidence is that Jesus was really resurrected. Could the Man who predicted His death and resurrection, only to have it come to pass exactly as He had said, be anything but God?” (Winfred Corduan, *No Doubt about It: The Case for Christianity*, p. 227).

## Introduction

1. The Bible says there are “many infallible proofs” of Christ’s resurrection (Acts 1:3). In fact, it is one of the best documented events of ancient history. Bible-believing Christianity is not BLIND RELIGIOUS FAITH!

2. Jesus and the Bible and Christianity rise or fall on Christ's resurrection!

The Bible's accounts of Jesus claim to be historical, eyewitness accounts (Luke 1:1-4; 2 Peter 1:15-16; 1 John 1:3). If the accounts are not historically accurate, then they can rightly be rejected.

Christ staked His authority on the resurrection (at least seven times He said He would die and rise from the dead -- Matthew 16:11; 17:9, 22-23; 20:18-19; 26:32; Luke 9:22-27; John 2:18-22).

Paul said that the Christian faith depends on Christ's resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:14-17).

### **Three great evidences for the resurrection of Christ:**

#### **1. The character of the Gospel accounts**

The Gospel accounts themselves give every evidence that they were written by eyewitnesses who believed what they wrote and who were speaking the truth without embellishment and myth-making. There is no hint of fiction, myth, or deceit.

Consider the details of the accounts.

“John's Gospel is characterized throughout by the personal touch; it has all the marks of the evidence not only of an eyewitness, but of a careful observer ... The running of the disciples, the order of their arrival at the sepulchre and their entry, the fact that John first stopped down and looking through the low doorway saw the linen clothes lying, while Peter, more bold, was the first to enter ... the description of the position of the linen clothes and the napkin ... this can surely be nothing else than the description of one who actually saw, upon whose memory the scene is still impressed, to whom the sight of the empty grave and the relinquished

grave-clothes was a critical point in faith and life” (E. Day, *On the Evidence of the Resurrection*, pp. 16-17).

Consider the candor of the accounts. When someone invents a religion, he glorifies its leaders, but the Gospels paint the founders of Christianity as very weak (e.g., Peter having to be rebuked by Christ as Satan--Mat. 16:23; Peter denying Christ thrice; the disciples fleeing and hiding; Thomas and others doubting Christ even after He appears to them).

Further, if men had made up the accounts of Christ’s resurrection, they would *not* have said that the women were the first to believe. In that day women had no authority in the eyes of society. They could not even testify in a court of law, except in rare occasions (J.P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, p. 168). The account of the women believing first is not something that would have been written unless it actually happened and unless the writers were committed wholeheartedly to recording the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. This striking candor is powerful evidence that the Gospels are true, unvarnished accounts.

## **2. The empty tomb**

That the tomb of Jesus was empty is proven by two facts:

First, the Jewish leaders had to invent the lie that the disciples had stolen His body (Mat. 28:11-15). If Jesus’ body was located anywhere, they would have searched it out and produced it.

Second, just weeks after the crucifixion, only a stones’ throw from the empty tomb itself, Peter publicly proclaimed the resurrection and 3,000 believed, followed a little later by “a great company of priests” and “a great number” more (Acts 2:37-42; 6:7; 1:21). If anyone could have produced the body or come up with a reasonable account for it being missing, they would have!

The following are theories that have been proposed to account for the empty tomb:

“The field of biblical criticism resembles a vast graveyard filled with the skeletons of discarded theories devised by highly imaginative skeptics. ... One might think that so many repeated failures ... would lead the opposition to abandon their efforts, but not so. They continue unabated, and men are still wracking their brains, working their imaginations overtime, and parading a vast amount of erudition and ingenuity in their, to us, futile attempts to destroy the impregnable rock of historical evidence on which the Christian faith in the resurrection stands proud and unshaken” (John Lilly).

Some say Jesus just swooned and recovered in the cool of the tomb

This is refuted by the fact that the professional soldiers had ascertained that he was dead (John 19:31-34).

Further, how could a near-dead man remove the heavy stone and convince his followers that he had risen from the dead? Consider what Christ endured: severe beating; nails piercing His hands and feet; spear piercing His side (John 19:34); great loss of blood and bodily fluids.

Some say that the women went to the wrong tomb

In *The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ*, Kirsopp Lake claimed that the women were confused in the dark and went to the wrong tomb. Not only is this contrary to what the Gospel accounts say, it makes no sense whatsoever. If the women had gone to the wrong tomb and reported that Christ had risen based on that mistake, the matter would soon have been cleared up. First, the disciples were not stupid. They would not have given their lives for the testimony of a few geographically-challenged women. They would have checked out the story thoroughly and would have come to the truth of the matter.

Further, the Jewish leaders would have made certain that the matter was cleared up by producing the right tomb, and the body!

### Some say the disciples were hallucinating

If they were hallucinating, it was a mass hallucination, because Paul said that the resurrected Christ was seen by above 500 people at once (1 Cor. 15:5-8)!

When Paul wrote the epistle of 1 Corinthians, most of these eyewitnesses were still alive. Paul was not writing about things that had happened long ago.

Josh McDowell observes: “Let’s take the more than 500 witnesses who saw Jesus alive after His death and burial, and place them in a courtroom. Do you realize that if each of those 500 people were to testify for only six minutes, including cross-examination, you would have an amazing 50 hours of firsthand testimony? Add to this the testimony of many other eyewitnesses and you would well have the largest and most lopsided trial in history” (“Evidence for the Resurrection”).

It has been rightly said that “this theory makes Christ a fraud and his disciples near idiots.”

“Somehow the rugged fisherman Peter and his brother Andrew, the characteristically doubting Thomas, the seasoned and not too sensitive tax gatherer, Matthew, the rather dull Philip, intensely loyal but a little slow of apprehension, do not fit easily into the conditions required for an absolutely unshakable collective hallucination. And if it is not both collective and unshakable it is of no use to us. The terrors and the persecutions these men ultimately had to face and did face unflinchingly, do not admit of a halfhearted adhesion secretly honeycombed with doubt” (Morison).

Some say they saw someone disguised as Jesus (Hugh Schonfield, *The Passover Plot*)

This is too ridiculous to waste time refuting. Having spent three years with Jesus, wouldn't the disciples know Him? They might be confused for a moment or even a short while, but eventually they would recognize that the individual was an impostor.

### Some say the body was stolen

This was the story invented by the Jewish leaders. They paid the guards to lie and to say that the disciples stole Jesus' body (Mat. 28:11-15). This is an impossible story.

First, if they were asleep how could they know what happened to the body, or if stolen, who stole it?

Second, sleeping on guard duty brought the death penalty in that day. That one of the guards might fall asleep is perhaps conceivable, but that all of them would fall asleep is not. As Richard Dickinson observes: "That without an exception all should have fallen asleep when they were stationed there for so extraordinary a purpose, to see that that body was not stolen, lest it should be said that the crucified Jesus had risen from the dead, may be possible; but it is not credible: especially when it is considered that these guards were subjected to the severest discipline in the world. It was death for a Roman sentinel to sleep on his post. Yet these guards were not executed; nor were they deemed culpable even by the rulers, woefully chagrined and exasperated as they must have been by the failure of their plan for securing the body" (*The Resurrection of Jesus Christ Historically and Logically Viewed*, 1865).

(That the guard was a Roman guard is clear from the passage. The Greek word for "watch" in Matthew 27:65, *koustodia*, is the word for a Roman sentry. A.T. Robertson says that "ye have a watch" is present imperative and refers to "a guard of Roman soldiers, not mere temple police." In Matthew 28:12 they are called "soldiers," which would not be the case if

they were temple police. Further, Matthew 28:14 indicates that they were Roman guards, because they were afraid of what Pilate would do if he heard of the matter.)

Third, by their actions it is evident that the Jewish leaders didn't believe their own story. They didn't call the disciples to examine them when they found out the body was missing, and they made no effort to find the body. John Chrysostom, in the fourth century, observed that the story of the stealing of the body actually establishes the resurrection. "For this is the language of men confessing, that the body was not there. When therefore they confess the body was not there, but the stealing is shown to be false and incredible--by their watching by it, and by the seals, and by the timidity of the disciples--the proof of the resurrection even hence appears incontrovertible" (*The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, p. 264).

Further, who could have stolen Christ's body?

*The Jews certainly didn't steal it*, because they wanted to prove that He did not rise.

*The Roman government certainly didn't steal it*, because the government sealed the tomb and had no reason to steal it and thus allow the Christians to say He had risen.

*Joseph of Arimathea certainly didn't steal it*. He was Jesus' disciple and had no motive to steal His body. Further, he couldn't have stolen it alone, because he couldn't have removed the great stone, so he would have needed help, and doubtless someone would have reported the deed sooner or later.

*The disciples certainly didn't steal it*. First, they were hiding in fear for their lives. Second, they had no opportunity, because the tomb was sealed and guarded. Third, they had no leader who could have envisioned and

accomplished such a thing. Their leader, Peter, was a broken man at that point and had given up his discipleship to Jesus to go back to fishing (John 21:3). Fourth, they would have been fools to have suffered and died for a lie! The disciples didn't suffer for what others had seen, such as Muslims who die for the Koran, but they died for what they had professedly seen themselves (Acts 4:18-20). Fifth, it would have been impossible for such a large number of people to have kept the secret hidden. "Even if it had been possible, and the disciples the men to do it, the subsequent history of Christianity would have been different. Sooner or later, someone who knew the facts would have been unable to keep them hidden" (Frank Morison, *Who Moved the Stone?*). Sixth, a great moral religion like we find in the New Testament, which exalts truth and honesty, could not have been founded upon a despicable deception.

"It is the complete failure of anyone to produce the remains, or to point to any tomb, official or otherwise, in which they were said to lie, and this ultimately destroys every theory based on the human removal of the body" (Morison).

We must not forget exactly what the early Christians suffered for their testimony that Christ had risen from the dead.

They were denounced by family and friends, hated by and considered the enemies of society, tortured, kept imprisoned for years in dark, rat-infested cells. Their property confiscated; they were crucified, burned alive, torn apart by wild beasts, chopped into pieces, roasted on racks; their tongues were torn out and their eyes put out. They also had to endure the torture and death of beloved family members.

"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 evidences 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 then their testimony was not true, there was no possible motive for its fabrication” (Simon Greenleaf, *An Examination of the Testimony of the Four Evangelists by the Rules of Evidence Administered in the Courts of Justice*, 1846).

### Some say the disciples made up the accounts

This would mean that they all suffered and died on the basis of a lie, which makes no sense. It is one thing to found a religion or cult when you will benefit from it materially, but it is quite another thing to invent one if you will only suffer for it.

Further, as we have already noted, it is obvious from their very nature that the Gospel accounts were not made up.

### Some say Jesus rose spiritually but not bodily

Jesus specifically refuted this by eating and letting the disciples touch Him (Luke 24:37-43).

Frank Morison set out to discredit the Gospel accounts of Christ’s resurrection, and instead he concluded that the only thing that can satisfy the historical facts is that Jesus actually did rise from the dead.

We agree and we find it much easier to believe in Christ's resurrection, than to believe in the attempts to discredit it.

“The simple faith of the Christian who believes in the resurrection is nothing compared to the credulity of the skeptic who will accept the wildest and most improbable romances rather than admit the plain witness of historical certainties. The difficulties of belief may be great; the absurdities of unbelief are greater” (George Hanson, *The Resurrection and the Life*).

The reason why there are so many theories that attempt to discredit the Gospel accounts is that men are willfully blind sinners who do not want to submit to God (2 Corinthians 4:4).

Further, the unbelief of “Christian preachers” such as Kirsopp Lake was prophesied in Scripture (2 Peter 2:1-2).

### **3. The changed lives**

“Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where THE DISCIPLES WERE ASSEMBLED FOR FEAR OF THE JEWS, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you” (John 20:19).

Something dramatic happened to turn the disciples from fear to courage.

#### Consider the testimony of Peter

After denying Christ the night of His arrest, Peter was a defeated man. He determined to go back to fishing (John 21:3). A few weeks later, the man who had denounced Christ before a handful of Jews on the eve of Christ's crucifixion, preached boldly to a multitude of them on the day of Pentecost and 3,000 were converted. What could have wrought such a

mighty change other than that he had become convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead?

### Consider the testimony of James, Jesus' half brother

Jesus' brothers were opposed to Him during His lifetime (John 7:7), but after Jesus rose from the dead, James believed and became a leader in the church at Jerusalem (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Gal. 1:19). James' conversion was prompted by Christ's resurrection appearance to him (1 Cor. 15:7).

### Consider the testimony of Paul

What converted Paul from being a bitter enemy of Christ to being one of His most zealous followers? From an earthly perspective, Paul had absolutely nothing to gain and everything to lose by following Christ. He admitted that he had "profited in the Jews' religion above many" (Gal. 1:14). Paul testified that it was the resurrected Christ who convinced him (Acts 22:3-21).

As a zealous Pharisee and leader of Christ's enemies among the Jews, Paul was in a position to know all about the story about the disciples stealing the body. Had he thought that Jesus' dead body actually lay hidden somewhere, he would never have believed in the resurrection. It is obvious that even he did not give any credence to this story.

### Consider the testimony of lawyers and judges

*Thomas Sherlock* wasn't a lawyer but he was trained in law. He was a Cambridge-educated theologian in the Church of England, and he wrote a classic book that examines the evidence for the resurrection of Christ from a courtroom perspective. It is titled *The Trial of the Witnesses of the Resurrection of Jesus* (1729). Sherlock wrote the book to rebut Deist

Thomas Woolston's skeptical book *Discourses of the Miracles of Jesus Christ*.

“Within the framework of a courtroom proceeding in which the Apostles are on trial for faking the Resurrection, Sherlock pits Woolston's own arguments against his own powerful defense of the ‘accused.’ Applying the logic and reason of the law to the Bible, this is a provocative and original interpretation of the story of Jesus' life and death” (Bookkilden.no).

Simon Greenleaf, Royall Professor of Law at Harvard University, was one of the most celebrated legal minds of America. He is the author of the three-volume *A Treatise on the Law of Evidence*, which is “still considered the greatest single authority on evidence in the entire literature on legal procedure” (Wilbur Smith, *Therefore Stand*, 1972, p. 463). After a thorough examination, Greenleaf concluded that Jesus did rise from the dead. In 1846 he published *An Examination of the Testimony of the Four Evangelists by the Rules of Evidence Administered in the Courts of Justice*.

“All that Christianity asks of men is, that they would be consistent with themselves; that they would treat its evidences as they treat the evidence of other things; and that they would try and judge its actors and witnesses, as they deal with their fellow men, when testifying to human affairs and actions, in human tribunals. Let the witnesses [to the Resurrection] be compared with themselves, with each other, and with surrounding facts and circumstances; and let their testimony be sifted, as if it were given in a court of justice, on the side of the adverse party, the witness being subjected to a rigorous cross-examination. The result, it is confidently believed, will be an undoubting conviction of their integrity, ability and truth” (*An Examination of the Testimony of the Four Evangelists*).

*Lord Darling*, former Chief Justice of England, said:

“The crux of the problem of whether Jesus was, or was not, what He proclaimed Himself to be, must surely depend upon the truth or otherwise of the resurrection. On that greatest point we are not merely asked to have

faith. In its favour as living truth there exists such overwhelming evidence, positive and negative, factual and circumstantial, that no intelligent jury in the world could fail to bring in a verdict that the resurrection story is truth” (cited from Michael Green, *Man Alive*, 1969, p. 54).

*Lord Caldecote*, Lord Chief Justice of England, testified that,

“an overwhelming case for the Resurrection could be made merely as a matter of strict evidence. ... [Christ’s] Resurrection has led me as often as I have tried to examine the evidence to believe it as a fact beyond dispute” (cited by Irwin Linton, *A Lawyer Examines the Bible*, p. xxiv, xxv).

*Edmund Hatch Bennett* was dean of the Boston University School of Law for more than 20 years, as well as a judge in the Massachusetts Probate Court. In 1899 he wrote *The Four Gospels from a Lawyer’s Standpoint*. He begins by saying:

“... this paper is the result of an effort, on my own part, to ascertain whether or not, independently of the exercise of a devout Christian faith, independently of any appeal to our religious sentiments, the truth of the story told in the four Gospels could be satisfactorily established by a mere reasoning process, and by applying the same principles and the same tests to the Gospel narratives that we observe in determining the truth or falsity of any other documents, or any other historical accounts.”

Bennett makes the following argument:

“These stories began to be published not long after the alleged crucifixion. Many persons were then living who could have easily refuted the statements of the evangelists had they been untrue. The enemies of Jesus were still alive and active. The Scribe and the Pharisee, the Priest and the Levite, still smarted under his repeated denunciations. They had the disposition, the opportunity, and the incentive to deny the story of the miraculous birth, the spotless life, the marvelous works, the sublime death, the astounding resurrection, and the glorious ascension of our Lord, had the then published description of these events been totally fabulous. But so far as we know, no

person then living ever uttered a protest against these accounts, and for two thousand years they have been received and treated as veritable history.”

*Irwin Linton*, a Washington D.C. lawyer who argued cases before the Supreme Court, published *A Lawyer Examines the Bible: An introduction to Christian Evidences* in 1929.

“Lawyers regularly sift through testimonies in order to separate falsehood from truth. A unique feature of this book is its weighing of testimonies in support of the Bible. Linton points out that lawyers ask witnesses seemingly trivial details because, while the main outlines of false testimony can be agreed upon in advance, the innumerable trifling details cannot. Apparent contradictions between the Resurrection accounts prove the absence of collusion, and the fact that they can be resolved adds credibility to the testimonies. So, far from being fatal, the apparent contradictions between the Gospel accounts of the Resurrection turn out to be support for the authenticity of the event. On this, Linton cites Paley: ‘The existence of the difficulty proves the want or absence of that caution which usually accomplishes the consciousness of fraud; and the solution proves that it is not the collusion of fortuitous propositions which we have to deal with, but that a thread of truth winds through the whole, which preserved every circumstance in its place’” (*A Lawyer Examines the Bible*, 1949 edition, p. 75).

*J.N.D. Anderson* (Sir Norman Anderson) is dean of the faculty of law in the University of London and director of the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies. He wrote *Christianity the Witness of History: A Lawyer’s Approach* (1969).

“The most radical theory of all is to dismiss the whole story as deliberate invention. But there is scarcely a single intelligent critic who would go so far. The adverse evidence is overwhelming. Think, first, of the number of witnesses. Paul tells us that in 56 A.D. the majority of some 500 original witnesses were still alive; and we must remember that most of the early records went out, as it were, with the collective authority of the primitive Church. Think, too, of the character of the witnesses. Not only did they give the world the highest moral and ethical teaching it has ever known, but they

lived it out, as even their opponents were forced to admit. Again, think of the phenomenal change which these men underwent because of this alleged invention. Is it conceivable that a deliberate lie would change a company of cowards into heroes, and inspire them to a life of sacrifice, often ending only in martyrdom? Surely psychology teaches that nothing makes a man more prone to cowardice than a lie which preys on his conscience? Is it likely, moreover, that even in disillusionment or agony not a single one of these conspirators would ever have divulged the secret?" (Anderson, "The Evidence for the Resurrection," London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1950).

*Albert Roper* was a prominent Virginia attorney, a graduate of the University of Virginia law school, and one-time mayor of Norfolk. He made a thorough investigation into the evidence for the resurrection of Christ, asking the question, "Can any intelligent person accept the resurrection story?" At the end of his research he concluded, "Can any intelligent person deny the weight of this evidence?" He wrote the book *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?*

Consider the testimony of those who have been converted trying to refute the Bible

The following are a few examples:

Gilbert West (poet): *Observations on the History and Evidences of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (1747)

George Lyttleton (English statesman): *Observations on the Conversion and Apostleship of St. Paul* (1747)

William Ramsay (Scottish archaeologist): *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (1915)

Frank Morison (lawyer): *Who Moved the Stone?* (1930)

Josh McDowell: *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (1972)

Lee Strobel (journalist for *Chicago Tribune*): *The Case for Christ* (1988)

(For the testimony of these men see the report "Men Who Were Converted Trying to Disprove the Bible" at the Way of Life web site.)

## **In this age of science, how is it possible to believe in a bodily resurrection from the dead; isn't this biologically impossible?**

Without doubt the resurrection from the dead is biologically impossible from the standpoint of what is natural and observable, but Christ's resurrection wasn't natural; it was a divine miracle. The Creator is not limited by or subject to natural things that He Himself created.

## **If the evidence is so strong, why doesn't everyone believe?**

1. Many have never heard the evidence. I have had the privilege of preaching on the resurrection of Christ to hundreds of university students in Nepal who had never before heard anything about it.
2. Many are willfully blind; they refuse to believe in miracles ("willfully ignorant," 2 Pet. 3:5).
3. Many do not want to submit to God. Lee Strobel tells of an acquaintance who agreed that the evidence for Christ's resurrection is overwhelming but he refused to believe, saying, "I don't want a new master."
4. Many *have* believed. The Bible is the most popular book in world. It is expected that by 2020 at least a portion of it will be available in every language, which testifies mightily to its popularity and to the fact that multitudes do believe that Christ rose from the dead.

## **Conclusion**

1. The bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is at the heart of the gospel (1 Cor. 15:1-8), and this is the gospel we are to preach to every person (Mark 16:15).



2. All men will be resurrected, either to eternal life or eternal punishment (John 5:28-29; Acts 24:15). An individual's destiny depends on his relationship with Jesus Christ. Man's existence is eternal, and he cannot escape the reality of this fact by not believing.

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