**The Resurrection Really Happened**

Matt. 28:1-20 April 12, 2020

Dr. Jeff Iorg and Mr. Eric Espinoza

Good morning and happy Easter! Thank you for joining us on this special day as we worship our risen Lord. It is a high honor to preach the gospel as we celebrate the central reality of our faith – the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Introduction

Have you heard of The Shed at Dulwich? For a while in 2017, it was the hottest restaurant in London, England. It was ranked number one on Trip Advisor and was the hardest reservation in town to get. Calls and emails poured in begging to be squeezed in for birthday dinners, romantic dates, and other celebrations. All were ignored or told to call back as they were booked solid for more than half a year. Except, that was a lie. The reason no one could score a table was because the business was bogus. It was an experiment in algorithm manipulation and buzz creation by freelance writer Oobah Butler. To turn his south London garden shed into a fake fine dining experience, he bought a burner phone and a domain name, created a website with pictures of delicious-looking dishes made with ingredients you would not want to eat (paint, bleach tablets, shaving cream, the heel of his foot), and drummed up interest by providing minimum details. He made his imaginary restaurant an appointment-only establishment, lying about it being full all the time and thus never booking any reservations. For six months, The Shed at Dulwich was the most popular restaurant that did not exist.

Hoaxes can be funny – like this one – or cruel and harmful when people actually lose time, money, their health, or even their lives as a result. Some people include the resurrection as one such hoax. They claim it never happened and that those who believe it did are harming themselves and others. This raises a fair question – did the resurrection really happen?

You are likely here today because you believe it did. But why? And, how do we answer the objections by those who claim the resurrection never happened? Let’s consider these questions and some answers today from Matt. 28:1-20 (read text).

Objections to the resurrection

The first objection to the resurrection is found in the text—the disciples stole Jesus’ body (Matt. 28:13). The Jewish leaders told the Roman guards to lie about the resurrection and claim his disciples had taken the body while they were sleeping. This was risky for the guards. In the Roman army, when a soldier was assigned to guard someone the penalty for failure was clear. If a soldier lost a prisoner, the soldier took their place and served their sentence. If he lost a very important person, he might pay with his life. It was a motivating penalty that caused Roman guards to be vigilant. The Jewish authorities promised to protect the guards and keep them from bearing responsibility for losing the body of Jesus. So, they lied and offered the first bogus attempt to explain away the resurrection.

This plan was flawed in several ways. First, sleeping men cannot give eyewitness testimony of what happened while they were asleep. The priests and the elders told the soldiers to say, “His disciples came during the night and stole him while we were sleeping” (Matt. 28:13). How ridiculous would this testimony be: “Well sir, I was asleep and I clearly saw Jesus’ disciples taking his body from the tomb.” Second, sleeping men would admit their dereliction of duty by confessing they were asleep. A better lie would be, “Well sir, while we were deceived by a false attack, Jesus’ disciples took his body from the tomb.” Admitting they were asleep would have compounded their problem and made their lie more laughable.

In reality, these guards were not asleep. The Bible indicates they were in shock, stunned like “dead men” (Matt. 28:4) by the earthquake, stone being moved, and an angel appearing. They definitely knew what happened. Jesus was resurrected! They had seen it first hand, along with the miraculous events that preceded the resurrection. These guards were so sure of what had happened the Jewish leaders could not risk allowing them to tell their story. So, the first lies were told to conceal the reality of the resurrection. While this was the first attempt to deny the resurrection, others followed shortly and have persisted until today.

The second objection to the resurrection was the Roman or Jewish authorities stole Jesus’ body. This actually makes more sense, since they could have dismissed the soldiers guarding the tomb on some pretext and then taken the body. Subsequent actions by these authorities demonstrate that is not what happened.

If the authorities had taken Jesus’ body, they could also have produced it at any time to debunk the myth of Jesus’ resurrection. This would have stopped the Christian movement dead in its tracks. The first Christians were adamant the resurrection had happened. Their faith, beliefs, and message rested on their confident reality of the resurrection. If the Roman or Jewish leaders would have wanted to stop the spread of Christianity, all they had to do was produce Jesus’ body. Yet, they could not do this because they did not have the body. They would also have had to coerce the guards to lie for them – thus putting their lives at risk. This is further proof this lie had no foundation.

A third objection to the resurrection was the disciples looked in the wrong tomb. This stretches the bounds of common sense. First, it is inconceivable Joseph of Arimathea would have forgotten the location of the tomb he owned and donated as the burial place of Jesus (Matt. 27:57-61). Most people who purchase a burial plot know where it is and do not forget those details easily. Second, people remember the location where a loved one is buried. While ancient cemeteries are lost, that process takes a few years, not a few days. We know where our loved ones are buried. For example, I can take you to my mother’s grave in Texas. I do not need directions or a map to get there. Third, the authorities who posted the guards certainly knew the location of the tomb. Once again, all they had to do was go to the right tomb and produce the body to debunk the resurrection. Of course, they could not do this because the correct tomb was known all along. Trying to explain away the resurrection by claiming the disciples went to the wrong tomb just three days after Jesus was buried is ludicrous. When someone we love is buried, we know the location of the grave. When there is a public record of the burial, governing authorities also know the location. There was no confusion about the true tomb of Jesus.

A fourth objection to the resurrection was Jesus did not really die – he only swooned. This means he lost consciousness and may have appeared to be dead, but did not really die. This theory agrees Jesus exited the grave, but was only resuscitated instead of resurrected. The first problem with this theory is it ignores the skill the Romans had at killing a person slowly by crucifixion. The Romans knew how to crucify a person, allowing them to die a torturous death by suffocation. They were not known for botching this method of the death penalty. The second problem is what Jesus accomplished in his resurrected body after he came back from the dead. If Jesus was only resuscitated, he would have been limited by the injuries to his badly damaged body. He would have been barely able to move after being beaten, scourged, crucified, and surviving without food or water for three days. Yet, when Jesus exited the tomb, he performed supernatural feats – only possible by a resurrected person, not a resuscitated one. My friends, Jesus really died! He was crucified. He did not swoon. He died a complete and horrible death – only to be resurrected, not resuscitated, three days later.

Finally, the fifth objection to the resurrection is mass hallucination by his followers. They wanted him to be alive so badly they imagined the resurrection. This is still believed by many people today who claim Jesus is only “resurrected in the hearts of his followers.” Jesus’ resurrection was a historical reality, not a mass spiritual delusion. The resurrected Jesus was seen by more than 500 people (1 Cor. 15:6) and reported in secular writings of the same time period. It is possible to get a few people to believe and testify to a lie. It is impossible to get hundreds of people to do it. The reason so many people shared the same testimony is they were telling the truth. Another reason this theory is bogus is the selfless service and martyrdom of early Christians. People will sacrifice and even die for what they believe. They will not make those same choices for a lie – or even an inconsequential truth. The resurrection really happened and people were willing to die to share that message rather than retract their statements about it.

These are some of the primary objections to the resurrection, raised throughout history and still postulated today. None of them are substantial enough to support a decision to reject the reality of the resurrection.

Evidence for the resurrection

This leads us to the next part of the message – evidence for the resurrection. How do we establish something as historical fact? Whether it be Washington crossing the Delaware or the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, historians determine the actuality of events based on the reliability of witnesses and documents who attest to those events. To validate the resurrection, we must consider the reliability of the New Testament as a historical document.

If we were in a seminary classroom, we could spend a great deal of time on this aspect of the evidence. Since this is a church service, let’s consider this issue in summary form. The historicity of the New Testament, based on the eyewitness accounts of its creators, is beyond serious debate. Secular and religious scholars generally recognize the New Testament as one of the best preserved and most clearly substantiated documents from the first century. We are confident our Bible today is an accurate record of Jesus’ resurrection and the early Christian movement that resulted from it.

From our New Testament as well as other contemporary documents, William Lane Craig, a respected Christian philosopher, argues there are four historical facts which – depending on how you appraise them – determine whether or not you believe in the resurrection. These facts include, first, Jesus was buried; second, his tomb was later found empty; third, there are multiple accounts of individuals who saw Jesus after his death; and fourth, his disciples zealously spread his message after his death. What best accounts for these facts? While we could spend a great deal addressing each of these, let’s focus on the final one – the changed lives of those who claimed to have witnessed the resurrected Christ.

The first people who discovered the resurrection were women who went to the tomb – Mary, Mary Magdalene, and some other unnamed women. An angel informed them Jesus was alive again and they were to tell the other disciples the good news. On the way to do that, Jesus appeared to them and gave them a further directive to tell the disciples to go to Galilee. The Bible says the women had “great joy” and when they later saw Jesus, “took hold of his feet and worshipped him” (Matt. 28:8-9). Jesus changed them forever.

This detail, women were the first and most important eyewitnesses, would have been a reluctant fact for the gospel writers to convey. In those days, Jewish society considered a woman’s testimony worthless. But all four gospels report this detail of the story. If the writers were creating a strong, fictional narrative – they would not have included women as the first and primary witnesses. This further underscores the authenticity of the story. The writers were reporting facts, not creating a fanciful tale to convince people of a lie.

The next people mentioned were the disciples – likely meaning the eleven left over in the original group of those Jesus chose to work most closely with him. When they met up with Jesus in Galilee, he gave them instructions which we commonly call The Great Commission. Jesus told them, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:18-20). We know from their subsequent activities, how much this commission changed them. Every one of these eleven men devoted their lives to telling the story of the resurrected Jesus. They had no doubt Jesus had been resurrected. They had seen him. They had heard his voice. They were transformed by the encounter, so profoundly they devoted the rest of their lives to telling his story.

Beyond today’s text, there are many other characters who believed in resurrection and were transformed by its message. Men like Paul and Stephen changed history by their sacrificial service. Their stories are told in the Bible (see Acts) as examples of how the resurrected Jesus could change the lives of people who followed him. Paul later influenced men like Timothy and Titus who became next-generation church leaders. While they had not seen the resurrected Jesus, the testimony of others about him was so profound men like this also became Jesus’ followers. Thus, the power of the resurrection impacted not only the first generation of Christians, but a second generation as well. Now, in our era, many of us have also been changed by the resurrected Jesus as the latest “next-generation” of Christians to follow our Lord.

Early Christians lived zealously for the mission inspired by the resurrection. They did this in two ways. First, they gave sacrificial service to other believers and their communities because Jesus had told them to live this way. They followed his instructions because his resurrection validated everything he had taught. It was a huge “seal of approval” God placed on Jesus. This was recognized by Paul when he later wrote, “If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation is in vain, and so is your faith” (1 Cor. 15:14). The resurrection validated God’s redemptive plans. Paul added, “And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins” (1 Cor. 15:17). The resurrection confirmed eternal life was possible. The Bible says, “And if Christ has not been raised…those, then, who have fallen asleep in Christ have also perished. If we have put our hope in Christ for this life only, we should be pitied more than anyone” (1 Cor. 15:14, 18-19). In all these ways, the resurrection determines the way early believers lived. It also determined how many of them died.

The fact many early believers were willing to die for their faith is further evidence for the resurrection. What would motivate a person like Stephen to endure stoning? He believed in the resurrected Jesus and, in the moment of his death, was comforted by Jesus. Stephen shouted, “Look, I see the heavens opened and the son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:56). Their belief in the resurrection explains why so many believers were willing to die for their faith. They knew they were preaching a life-changing message. They had experienced a life-transforming gospel. They also knew the resurrection assured them of eternal life. If they lived, they could testify about the resurrection. If they died, they knew they would be resurrected to eternal life. People do not die to preserve a myth or foster a lie. They will only die for truth so life-changing it is worth dying for. The willingness of early Christians to embrace martyrdom is further evidence of the reality of the resurrection.

The roles of proof and faith

In light of all this data, a legitimate question is “how much proof do you need to believe in the resurrection?” A story in John 11, about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, helps answer this question (Jn. 11:17-27). Would seeing a dead man come back to life be enough for you to believe in Jesus? Many people believed when they saw Lazarus alive (John 11:45), “but some” refused to believe and stirred up strife with the Pharisees (John 11:46). The Pharisees did not doubt these witnesses, instead they began to plot and ask themselves, “What are we going to do since this man is doing many signs?” (John 11:47). The Pharisees saw the miracles Jesus was doing and those who reported to the Pharisees saw these same wonders. Yet, they refused to believe and follow Jesus. In the face of undeniable evidence – a dead man walking – people still refused to believe in Jesus.

Are you like the Pharisees and their followers? Are you demanding proof of the resurrection, yet when it is presented, still refusing to believe? How much “proof” do you need? Would seeing the empty tomb be enough? How about meeting a terrifying angel who rolled away the stone? Or would you need to see the resurrected Jesus himself? In the last chapter of Matthew, people experienced all of these things and yet had very different responses. The empty tomb and the soldiers’ report were not enough for the high-priests, the angel rolling away the tomb did not convince the soldiers, and even for some of the disciples seeing the resurrected Jesus did not remove all of their doubts – but they worshipped him anyway (Matt. 28:17).

Some of you have absolute certainty in your mind and heart of Christ’s resurrection, but others may still doubt it really happened. The characters in the biblical account in Matthew teach us two important principles: factual data does not, by itself, produce faith in Jesus and having some doubt, by itself, does not preclude worshipping the resurrected Jesus.

On another occasion Jesus addressed the issue of how doubt is often mixed with faith. In the story where Peter walked on water, Jesus rescued Peter when he began to sink and asked, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Matt. 14:13). While Jesus words were a corrective, they also teach us, even if we have doubts from time to time, that does not mean our faith is not real. Remember, before Peter’s doubts caused him to sink, his faith motivated him to get out of the boat! Jesus often speaks of people who have “little faith” (Matt. 6:30, 8:26, 14:31, 16:8). Having “little faith” is not a badge of honor, but neither does it disqualify someone from being a true Jesus follower.

Your response to the resurrection

As you consider your response to the reality of the resurrection today, make these three commitments.

First, affirm the resurrection really happened. We are not here to celebrate an ancient religious myth, urban legend, or centuries old hoax. We are here today because we affirm Jesus was really raised from the dead. We accept the historical reality of the resurrection. We are sure Jesus was raised from the dead as we are Nero lived in the first century and Roosevelt in the last century. Eyewitness accounts and accurate historical records validate true events in the past. The resurrection of Jesus meets all reasonable criteria for being a demonstrable, historic event. With intellectual honesty and academic integrity, we declare the resurrection really happened. We affirm it as the most amazing moment in human history.

Second, allow the power of the resurrection to change you. The resurrection interprets and validates the life and death of Jesus. He can change your life today. This Easter can be more than a day to dress nicely, go to church with our friends or family, and have a big meal. Jesus can change you. If you will confess your sins, commit yourself to Jesus as Lord, and believe that God raised him from the dead, he promises to give you the gift of salvation (Rom. 10:9). If you will turn from living for yourself, and determine to live for him, he will change your life today and forever (2 Cor. 5:17). If you are afraid of dying, Jesus will resolve those fears (Rom. 6:5; John 11:25-26). He promises to extend his resurrection power to you and give you eternal life with him (Rom. 8:11).

Third, accept your role in the mission inspired by the resurrection. You are living for something and you will die for something. Will it be a larger house, nicer car, or more extensive wardrobe? Will you live for your job, your career, or your achievements? Will you live for your friends or even your family? All of these may be important in the proper context, but none of them are worth giving your life – and certainly not sacrificing your life.

The only message worth that kind of sacrifice is the message of the resurrection. When you focus on sharing that message, you give other people the means to meaningful life now and eternal life when they die. When your life is devoted to the resurrection, you will obey all Jesus taught about every area of life. When you recognize the resurrection as the most important moment in human history, it also becomes the focal point of your personal history. You will sacrifice your time, energy, influence, money, and talents for the message that really matters – the resurrection of Jesus.

Just after his resurrection, Jesus gave his followers instructions we now call The Great Commission. Those instructions are still applicable today. If you have believed the fantastic news about the resurrection, you are commissioned on mission with Jesus and your fellow believers. Today, give your life to that great cause. The resurrection makes it possible. The Resurrected Jesus mandates we obey him.

May God give us the grace to believe in, live in light of, and tell others about the resurrection of Jesus Christ!

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