

The Fourth Great Truth About Jesus

He Rose from the Dead

*The fourth of several studies by Major General Sir Laurence New
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In part 1 we rehearsed the evidence for Jesus' immaculate conception; in part 2 we saw the evidence for His deity. In part 3 we saw that these qualities made it possible for Jesus to die in our place. Now in part 4 we examine the evidence for and against the central truth of what happened on the third day.

In the 1950s and 60s there was a British TV personality called Professor Joad. He was erudite, eloquent, and sharp, but he was uncertain of his faith. He was often featured on panel games and appeared regularly on the very popular program "Any Questions." One day he was challenged: "If you could ask any question of anyone alive or dead, who and what would it be?" After a moment's thought he answered, "The person would be Jesus Christ and the question would be, **did you or did you not rise from the dead?**"

Of course he was right; it is the most important question anyone can ask. Why? Because if Jesus did not rise from the dead our whole faith is built on a lie; the apostles were liars; saints down the ages have died for a lie; Jesus did not conquer sin and death; our hopes of eternal life are false; our church is based on a lie.

Paul stressed in the fifteenth chapter of his first letter to the church in Corinth that the truth of the resurrection was central to our faith, "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless... your faith is futile" (1 Corinthians 15:14, 17).

Since the resurrection is so central a truth we need to look carefully at four pieces of evidence:

1. The body had gone. There can be no doubt that it had gone. The guards were bribed to say that it had been stolen. But there were only two groups of suspects with a credible motive—His enemies and His friends. If His enemies had stolen the body they would have paraded it, to dispose once and for all of His claim that He would rise on the third day. But they didn't because they couldn't. His friends would have had an impossible task stealing His body. At the express wish of the Chief Priest and the Pharisees, Pilate had ordered that they make the tomb as secure as possible. The guard had been doubled. The stone had been put firmly in place and sealed. Moreover the comments of Jesus' followers "**You killed Him, but God raised Him and we are witnesses**" are not the words of men trying to conceal a fundamental lie.

Other attempts to explain the absence of the body have been:

- **The wrong Tomb.** Perhaps Mary could have gone to the wrong tomb in the early morning light. But not Peter and John and certainly not Joseph of Arimathea whose tomb it was!
- **The Swoon Theory.** The idea here is that Jesus didn't actually die on the cross but swooned. In the cool of the tomb he regained consciousness, took off his spice-laden bindings, moved the stone and emerged! This theory would never carry any weight with a jury. The Romans

were very good at putting men to death. When the sword was thrust into Jesus' side warm red blood would have flowed if He had still been alive; but it didn't. Instead blood and water flowed—clot and serum—a sure indication that the heart had ceased to function. Besides, when they took his body to lay it in the tomb they would have noticed His breathing, however shallow. Finally, Jesus had been beaten within an inch of His life even before being crucified. No jury could be persuaded that He could have recovered his strength in the tomb sufficient to free Himself from a hundredweight of spices and bindings, move the sealed stone and have emerged without being seen.

The second piece of evidence, which we tend to overlook, bears this out.

2. The Body had gone but the grave clothes had not. When Peter and John reached the tomb they looked in. Peter entered first and saw the binding and strips of linen. But then John also went inside. "He saw [the grave clothes] and believed" (John 20:8). What was so special about the grave clothes that helped John to dismiss his doubts about the resurrection? John records it in detail. The grave clothes were undisturbed; the head linen being separate. It was the custom to bind the body and the head separately leaving the neck uncovered. Both sets of linen had simply collapsed. Jesus had not had to unwind Himself or been unwound as had Lazarus in his resuscitation; Jesus' body had been transmuted through the linen. It was not resuscitation it was resurrection. John saw this in an instant and believed the only possible explanation—Jesus had risen from the dead as He had said He would.

3. The third piece of evidence is that Jesus appeared on at least nine occasions. First He appeared to Mary Magdalene at the entrance to the tomb, then to the two disciples on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They were so excited and convinced that they walked the ten miles uphill to Jerusalem in the dark to tell the disciples. He then appeared to the ten disciples in the upper room and some days later to the eleven (including Thomas this time). He then appeared to about five hundred in the Tiberias region and to James, His brother, who had had an understandably difficult time believing that his step brother was the Messiah. Next He appeared to Peter and his fellow fishermen on the shore when they returned from an abortive night's fishing. He appeared to many of His disciples at the time of His ascension; and finally He appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus.

These alleged appearances face us with a further credibility test. Were they plain lies? If they were inventions one has to say that they bore the mark of a diabolically clever con trick. The language used to describe them is artless, the accounts have the ring of truth; all the accounts have a consistency. If they were lies, than we can not trust anything that any of the apostles said or wrote. The doubters have not claimed that they were lies, but that they were genuine wish-fulfilling hallucinations. An expert witness would testify to a jury that group hallucinations are effectively unheard of and never involve any physical manifestation, such as inviting Thomas to place his hands in Jesus' side, nor of cooking and eating fish on the Tiberias shore. As for "wish-fulfilment" the disciples were so far from expecting Jesus to rise from the dead that they refused at first to believe the clearest evidence that He had risen. No, a jury would not for a moment accept the hallucination theory and nor should we. This leaves only one other possibility—that they were true. The fourth and final piece of evidence bears this out.

4. Those who met with the Risen Lord were changed. Four examples will suffice. It was the fact of the resurrection that changed Peter from a cringing insistence that he had ever met the Lord into

a bold and inspired public speaker who led thousands to a vibrant faith. It was the resurrected Lord who changed James, His brother, from persistent agnostic into a powerful leader of the early church. It was the resurrection that caused doubting Thomas to proclaim “My Lord and My God!” and to become one of the most effective apostles. It was the risen Lord who changed Saul, a passionate enemy of the “Followers of the Way” into Paul, the greatest advocate of the faith which he had tried so urgently to destroy. Finally it was the resurrection that changed the Sabbath into Sunday.

We have now reviewed four great truths about Jesus, His immaculate conception, His deity, that He died in our place, and that He really did raise from the dead.