

Easter 2019: Why We Believe in Jesus' Resurrection
Jeff Kennedy / April 21, 2019

Intro Story: Welcome to Resurrection Sunday at Christ Community Church. When I was about 8-9 years old I had a profound experience with God. I went to a little southern Baptist church in Virginia and our pastor's name was Preacher Scott. And one Sunday night he preached the Gospel of Jesus. I remember his eyes full with tears as he pleaded with us. I remember his balding head glistening with sweat as he did his best to tell us about God's Son—slain and resurrected; our sin; heaven and hell; and our need for His salvation.

I left that night thinking, "How could a guy come back from the dead. I also could not shake the certainty that I was a sinner, that God was just and righteous in judging me, and that I needed—desperately needed his salvation through Christ—this slain and risen King.

So that night, I did what the preacher said to do. I confessed all the sin, the anger, the hatred, the racism, the lust of my heart. I confessed every sin through hot, blistering tears. I exchanged my sorrow for his joy. I exchanged my burden for his freedom. I exchanged my death in sin—for his resurrection life. And that is possible because Jesus was slain on the cross taking the full weight of God's just demands—and he was raised to life never to die again. And all who believe are saved.

Why? If Jesus has not risen from the dead, then we should not trust anything he said about God, about us, about the afterlife, about eternity.

But if Jesus has risen indeed—If Jesus from Nazareth has been raised by the Father to defeat our ultimate enemy—the permanency of death—then we should take Jesus with urgency when he speaks about the nature of the Father, himself, the Spirit, human beings, and eternity.

All four Gospel accounts give us a record of his death and resurrection. What I am going to lay out for you this morning is a brief case for the resurrection of Jesus based on what Historians call an "Inference to the Best Explanation." **Inference to the best explanation is an approach which seeks to assess available sources and evidence, and then to assemble plausible explanations (Live Options), then to confer "best explanation" status on that which best explains all or most of the data.**

Illus. My sprinklers. We have been in a very rainy spring season here, and the sprinkler guy showed up on Friday morning to turn my sprinkler system on for my lawn. I set the dial and timer to go off at about 6am.

Two explanatory options: (1) My sprinklers deployed and wet the grass, (2) It rained. But I notice that only my sidewalk, my grass, and a little area out in the street in front of my house. None of my neighbors lawns were soaking wet, none of their sidewalks was wet. I concluded that my sprinklers deploying was the best explanation of the known facts regarding the historical event of my sprinklers deploying.

This is the kind of reasoning we're appealing to in the case of the early church's belief in the resurrection event.

Today we're going to look at the evidence for Jesus' resurrection, and we're going to ask the question: So What Difference Does it Make?

Acronym: RISEN

1. The Reluctance/Reticence of the Jews to Believe in a Crucified Messiah

Why is this evidence so important?

Because Roman Crucifixion was the way the Romans permanently stigmatized you and your family.

Now, most of us are familiar with the fact of Roman crucifixion in history. The cross, in its various forms, is one of the best attested torture devices of the ancient world. It can be found in just about every ancient culture in the world, including: (1) Ancient Assyrians (2) Thracians, (3) India, (4) Celts, (5) Germans, (6) Britons, (7) Greeks and (8) Persians.

But the Romans did not just use it as psychological warfare or public execution. The Romans created a culture in which it was a public shame to be associated with Crucifixion. To have been the family member of a crucified rebel, for example, was akin to having the memory of you and your family erased.

This was particularly true for the Jewish people. In an effort to brand them as a people, both the Greeks under Alexander and Antiochus, and the Romans under Varus and Titus—crucified thousands of Jews publicly.

Jesus shocked his followers by challenging them to “take up their cross” and follow Him (Matt 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23). A statement at the time was incomprehensible and unthinkable to the average Jew. The Romans forced crucifixion victims to carry their own patibulum in a processional to a roadside tree, or a hillside stake—there they hung the cross beam on the pylon or tree just a few feet off the ground.

But the whole thing is an unseemly scandal to the Greco-Romans, and a barrier for belief to the Jews. Paul put it this way in **1 Cor. 1:22-24** “Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God”

Jesus' resurrection is the best explanation for the sudden belief and bold preaching of the Apostles that the Messiah had been shamefully executed as a common criminal on a Roman high cross.

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Resurrection was for the whole nation at the end of the world: Not the Messiah. No Jew would make up a religion like this.

The second letter in our RISEN Acronym is “I”

2. Initial Eye-witnesses of the Empty Tomb

We have early testimony of Jesus' empty tomb and the initial witnesses are unlikely to be thought of as credible, and initially reluctant to believe their own eyes.

- **Let's start with the Women:** not considered reliable witnesses in the first century. Yet, all four Gospel accounts agree that Jesus first appeared to women.
 - **Luke 24:1-8** On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴ While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. ⁵ In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? ⁶ He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ⁷ ‘The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’” ⁸ Then they remembered his words.
 - All of the Gospels record this detail. Why is this significant. Because if you are a first century or second century scribe who is trying to concoct a story about a risen god who was shamefully crucified as a common rebel—you don't insert women into the story. Not in this world you don't. Women's testimony was considered invalid in a court of law. Even in their own divorce proceedings, a woman's testimony could be invalidated simply by the man contradicting her story. If you're making up a story about a risen rabbi, you don't contrive a detail like this and then make it so critical to your fabricated story. And then you surely don't repeat it often enough that all four authorized accounts include this detail. This strikes the ancient reader/hearer as historically reliable.
- **Early disbelief, despite having seen for themselves.**
 - **Jn. 20:25-29** But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” ²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” ²⁸ Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”
²⁹ Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”
- **Extended eye-witness testimony**
 - **1 Cor. 15:6-7** “After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though

some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.”

The third letter in our RISEN Acronym is “S”

3. Success of the Early Church Against all odds, Christianity experienced a meteoric rise in popularity and growth in the Roman Empire.

- Cults that Rome destroyed and left hardly any evidence for.
 - **Bacchanals**—by 186 BC, the Romans had eliminated the worshipers of Baccha who was thought to be a god. Rome crucified or beheaded most of them and issued a decree that anyone joining their ranks would be so executed. It stopped that religion cold.
 - **Druids**—by 54 AD Rome had put an end to their occultic sorcery.
 - **Judaism**—After the destruction of the Jewish temple in AD 70, Judaism went into a period of about 400 years of recession. Rome effectively wiped out the practice of Judaism from the end of the first century to the beginning of the 5th.
 - **Mithraism** and the worship of **Dionysus**
- **Emperor Decian** who attempted to eradicate the Christian faith from the face of the earth and when he was done there were twice as many Christians.

What best accounts for their success against all odds?

We believe that what best accounts for the unstoppable, meteoric rise of the Christian church is that men and women dead in the transgressions were really experiencing resurrection life of the Son of God.

There is no reason for the Christian faith to exist at all. No Jew would invent a religion that involved a crucified, shamed, cursed Messiah who personally rose from the dead as the divine atoning sacrifice for our sins. *There is no reason for the Christian Faith to exist in the first place. And it is just unbelievable that Rome, an empire who was exceedingly efficient at destroying illegal new religions* would not have been able to wipe Christianity off the map.

Yet, here we are.

The fourth letter in our RISEN Acronym is “E”

4. Early Creeds Some skeptics have attempted to explain Christianity away by imagining that the New Testament stories were created later and superimposed on the time of Jesus. They imagine that Jesus was a simple country Jew—an illiterate yokel from backwater Nazareth who could not have possibly said and done the things he did as recorded in the Gospels. The whole story, for these skeptics, has been corrupted by later accretions of tradition.

- Early creeds: 1 Cor. 15:3-5 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas,^[b] and then to the Twelve.
- Verses 3-8 are not Pauline. Grammatical scholars have concluded that those verses are borrowed and structured orally—that is, it's the kind of thing you'd say or sing, not the kind of thing you'd compose in written form. Scholars in unanimity agree that this belief goes all the way back to Paul's fact-finding mission (Gal. 1), after his conversion when he went back to Jerusalem and interviewed Peter, James, and John to confirm that his Gospel was the same as theirs. This creed he got from them, which puts the date of the creed to no less than a few short years from the crucifixion event itself. Not enough time for myth to creep into the story, and not nearly enough time for legendary development.

The resurrection of Jesus is the best explanation for the early creedal commitments of Jesus' followers.

The fifth letter in our RISEN Acronym is “N”

5. No Good Competing Explanations

- **Stolen body:** Who has incentive to steal it? The disciples don't even initially believe it even after Jesus appears to them.
- **Misplaced body:** Scholars are nearly unanimous in their belief that Joseph of Arimathea was a historical figure and Jesus was indeed buried in his tomb. Joseph knew where his property was, they weren't confused about where Jesus had been buried.
- **Legendary Myth:** Again, we ruled that out because the tradition does go back to the mid first century, was believed and preached by the earliest community of believers.
- **Intentional Deception:** The 12 were in a position to falsify the story, should persecution become far too difficult to bear. People die all the time for what they believe to be true but what is actually a lie, such as suicide bombers. But few if any who are in a position to falsify a religious belief would die for what they know to be a lie.

Reticence/Reluctance to embrace a crucified messiah by early Jews or Romans.

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Initial Eye-witness testimony preserved in the Bible, and passed on to the earliest generation of Christians.

Successful rise of the early church—its explosive growth on the foundation of Jesus' resurrection must be explained.

Early Creedal statements of Paul which scholars can now trace all the way back to the earliest Christian community.

One last evidence (not in my acronym)—the experience of resurrection life and hope in the individual believer.

Resurrection hope: **2 Cor. 1:8-9** ⁸ We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. ⁹ Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.

- We don't hope in our technology
- We don't hope in our medicine
- We don't hope in a long and productive
- We don't hope in fleeting and vaporous wealth, material possessions, or accumulating things.

Our hope, Paul says, in the midst of our suffering, in the midst of our pain, in the midst of persecution and loss—our ultimate hope is in the resurrection of Jesus. And nothing, NOTHING else.

Resurrection life: Jn 11: "I am the resurrection and the life"

- Our hope is in his life and his life alone. Nothing else.

In 1993 a story appeared in the NY Times about Ms. Adele Garbourey The neighbors of Adele Garbourey in her working class New York neighborhood always tried to pitch in. They mowed her lawn, collected her mail, sliding it through her mail slot, and some ambitious youngsters even got together and repainted her entire home. The place was the picture of a well-kept, well-manicured home. But her neighbors discovered that Adele Garbourey had been lying dead in her kitchen for four years. All the while they took good care of the outside, there was a dead person all the while on the inside.

You may look like you have it all together, as a religious person.

You may think that you have hope or life in whatever pursuit of pleasure

But there is no life in all that. It's just a well-kept house with a dead person on the inside.

The Resurrection is our hope because you and I can be made alive in resurrection power this morning. A dead heart, dead in our sins—is breathed on by the Holy Spirit and is made alive again.

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And here's how.