

## Easter 2023: Resurrection Sunday

Jeff Kennedy / April 9, 2023

**Opening Scripture: 1 Peter 1:3** “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead”

**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 teary eyes, his balding head glistening with sweat, his red face 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 about that message.** I knew 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 traded my death in sin—for his resurrection life. And that is possible because Jesus was slain on the cross taking the punishment that would have been mine—and he was raised to life never to die again.

### 1. Why does the resurrection of Jesus matter?

**Because if Jesus hasn’t been raised...**

- Then the world is corrupt and the arc of history bends toward injustice and it will always be that way. It has no hope for reform.
- If Jesus has not been raised, then nations will always go to war, fighting over territory, killing each other with millions dead. And the nations of the world will never know true and lasting peace.
- If Jesus has not been raised, then the earth will eventually spin itself out, running out of energy, as our sun dies a heat death in the coldness and darkness of space. The earth itself has an expiration date.
- If Jesus has not risen from the dead, then men die and they always will. We go into the grave and remain there—no hope for eternity, no prospect of life beyond this one. And our faith has been a waste of time.

**But if Jesus has risen from the dead...**

- Then the death, destruction, discord, the spiritual and moral darkness in the world will someday be no more. The King of Kings and Lord of lords will return to claim his world and all those who have believed in him.
- If Jesus has risen, then every person who names Christ as Lord and Savior will be ushered into the high beams of heaven’s glory when they die, awaiting new resurrected bodies when Christ returns, and a new heaven and new earth will replace the

old. 1 Thess 4:15–18 “For we say this to you by a word from the Lord: We who are still alive at the Lord’s coming will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. <sup>16</sup> For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the archangel’s voice, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. <sup>17</sup> Then we who are still alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. <sup>18</sup> Therefore encourage one another with these words.”

***Jesus’ resurrection matters because if he has not been raised, then death reigns, and it always will.***

## 2. What evidence is there for the resurrection of Jesus?

**So what evidence is there for the disciples' claim that Jesus rose from the dead?** I want to give five facts that are indisputable and then we'll talk about the implications of those facts.

**Acronym: RISEN** to help us remember the key facts surrounding Jesus' resurrection.

The first letter in our acronym is "R" for reluctance...

### (1) The Reluctance/Reticence of the Jews to Believe in a Crucified Messiah

**Why is this evidence so important?**

The cross, in its various forms, is one of the best-attested devices of execution in the ancient world. It can be found in many ancient cultures including: **(1) Assyria (2) Thrace, (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.

**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 unintelligible and unthinkable to the average Jew. The Jews knew Moses' law in Dt. 21:23ff. that anyone guilty of a capital crime whose body hangs on a tree—that person is cursed; cut off from God and the people. Is. 53: "Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. <sup>5</sup> But he was **pierced** for our transgressions, he was **crushed** for our iniquities; the **punishment** that brought us peace was on him, and by his **wounds**, we are healed...After he has suffered, 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." This was written about the Messiah 700 years before Jesus was born.

**The whole thing is an outlandish, lewd scandal to the Greco-Romans and the Jews.** Paul put it this way in **1 Cor. 1:22–24** "Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

This message was a psychological barrier to anyone in the first century who heard it.

**Jesus' resurrection is the best explanation for the sudden belief** and the bold proclamation that the Messiah had been shamefully executed as a common criminal on a Roman cross and God raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead.

The second letter in our RISEN Acronym is “I”

## (2) Initial Eye-witnesses of the Empty Tomb.

There were lots of eyewitnesses, about 500 (according to Paul) in all. 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.” But I want to focus on the initial eyewitnesses, the first ones. Why?

- **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.
- **The Disciples: They were *idiotés* (meaning not educated) and incredulous (they were predisposed to not believe).** Now Jesus has appeared to the 12 and Thomas is not there.
  - **John 20:25–29** But he [Thomas] 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, (*shalom aleichum*) “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.”<sup>28</sup> Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”<sup>29</sup> Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

**The resurrection of Jesus is the best explanation for Jesus first appearing to women and to doubting disciples.**

**The third letter in our RISEN Acronym is “S”**

**(3) Success of the Early Church.** Big deal. There has been lots of successful religions over the centuries. Look at the enduring nature of Judaism. Or the global success of Islam. How can this point be an evidence for Jesus’ resurrection? Because their success was against all odds. 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. ***When we look at their comparative disadvantages as a sect of Judaism that lacked prestige, political power, influence or military might—and Rome’s disposition to rid the empire of these kinds of unauthorized religious cults—then their success cries out for an explanation.***

• **Here are a few examples of cults that Rome destroyed or effectively suppressed.**

- **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 AD 60 Rome had put an end to their occultic sorcery in England. So you have the obliteration of cults such as the worshipers of Bacchus, Cybele, Isis, Sarapis, and the list just goes on.
- **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 5<sup>th</sup>.

• **Nero persecuted Christians to death in gruesome fashion.** Who on earth would want to share that fate? **Eminent Roman historian Tom Holland** states, that the Roman populace would have viewed the message of a crucified god to be scandalous, obscene, grotesque. While Nero was obsessed with immortality by building monuments and golden effigies in his honor while burning Christians as human torches and feeding them to wild beasts in the Colloseum for amusement—he could not have imagined the wild success of the Christian message: Holland states that while Nero’s efforts and works (and all those of the Caesar’s) would crumble into dust, Jesus’ legacy would live on and thrive, taking the world by storm.

• **Emperors Decius and Diocletian** attempted to eradicate the Christian faith from the face of the earth. But, there were more Christians when those campaigns were over than when they started.

**What best accounts for their success against all odds?** They have no ***social standing***, no ***political clout***, no ***military power***—in a world where all of these things really, really matter. How could a cult like this have gotten off the ground, much less flourished?

***There is no reason for the Christian faith to exist at all.***

**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 generations of Christians reading these miraculous ideas back into the gospels.

- 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, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup> and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.**
- Verses 3-7 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 five 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 Plausible Alternative Explanations

Now, what I have laid out for you is what we call “An inference to the best explanation.” An **Inference to the best explanation** seeks to assess available sources and evidence, and then to assemble plausible explanations (*live options*), then confer “best explanation” status on the interpretation that best accounts for all or most of the data.

**Illus. Now suppose you are on an epic hike on one of the many trails within driving distance here.** You hike all day, get to your site and set up camp with your friends. You fish in the stream for your dinner, eat and tell stories by the campfire and then turn in. Lights out. You hear something rustling around the camp at night, but you are so tired that you sleep through it. The next morning you and your friends awaken to mayhem in the camp. (1) You see trash scattered everywhere. (2) fresh tracks with large claws. (3) a pile of scat (you look closer to see undigested nuts and fish bones) and (4) recent claw marks on the trees.

Now, you have to make a deduction from the available evidence, and you have to choose between what is **possible** and what is **plausible**.

- Now, it’s possible that one of your friends is pranking you and got out of his/her tent to set up the whole elaborate rouse to make you think you’ve been visited by a bear.
- It’s also possible that it was a pack of wolves or some other animal.
- It’s possible that you are hallucinating—you just got some bad fish or picked and ate from the wrong berry tree the previous night.

But the assembled evidence also has a context—you’re in “bear country.” So, you reject *possible* explanations for the most *plausible* one. A bear was in your camp.

Skeptics have also attempted to explain Jesus’ empty tomb and the Disciples’ early belief in Christ’s resurrection.

- **Stolen body hypothesis:** Who has the 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. Also, the first recorded accusation from the Sanhedrin was that the disciples stole the body. But no one contested the empty tomb.
- **Legendary tradition:** Again, we ruled that out because the tradition does go back to the mid-first century, and 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 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.

**The competing explanations are possible, but given the established facts and background information, folks, we're in bear country here**—the most plausible explanation is that Jesus is not here he has risen!

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

**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.

**No** good competing explanations that best account for all the facts.

One last evidence (not in my acronym).

### **3. How can I experience resurrection life?**

**You can experience Jesus as your risen hope and your life right now.**

Resurrection hope: Romans 6:4–5 “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. <sup>5</sup> For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.”

So if it's true, and it's the only way the world, humanity, and you personally can be saved—what's stopping from trusting in Jesus today as your Savior and Lord?

**Confess your sins and repent of your unbelief.**

**Believe in your heart and confess with your mouth that Christ died for your sins and God has raised Jesus from the dead.**