

THE EVIDENCE FOR EASTER

Everything hinges on Easter. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then he is a liar and a fraud, not the Son of God he claimed to be. However, if Jesus is alive, then he is worthy of our faith, trust, love, and worship. But how can we know the truth? Is there any proof to back up the claim of the Christian faith that Jesus rose from the dead?

Here is what we know historically, based on multiple sources from history—In the middle of the 1st century, a growing number of men and women started to believe that Jesus of Nazareth, a prominent spiritual teacher, rose from the dead. Therefore, either this event actually happened (the claim of Christians) or we must come up with another plausible explanation other than Jesus' resurrection from the dead (the claim of non-Christians).

If you are skeptical of the Christian claim recorded in the four biblical biographies of Jesus (books called Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), consider the following evidence:

(1) The Old Testament predicted it.

1,000 years before Easter, a king named David wrote, "You will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay." As the Apostle Peter pointed out just 50 days after the resurrection, "Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day...Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay." Considering the Old Testament also predicted Jesus betrayal, crucifixion (before the cross was even invented!), and burial, we should weigh its claims rather seriously.

(2) The non-Jewish culture scorned it.

Many near-eastern pagan religions believed the human body was an evil prison that needed to be escaped through a spiritual process. Therefore, the idea that the Son of God would come to earth as a human being and then rise again with a human body was insulting. When the Apostle Paul preached in Athens, the Bible says these eastern intellectuals scoffed at the message, "When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered." If the early church was making up a message to gain non-Jewish followers, they wouldn't have chosen a resurrection from the dead.

(3) The Jewish culture was surprised by it.

Most 1st century Jews believed in a resurrection, but only at the Last Day of world history (aka the Judgment Day). This is why one of Jesus' friends, Martha, said of her dead brother, Lazarus, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." In fact, an entire branch of the Jewish religion called the Sadducees didn't even believe in a resurrection at all. If the early church was making up a message to gain a majority of Jewish followers, they wouldn't have chosen a resurrection in the middle of history.

(4) The apostles relied on it.

When the apostles (Jesus' chosen disciples) began to preach within two months of his supposed resurrection, they persuaded the crowds by appealing to the hundreds of witnesses of the Risen Jesus. For example, the Apostle Peter told a crowd at Jerusalem, "You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this." The Apostle Paul wrote a famous letter to the church at Corinth (modern Greece) and listed the numerous witnesses, some of whom were still alive. If Jesus' hadn't appeared to so many people, why would the apostles encourage their audiences to ask the witnesses themselves?

(5) The earliest Christians confessed it.

1 Corinthians 15 is a priceless chapter in the Bible because it records an ancient Christian creed. It begins, “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” Paul wrote this letter in A.D. 55. What is even more intriguing is how Paul says in that same chapter that he had already passed that creed on to the Corinthian church when he visited them years earlier. Paul had received the creed even earlier than his visit to Corinth from other Christians (as opposed to making it up himself). The date keeps getting pushed further and further back, proving that the belief, “Jesus was raised” was circulated not centuries after Jesus’ life (as most myths do), but within a few years of the first Easter.

(6) The women witnessed it.

This may seem insignificant to us, but it wasn’t to the original audience. In the 1st century, due to cultural sexism, women were looked down upon in many ways, one of which was their ability to give reliable testimony. Women weren’t even allowed to be witnesses in a 1st century court of law since, according to many, no one would trust their eye-witness reports. This is why Celsus, a 2nd century unbeliever, mocked the message of Christianity, remarking that all the miracles of Jesus’ death and resurrection were witnessed by “hysterical women”. If the early church was making up a message to persuade the majority of their culture, why would they have made women (and not the male apostles) the first witnesses of the resurrection?

(7) The witnesses died for it.

Consider this—All eleven apostles (Judas, the twelfth apostle, killed himself after betraying Jesus) were tortured for their Christian faith and ten of them were martyred. Although it is true that people die for their religious beliefs frequently in our world, these “martyrs” aren’t eye-witnesses to the events. But the apostles were. In other words, they knew the truth about the resurrection. If they died for their testimony, they would have been dying for a lie they invented! Would you lose your health, wealth, and your very life for a lie you invented? Study the agony of crucifixion, which is how Peter was martyred, and tell me a man would suffer like that for a lie!

(8) The enemies were converted by it.

Some skeptics have suggested that Jesus’ friends claimed he was alive because their minds wanted him so badly to be with them again (like a hallucination). While that theory doesn’t explain the hundreds of witnesses mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15, it also can’t account for the conversion of men like James, Jesus’ brother, and Saul, who later became the apostle Paul. These men both thought Jesus was a fraud/madman and had no reason to preach his resurrection from the dead...unless they actually saw him alive! The mere fact that Paul, one of the most famous Christian preachers in history, was formerly hunting down Christians to kill them (cf. Acts 9 in the Bible) tells us something powerful, even miraculous, changed his mind. Something like...a Savior back from the dead!

It makes you think, doesn’t it? Either a group of 1st century men and women invented a message that would be widely rejected by their culture and get them killed or something supernatural happened on Easter morning.

So, what about you? What will you do next?

If you are interested in learning more big spiritual questions like this one, consider joining Starting Point, a group designed specifically for people like you. Our next Starting Point group kicks off the week of April 7th. Learn more at www.922ministries.com/startingpoint.

Happy Easter! Jesus is risen!
The pastors and staff at St. Peter and The CORE

