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Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?

By Pastor Duane Smets

John Dominic Crossan, he is considered by some to be a scholar, others scholars call him an imposter for his lack of scholarly credibility and method, but you might be familiar with him because the news people and the discovery channel people like to interview him. He is a short little white haired man, who is very nice and he says this about Jesus' resurrection, "The resurrection is a fabricated myth used for religious propaganda, only effective with an audience of unsophisticates and children. "...after the crucifixion Jesus' corpse was probably laid in a shallow grave, barely covered with dirt, and subsequently eaten by wild dogs; the story of Jesus' entombment and resurrection was the result of 'wishful thinking.'"

Paul, the author of about two-thirds of the New Testament was aware of what was at stake if Jesus did not rise from the dead, and Paul agrees with Mr. Crossan that if Jesus did not rise from the dead, Christians are fools. Here is Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, "if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain....(and) we are of all people most to be pitied (1 Cor 15:14,19)." If Jesus did not rise from the dead Christianity is false, not true, it is a wishful myth and those who believe in it are to be pitied for being such fools. And I don't want to be a fool.

According to this passage above a Christian is not one who takes some great leap of faith into some experiential abyss of spirituality where I leave behind my brain. I can believe all I want that I am going to inherit a million dollars from Bill Gates some day, but unless I see some evidence to convince me of it, that is a vain hope and useless to try and build my life counting on that money. So we are going to go through some evidence for the resurrection. The question on the table is "if" it actually happened.

We are going to begin with the biblical evidence, then the circumstantial evidence, and then the historical evidence.

The Biblical Evidence

We start with the biblical evidence because the way this discussion about Jesus' resurrection usually goes when you talk to people about it is that you usually just get an assumption of what the Bible says about it. But very few have actually looked inside to see what the Bible says specifically.

Jesus' Prediction

We've got Jesus who's been around for about thirty years and just laying low, making rocking chairs and tables and houses and knick knacks for old ladies as a carpenter. When he is about thirty years old he starts teaching and preaching and healing people, doing miracles and he does this straight for three years. I'm turning

29 next Sunday, so Jesus would have been just about my same age when he started doing all this stuff. Toward the end of those three years he starts saying on several different occasions that he is going to die and in three days later he will rise from the dead.

Here is one of those occasions. Jesus is in a small village near Caesarea Philippi, which is now the area called Golan Heights on the edge of the border of Israel. He may have been near the Banyas Spring, which is right in that area. He pulls some of his closest followers together and starts asking them some questions about what they think about him. Who people think he is and what he came to do. They start answering and then Jesus says these remarkable words, "(I) must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again (Mark 8:31)."

Astounding words. Prediction that is specific and supernatural and shows Jesus knew who he was and what he planned to do. He wanted to give let his followers know what was going to happen before it did so that they would know he could be trusted, they could trust him. Now, I know you could say, we'll they wrote this after it all happened so how do you know they didn't just make it up that Jesus said this. Maybe, perhaps. But listen to the very next words in Mark after this, Mark 8:32 "And he said this plainly." It is almost as if Mark knew some might think that, so he goes out of his way to emphasis that Jesus really said this.

Jesus Died

Next in the story we look at Jesus' death. This may seem like an obvious point. But many today, especially Muslims, do not believe that Jesus died on the cross. In the Qu'ran in Sura 4:157 it says, " And for claiming that they killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the messenger of GOD. In fact, they never killed him, they never crucified him - they were made to think that they did. All factions who are disputing in this matter are full of doubt concerning this issue. They possess no knowledge; they only conjecture. For certain, they never killed him." And so, the explanation is that Jesus did not die on the cross but merely swooned, he merely passed out for awhile and was resuscitated.

The story of Jesus death...one written by a tax collector, one written by a meal servant/waiter, one written by a primitive medical doctor, and one written by a fisherman. And their story is unanimous. Jesus is taken from a garden where he is seemingly sweating blood, is thrown into a hurried up trial in the night. Is taken out and flogged, which is where a soldier takes a whip with pieces of bone tied up in it and hits a persons back until the flesh is all opened up. They put a crown on his made out thorns from a throne and press it onto his head. In the morning they take him up on a hill, lay him down and drive 5-7 inch spikes through is ankles and wrists into a cross made of wood. And then they stand him up so that he hangs from his wrists and if he needs to breath, he has to push up on the spike in his ankles and pull on the spikes in his wrists to get air into his lungs. This can go on for a long time, so sometime the soldiers would break the person's legs so they couldn't push up anymore and they wouldn't have enough strength in their arms and would just suffocate. They don't end up breaking Jesus legs because it didn't take long for him to die. He had lost so much blood and strength they could see he was dead and to prove it and make sure a soldier takes a spear and jabs it up under his rib cage into his heart. When he does that the gospel writers say they saw blood and water flow out. Jesus was dead.

A modern medical examination looks at these documents written by people who knew nothing about modern medicine and here is what they say. Jesus suffered from hematomas, a condition, where under a great deal of stress one sweats blood. Jesus suffered from respiratory acidosis, which is where one suffocates from not getting oxygen into their lungs. Jesus suffered from hypovolemic shock and cardiac arrest, which is where one loses so much blood that their organs shut down, Jesus heart stopped beating. And Jesus experienced pericardial and pleural effusion, pleural is the fluid around the lungs and pericardial is the blood that flows through hearts, so when the soldier stabbed Jesus, it was clear, he was a real human who was dead.

The Empty Tomb

Next in the biblical story is the empty tomb. Jesus was buried in a tomb. Not everyone was buried in a tomb. You only got a tomb if you had a lot of money and Jesus didn't have any. But a rich man, named Joseph of Arimathea, he was probably a prominent member of society had been following Jesus because it says he did so secretly. When Jesus died, he came out from his secrecy and offered his tomb for Jesus to be buried in because it was the tradition for holy men to be buried in a tomb. A tomb was a big hole cut out of rock in the side of a mountain or hill and there would have been a stone that would have taken at least three or four men to move in front of it.

We'll talk about those who found the tomb empty three days later in a minute. But first note, there is no other historical story found anywhere than that Jesus was buried in a tomb. And if he was buried in tomb then the question is simple. What happened to him? If Jesus did not rise from the dead, where did the body go? When everybody was saying he rose from the dead they could have easily gone to the tomb and proved it and that is probably what the Roman government would have done to squash this new group that was forming, because the Roman government did not like anything that disturbed the peace. The pax Romana, the peace of Rome was their official virtue. But Jesus' dead body has never been found.

So many people were becoming Christians when the disciples started preaching about Jesus having risen from the dead, but no one would have believed them if they all knew Jesus' body was still in the tomb. But it was just the opposite. Everyone was talking about how the tomb was empty. The only explanation anyone ever came up with was that the disciples stole the body. Which is funny if they did, because they were scared for their lives.

After Jesus died his followers were afraid. When Jesus first appeared to them as a group the Bible says they were hiding behind locked doors afraid that the Romans were coming to get them and crucify them next for being part of the Jesus rebellion. Tampering with a dead body was punishable by death, these men would not have had the courage and if they did, why would they all end up giving over their lives to death for a lie. All the disciples were killed (except John) for staked their preaching and their death on the claim that Jesus rose from the dead, why would they do so if they all knew that they really stole the body? Everyone knew the soldiers just said that so they wouldn't get fired or worse. Jesus' dead body has never been found since his crucifixion, only an alive, living, breathing, talking and walking Jesus, who rose up from death and is alive today.

The Eyewitnesses

After the tomb was found empty and Jesus began appearing to people. In the first century, an eyewitness was the strongest evidence a lawyer could bring forth in court. It is still strong today, not as strong as videotape. But they didn't have video camera back then. There weren't these guys you could hire to go film your spouse and see if he or she is cheating on you. They didn't make home videos and happen to catch things on tape to send in for Americas Funniest Videos or wildest car chases. But eyewitnesses were a big deal, the strongest evidence around.

In the Bible there are 15 specific names of people who are recorded as having seeing the risen Jesus, there are 19 independent personal accounts or stories of what happened, and there are several verifications where Jesus appeared to huge crowds of people. One specific time is famous where there were 500 people all in one place who all saw and heard Jesus. Can you imagine 500 witnesses testifying in a court today. And the Bible records these people's names and was written when they were still alive and openly admits, if you don't believe us go ask them, they'll tell you the same thing. This is not conspiracy theory, this is widespread confirmation. This is not one person's spiritual meanderings, like Siddhartha's, this is hundreds of people's authentications. This is not a few individuals hallucinating because they loved and longed to see their dear friend who had just died, this is tons of people seeing the exact same thing.

1. Women

Listen to a few the personal accounts. The first people all four gospel accounts record having discovered Jesus resurrection are women, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and some others. They go to the tomb to leave some memorials and spices and they discover the tomb empty and an angel appears to them and tells them Jesus has risen.

Okay, so set aside your potential disbelief in angels. But note this, it is an important one, Jesus and the apostles and the writers of Scripture and Christians throughout the century are the ones who have given women a high place of honor. We value and love our women. We may think there are different roles intended for men and women but women are very very important. This was not the case in the first century. Women were looked down upon and were not even allowed to give a testimony in court. Their testimony was considered unreliable. So if all four of the disciples are making up this story about Jesus' resurrection, then the last thing you do is have women being your first eyewitnesses, it doesn't even count...which also a very strong reason to believe the New Testament gospels as a whole are accurate, because throughout their accounts of Jesus, they consistently give a high place to women.

Some of you today might have heard everything I have said so far and you are like, "yeah, so what, that is just what the Bible says and just because the Bible says it happened doesn't mean it really did, the Bible says a lot of crazy stuff." Listen, that the Bible records women first discovering the resurrection of Jesus is blaring proof that what the Bible records did in fact actually happen.

2. Thomas

One of my favorite accounts is the one from Thomas the disciple. He wasn't there the first time when Jesus appeared to a bunch of the disciples and so when they got all excited and went and told Thomas Jesus had risen. He told them they were crazy, to get some sleep, and to stop drinking so much...and they are like no, we weren't drunk, Jesus really rose. Then Thomas gets super intense and says unless I see his scars from the nails and the spear I won't believe it. I love Thomas, because he is there for all of us skeptics. So Jesus appears to Thomas and offers his body for inspection. So Thomas checks out his hands and touches Jesus' side, looks into his face, hears that familiar voice, and Thomas breaks down, tears well up in his eyes and he falls down and starts to worship and says, "My Lord and my God!" I think for Thomas, Jesus had just been a good teacher, an interesting dude, but at that moment his heart changed and he realized Jesus was in fact the messiah. He wasn't just seeing a ghost. This was real, flesh and bones Jesus. After this they ate a meal together having some fish and talking. Jesus was alive and had rose up from the dead.

3. Paul

The last account I want to share is Paul's himself, the author of Romans. Before he wrote Romans he had a very high and esteemed job. He was a protector of the purity of the Jewish religion. A new movement spawned rapidly and quickly when Jesus rose from the dead and started showing himself to all these people. So Paul was on the inside track from the Jewish authorities to try and stomp out this new heresy called Christianity. Paul oversaw the first Christian to die for saying Jesus rose from the dead, his name was Stephen. Paul was a high class murderer. He is on a trip to Damascus to go try and have some more Christians stoned to death and while he is traveling there, Jesus shows up in the middle of the road, stops Paul and asks him why he is doing all this. Paul stares at Jesus in disbelief and asks who are you? And Jesus answers, "I am Jesus who you are persecuting." And Paul becomes a changed man going on to write 1/3rd of the books of the Bible about Jesus.

There are other eyewitness accounts, I'd thought I'd just share a few of the ones with you today that come from unlikely sources. This is the point. This is what we are faced with. Maybe you're sitting there and you are like fine, this thing happened in history like 2,000 years ago and a bunch of people testified that it actually happened, so what if it did?

The Christian Creed

What difference does it make? Here is the difference. Very shortly after Jesus rose from the dead, his followers started grouping together and the gospel began to click. Almost as though a light went on and everything Jesus had been saying and teaching and doing for the past three years made sense. So very shortly, perhaps a few weeks, maybe a few months, they formed a creed. A statement of faith about who they were and what they believed.

Paul shares it with us in 1 Corinthians 15, "(I remind you) of the gospel which you received, in which you stand and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast...(here is the creed, the gospel that saves) For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures." Jesus died, Jesus was buried, and Jesus rose from the dead.

That is the gospel. Jesus died, Jesus was buried, and Jesus rose from the dead. And that changes everything. No longer were any of Jesus words just good things to know, they are the words of life. No longer is God seemingly a distant source, Jesus truly is God himself, here among us. No longer is death the undefeatable foe, but death has been conquered. Life and new life now reigns through Jesus. Now in the midst of darkness and despair stands Jesus, the light of his resurrection pours in and gives hope and brings peace. Jesus the son of God live and stands to save.

Jesus' resurrection is the source and the symbol. And all creation rings of its praise. Plants and grass that wither and turn brown from being scorched come back to life and turn bright green and champion the resurrection of Christ. The sun itself which sets and darkness covers the earth, rises in the morning and reminds us that everything in creation is about Jesus and his resurrection and the promise of true and eternal life. Life now becomes not about death but about how Jesus heals and saves and brings new life, he changes things. Creation calls out Jesus saves, Jesus saves, Jesus saves.

Circumstantial Evidence

Circumstantial evidence is when unrelated facts when considered together can be used to infer a certain conclusion. Our lawyers here today know a lot about circumstantial evidence. So let's look at the circumstances that surround the Bible's claim of Jesus rising from the dead. So what the Bible says he did, is there any supporting evidence to conclude such a thing?

The Transformation of the Disciples

The disciples were changed from being lowly, timid, self-conscious followers to strong, powerful, compassionate and fearless leaders, giving to the poor, taking care of widows and orphans, who all suffered and died (except John) on the claim of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Their good character and their courage evidences Jesus must have really appeared to them in bodily form.

The Day and Object of Jewish Worship Changed

The Sabbath was the sacred to Jews. That is Saturday. But Scripture tells us that the reason why Christians started worshipping on Sunday was because Jesus rose from the dead on a Sunday and worship had become all about Jesus, instead of the Torah. Jews would not have done so, they would have been mortified if Jesus did not really do something as great as rising from the dead to change their sacred tradition.

The Practices of the Church

Baptism and Communion became fixed elements of Christian worship and they are elements that are meaningless if Jesus did not rise. Baptism is a picture of death to life and was talked about as a symbol of Jesus' resurrection. Communion is a picture of Jesus death on the cross, which would have had no meaning if Jesus was not God and did not rise from the dead, he would have been just another crucified human and there is no need to attach theological significance to his death.

The Preaching of the Church

The preaching of the early church was saturated with talk about Jesus' resurrection from the dead. This would not have been their primary source of material if it had not happened, they were stuck on it.

The Tomb was not Enshrined

It was the cultural way to enshrine the tombs of holy men, yet there is no trace of any veneration for a tomb of Jesus. There is no question that a hoymen named Jesus existed in the first century, if so then where is his gravestone inscription, unless he rose from the dead?

The Growth of the Church

The church grew at an unheard of exponential rate...essentially a worldwide phenomenon. Only the widespread knowledge of something like a resurrection of Jesus could have spawned such a movement. Any other explanation for the rapid growth just doesn't make sense. There were many wise men around...none had results like that.

Historical Evidence

Lastly, we look at the historical evidence. Maybe you have wondered is there any books or writings besides the Bible which mention the resurrection, maybe ones written by people who were not Christians? The answer is yes, there are several.

1. Josephus from "Antiquities" written ~AD 93 (Jewish historian worked for Roman governor)

"About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a wise man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Christ. When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing among us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. On the third day he appeared to them restored to life, for the prophets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvelous things about him. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has to this day not disappeared."

2. Suetonius "Vita Nero" written ~AD 54 (Roman historian under Nero)

"Punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition [the resurrection]."

3. Tacitus "Annals" written ~AD 66 (Roman Historian)

"Nero fastened the guilt . . . on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of . . . Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome. . ."

4. Pliny the Younger "Letter to Turkey Emperor Trajan" written ~AD 111 (to explain Christian worship)

"I have never been present at an examination of Christians. Consequently, I do not know the nature of the extent of the punishments usually meted out to them, nor the grounds for starting an investigation and how far it should be pressed...They also declared that the sum total of their guilt or error amounted to no more than this: they met regularly before dawn on a fixed day [Sunday remembrance of resurrection] to chant verses alternately amongst themselves in honor of Christ as if to a god..."

That's the evidence. Ten confirming circumstances and written accounts outside the Bible, that Jesus did in fact rise from the dead. It will not do to simply dismiss it because we have never seen the resurrected Jesus or because it seems too fantastic. The burden of proof is on those who say it didn't happen.

Three Objections

Only three explanations have ever been given by those who say Jesus did not rise from the dead.

Conspiracy

Some have said the "resurrection" was a conspiracy or hoax devised by the disciples who stole Jesus body as the soldiers claim in Matthew 28:12.

Response #1: Matthew 28:12-15 describes how the chief priest paid the soldiers off to say the disciples stole the body.

Response #2: Matthew 28:13 tells how the soldiers were to say they were asleep when the body was stolen. if they were asleep how could they have known the body was stolen, or known anything that happened.

Response #3: In 1879 a Roman edict was found stating that it was illegal under penalty of death to rob a tomb or to move a body from one place to another. Disciples knew they would be guilty of death.

Response #4: If the disciples stole the body they would not have taken time to fold up the grave clothes (Jn 20:5-7).

Response #5: If the disciples stole the body they would not have died for what they knew was a lie.

Resuscitation

Some have said the "Resurrection" was merely resuscitation from an apparent death. "Jesus was not completely dead when He was taken down from the cross. He revived in the tomb and escaped to convince His disciples that He had risen from the dead."

Response #1: Physically impossible. Considering the extent of Jesus' tortures. A modern medical examination of the Gospels determines that Jesus suffered from hematidrosis, hypovolemic shock, respiratory acidosis, pericardial and pleural effusion, and finally died of cardiac arrest.

Response #2: Religiously impossible. A half dead Jesus appearing to disciples would not evoke their worship to Him as Lord.

Response #3: Biographically impossible. This idea goes against all we know of Jesus character.

Enlightenment

Some have said it was not a bodily resurrection but spiritual or psychological resurrection, an enlightenment of sorts.

Response #1: Jesus called His body "flesh and bones" (Lk 24:39).

Response #2: Jesus offered His body for physical inspection (Jn 20:27).

Response #3: Jesus ate food (Lk 24:41-43).

Response #4: One person could have had a hallucination or delusion but not 500 people all at the same time (1 Cor 15:6).