



***The Resurrection
of
Jesus Christ***

Fact or Fairytale?

Oliver Bayley

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome! This book is written with two groups of people in mind.

First, our fellow Christians will see from the evidence given here that the central foundation on which the Christian Faith sits - Jesus' resurrection - is immensely solid. All the attempts over the centuries, still continuing today, to "write the whole thing off" as a fairy tale hit one or other of the many rocks along the way. All the facts point strongly, clearly and undeniably to the resurrection being TRUE.

So in these days of arrogant atheism wherever we look, Christians can and must look the opposition squarely in the eye on this matter. There is no need at all for Christians to cower and snivel, leaving the areas of public debate in the hands of the God-opposers, as has been the case, quite needlessly, for so long.

Secondly, this book is for those not yet committed to Christ as Lord. Please God, they are honestly looking, wondering, exploring, weighing things up: "Is there something in all this Jesus stuff after all?". This book answers that simple question with a humble, solid YES! - on the basis of the evidence before us.

Certainly, a step of faith is required, as in all matters beyond the realm of total proof. But anyone who truly wants to know will see from the evidence in these pages that such a step of faith is a small one, taken *in response to* the evidence, rather than a huge leap into the dark *in the face of* the evidence - as detractors urge us to think.

Our hope is that the Lord will graciously use this book to bless and encourage you in His service.

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1 THIS MATTERS!

Because of the central importance of the resurrection to the whole edifice of the Christian Faith, it is not surprising that over the years many people, with a desire to dispose of the Christian Gospel for once and for all, have sought to dismiss the resurrection as a concoction of fairytales. Simply because the resurrection of Jesus Christ is so central, it has been the subject of probably more hostile scrutiny than any other question in history.

Such people are quite right in concentrating on the resurrection, for the Holy Spirit makes it quite clear to us through Paul (I Corinthians 15) that if Christ did not rise from the dead, then the whole Christian Gospel becomes worthless; "if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain" (I Corinthians 15.4).

Indeed the Gospel becomes worse than worthless, for it promises so much but, with no resurrection of Christ, delivers nothing at all except empty and false hopes. We must be in no doubt that no resurrection of Christ means the Christian faith is simply a cruel waste of everyone's time.

In these pages we will tackle head-on the critics of our day who seek to "rubbish" the resurrection - and of course, amazingly, not all those critics are outside the Church.

Why is it that whenever Lent is upon us and Holy Week, Good Friday and Easter Sunday are coming into view, it is never long before the views of some supposedly senior cleric are splashed all over the media, in which we are told that the Easter resurrection story may be all very nice, but of course it never really happened!

How the media love such a story – it stirs things up, ruffles the faithful, sells newspapers and increases TV viewing figures – a true case of many birds being killed with one stone!

To be fair, in recent years we have had some bishops speaking up in defence of the resurrection, so mercifully it is not all "one-way traffic". But what a shame that we even have to commend such bishops and

such comments! - for someone denying the resurrection of Jesus Christ has no right to be a bishop in the first place.

Even so we are all aware of how the debate tends to be stacked in favour of the sceptics; why? – and why should there even be a debate about the resurrection at all?!

Let us now take a careful look at the evidence surrounding the claimed resurrection of Christ.

This resurrection was repeatedly foretold, both in what is now for Christians the Old Testament, and also by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, as recorded in the four Gospels of the New Testament.

If it did not happen then all those prophecies are seen to be false, and once we see that the Bible contains falsehood, then where does such falsehood stop? We might as well chuck the Bible in the bin.

So, how sure can we be, or anyone else for that matter, that these resurrection events happened as described in the Bible?

The Bible asks us to accept that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, actually, physically, really, historically – a real living person emerging from a real cold tomb.

But how confident can Christians be, in this age of vociferous, articulate atheists such as Richard Dawkins and the like, that the Christian Faith is grounded in good, hard facts rather than in mere wispy stories set in the morning mist?

The answer to that question is of critical importance.

2 THE GOSPEL TEXTS

For a start, let us dispose straightaway a notion that is sometimes expressed, that the New Testament writings were written down decades or longer after the claimed events, so they simply cannot be trusted.

This is not the place to go into this point in detail (we cover it in our book "A Dodgy Bible?", which you can download free from our website, www.fsmins.org).

Suffice it to say that we can be quite sure that the text we have before us in the New Testament today is a very close fit indeed with the original Gospel texts. This means that the critics of the resurrection cannot argue, as some try to do, that over the centuries the resurrection stories in the Bible just "grew like Topsy", becoming less and less related to what was written down originally.

Now those written records of the resurrection which we have in the Gospels were in circulation within 30 years of the ascension of the Lord, that is, still within the lifetimes of many of the people who would have witnessed the claimed events of those days.

To fabricate resurrection stories from nothing – or indeed any other stories within the ministry of Jesus - in such circumstances is impossible! For it would be instantly recognised, by those who had been there, that such stories were simply false, and hence they would wither quickly away, and quite rightly too.

What is more, the sudden "bursting forth" of the original texts, both Epistles and Gospels, in the middle of the first century AD, is in itself strong objective evidence that something had happened of immense significance.

No. We can take the Gospel accounts very seriously. The attempt to write them off simply does not stack up.

3 THREE "EXHIBITS"

But let us assume for a moment, with the sceptics, that the resurrection of Christ *really did never happen*.

Anyone who holds such a view is faced with three central pieces of evidence, three "exhibits". These cannot be ignored. They have to be explained satisfactorily by anyone who holds to the belief that the resurrection did not in fact occur.

Here they are - the three awkward "exhibits":

- 1) The empty tomb**
- 2) The appearances of Jesus after the resurrection**
- 3) The total transformation of the disciples**

The tomb was clearly empty, and the body could not be produced. That has to be explained.

The disciples claimed to have seen Jesus after His resurrection, in different places on different occasions. Those claimed appearances have to be explained.

Most of all, *something* happened to cause the disciples to change suddenly from scared cowards to bold evangelists, within weeks of Jesus' death, in the very city where Jesus had been put to death. Ten of the original twelve disciples, along with countless thousands of converts to the Christian Faith in later years, were martyred, often in gruesome ways, rather than deny the truth of Jesus and His resurrection. That transformation, and that courage even when faced with martyrdom, have to be explained.

Any naturalistic theory that people may come up with must give convincing explanations on each of the above exhibits. If this cannot be done, then that particular sceptical view loses any credibility.

4 FOUR NATURALISTIC THEORIES TO EXPLAIN THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST

Now there are four main attempts to explain away the resurrection of Jesus Christ. These continually crop up in one form or another.

They are not new. Since the earliest days of the Christian Gospel it has suited some people to do their best to try to rubbish the whole thing.

That is why, for example, the Holy Spirit caused Paul to write what is now the fifteenth chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians. Already, even within that Christian community in Corinth, some people were dismissing the resurrection of Christ as a non-event.

It is always helpful to ask why people are so keen to dismiss the resurrection: perhaps protection of the "status quo"; or anger at the exclusive claims of Christ as being the only means of salvation; or a wilful refusal to bow the knee before a God to whom we are accountable.

Whatever their reasons, down the centuries the resurrection has attracted more hostile attention than anything else in the Bible - simply because it is so crucial. Explain away the resurrection, and the whole Christian Faith falls flat, as is made clear in I Corinthians Chapter 15.

Here they are - the four main naturalistic attempts to dismiss the resurrection of Christ:

- 1) Jesus was not dead**
- 2) The wrong tomb**
- 3) The body was stolen**
- 4) Hallucinations**

Let us now examine each of these attempts, and in each case see how they fare in dealing with each of the three "exhibits" listed above.

5 THE FIRST NATURALISTIC THEORY: JESUS WAS NOT DEAD

The Theory

This theory argues that Jesus was not in fact dead on the cross, but was in a deep swoon or coma.

The soldiers naturally thought he was dead – though Pilate was surprised that He had died so soon (Mark 15.44). They took His body from the cross, even though, had they had the level of medical knowledge we now possess, they might have detected a very faint pulse.

The body was duly buried, but in the cool air inside the tomb Jesus revived. He felt round in the dark, found the entrance of the tomb, rolled back the stone, and emerged as "the risen Lord"!

No wonder both Jesus and His simple-minded, credulous followers believed there had been a great miracle, and from there, the whole "resurrection bandwagon" began to roll.

The Theory and the Three Exhibits

At first sight this swoon theory does quite well with our three exhibits: it explains both the empty tomb and the appearances, and at a pinch it explains the transformation of the disciples. So far, so good?

But wait a minute – it conveniently ignores rather a lot of other evidence!

For a start, Jesus had been through an appalling ordeal. It began with the horrors of the illegal trial, in which He was standing all night, and was then scourged with metal tipped thongs, an ordeal that often proved fatal in itself. He was too weak to carry His cross (Matthew 27.32), and was then crucified.

Let us never forget, in our familiarity with the manner of Jesus' death, just how utterly appalling crucifixion was. The victim, naked and in full

view of the crowds, had to keep trying to hold up his weight by his arms, to be able to lift the chest so as to be able to take a breath. As exhaustion came on, the victim simply could not breathe. It was agony, and we can see how the smashing of the victims' legs by the soldiers was in itself an act of mercy, and how death would finally come as a blessed relief.

Jesus went through all this.

But there is more. The soldiers were professional executioners. This was just another day and another job for them. They knew a dead body when they saw one, for it was their job to make people that way! In John 19.34 we read how one soldier, just to ensure Jesus really was dead, thrust a spear into His side, and that "blood and water" emerged.

Now we are told that this is very strong medical evidence of Jesus' death: had He still been alive, blood would have come forth with every heartbeat, but instead there was massive clotting of the blood, accompanied by watery serum.

We then come to the burial in the tomb itself. In John 19.40, we read that the body was wrapped in thin linen strips with spices. How could a fit man ever get out of such a cocoon, let alone someone in Jesus' state?

The stone rolled across the entrance of the tomb is another factor (see Matthew 27.60). Now this would have been a large stone disc, probably 5' or 6' in diameter, like a great millstone, which was slotted on its rim into a rough stone groove. To roll it, several strong men would have had to push it along this groove *from the side*. But the swoon theory needs the revived, unwrapped, desperately weak Jesus to roll back that stone from within the tomb, by pushing on its inside face alone. Is that likely?

Very soon after His emergence from the tomb, Jesus was in close touch with those who knew Him very, very well. Is it really plausible to argue that these men and women, in the midst of giving Him the urgent medical attention He required, became convinced that He had truly conquered death and risen from the dead?

Even if we grant that for a moment, whatever happened to Jesus in the following weeks, months and years?

For example, where was He on that wonderful Pentecost morning a few weeks after His "apparent resurrection" - upstairs in His convalescent bed? When He was finally recovered enough, did He just go off quietly, buy an up-country carpenter's business and marry Mary Magdalene – while the Gospel was "taking off" all around Him? That is a nonsense!

The swoon theory looks a possibility at first sight, but then crumbles away in the face of the evidence: we can be sure that Jesus was dead.

6 THE SECOND NATURALISTIC THEORY THE WRONG TOMB

The Theory

Many of us will all have come across Wallace and Gromit and the wrong trousers – let us now consider the wrong tomb.

The theory goes like this.

The women were devoted to Jesus and were very upset. Some of them developed a rather hare-brained scheme to revisit the tomb with some more spices, as a final, somewhat pathetic act of devotion. How they were to get round the guards or to open up the tomb does not seem to have occurred to them.

So here they come, sobbing in the half-light of dawn, winding their way down the path through the graveyard. In their grief, they arrive at the place – at least they assume it is the place – and look, the stone is rolled back!

A young man inside the tomb (Mark 16.5) tells them not to be scared. He realises they are looking for Jesus, and he says – "Jesus is not here" – pointing at the burial platform in the tomb where they all are – "see where they laid Him" – as *he points down the path to the correct tomb*.

In their tearful state the women have come to the wrong tomb, a new, unused tomb with the stone rolled back from its entrance, and the young man points out the right tomb, further down the path.

The right tomb of course is untouched, still sealed and undisturbed – and still containing the body of Jesus.

But the women don't wait! Off they go, breathless and excited (v.8) – "Jesus has risen from the dead!" they cry, and so the resurrection story begins.

The Theory and the Three Exhibits

Convincing? Many people go along with this account.

It explains the empty tomb – for the tomb they visited really was empty.

It ignores the post-Resurrection appearances – supporters of this theory will have to explain those stories in other ways.

And it stretches the transformation in the disciples beyond credibility, because of the one, obvious, huge flaw in this argument!

And this huge flaw? The mistake of "those silly women" would have been discovered within the hour by Peter and John and others! The correct tomb would have been identified, the disciples would have returned to the city with much male-chauvinist muttering into their beards, and that would have been that!

Even supposing that somehow the women's mistake had not been discovered immediately, all the authorities had to do when the resurrection preaching started up a few weeks later, was to go to the correct tomb, and point to the body of Jesus lying within it.

This theory also omits some crucial words from Mark's account (Mark 16.6): "Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: *he is risen*; he is not here: behold the place where they laid him". Those three words, "he is risen", knock rather a large hole in the bottom of the good ship Wrong Tomb!

This theory also ignores the fact that this was the second visit of the women to the graveyard. They had faithfully watched on the Friday afternoon – it is inconceivable that on their next visit none of them realised their mistake.

No: the wrong tomb theory gets us nowhere.

7 THE THIRD NATURALISTIC THEORY: THE BODY WAS STOLEN

The Theory

Yes, He was dead, and Yes, He was buried, but it is clear that this whole resurrection thing was put around by the disciples – who had started it all off *by stealing the body*.

A few of them opened the tomb during the night, removed the body, and hid it somewhere else. They then started jumping up and down proclaiming Jesus had risen from the dead, for reasons best known to themselves!

The Theory and the Three Exhibits

So runs this third theory.

It copes with the empty tomb – the disciples had made it empty themselves.

It ignores the appearances – all of which must have been concocted either by the disciples who were in on the plot, or by their gullible followers.

As for the transformation of the disciples, from fearful cowards behind locked doors, to those who could not be silenced even when faced with martyrdom? – unlikely! If you had been in on such a plot, would you not have been pretty quick to own up when they started talking about crucifying you?

OK - the body wasn't stolen by the disciples.

But wait, as they say, there's more! Perhaps the body really was stolen, not by Jesus' friends but by His enemies - the Roman or Jewish authorities, or both?

After all, they knew of Jesus' "big talk" about His rising from the dead after three days. If the authorities removed the body and stored it

somewhere else, then there would be no question of Jesus' known tomb becoming a place of pilgrimage and possible unrest.

Again, this idea explains the empty tomb – but stumbles over both the claimed appearances and the transformation in the disciples.

But there is yet once more an obvious "killer blow" against this theory!

By removing the body, the authorities would be giving the opportunity for the very resurrection rumours to begin – *and that was the last thing they wanted.*

It was far better from their point of view to keep that body very firmly where it was, which is why they arranged for a military guard at the site to ensure there was no "funny business" (Matt 27.62-66).

Even ignoring all these problems (which logically is quite impossible to do), when the resurrection preaching began a short time later, again it could have been instantly silenced by the authorities producing the corpse.

This never happened, because they did not have the corpse!

Instead, they were angry and bewildered, resorting to bullying and threatening the disciples – all to no avail, thanks be to God! (See for example Acts 4.1-22 and 5.17-42).

These glorious passages shout to us of the truth of Jesus' resurrection! Nothing would or could shut those disciples up – they simply KNEW! No wonder they marched on even into martyrdom. They KNEW.

8 THE FOURTH NATURALISTIC THEORY: THEY SUFFERED FROM HALLUCINATIONS

The Theory

But the sceptics have one more popular "throw of the dice" we need to consider: that the followers of Jesus, upset, gullible, longing for their Master's presence once more, started "seeing" Him after His death for themselves.

Rumours raced around, devoted followers were keen to have their own "appearance story" to tell, stories became exaggerated, and thus the whole resurrection theme gathered pace on the basis of hallucination and rumour. "Did you see something move behind that bush over there? – I'm sure it was Jesus!"

Never mind the empty tomb – that remains something of a problem for this hallucination theory! This theory majors on explaining the appearances, and just perhaps might get away with the disciples' transformation.

The Theory and the Three Exhibits

But yet again we find that a theory that looks vaguely possible at first sight is actually peppered with holes.

A group of tearful women in a graveyard at the dawning of the day just might feel persuaded that they had seen the "risen" Jesus – but they still had to convince all the others (see Luke 24.11 for the reaction!).

Yet the appearances of Jesus were based on a far firmer foundation than this. Between His resurrection and ascension, He appeared many times, to different people, in different places, at different times of the day and night. Such appearances simply cannot be explained away as mere tricks of the light, or as hallucinations brought about by wishful thinking.

The earliest written account of these appearances occurs, not in one of the Gospels but in an Epistle – Chapter 15 of I Corinthians, one of the most remarkable chapters in the whole of the New Testament, which we mentioned earlier.

There was talk in and around Corinth that all this resurrection teaching they had been given about Jesus was simply not true, (a view based on conventional Greek thought of the time which denied the existence of any after-life).

It is into such a situation that Paul writes, to a small group of new, ignorant, impetuous Christians, of both Jewish and Gentile background, many of whom were fresh off the streets, quite literally. Quite a challenge!

So, in verse 4, Christ was raised on the third day, according to the Scriptures (that is, as the Scriptures had foretold). In verse 5, He appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve (an official title for the first disciples, for immediately after the resurrection, to be precise, there were actually only eleven of them).

Then we come to verse 6 – astonishing! "After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, of whom most remain until now, though some have fallen asleep".

A crowd of over five hundred people is hardly going to be subject to hallucinations! And notice the way Paul mentions that many are still alive; his whole message is – "You don't believe me? – then go and ask them!"

The resurrection of Jesus clearly rests on foundations far, far more solid than tricks of the light convincing a few gullible peasants.

9 CONCLUSIONS

So we have seen that the four most common attempts to explain the resurrection in a naturalistic way all fall down at one stumbling block or another.

Many legal minds over the years have been set the task of examining the evidence concerning Christ's resurrection, both for and against, as if it were a normal legal case.

One such reaction will suffice from the many that exist. Lord Darling, a former Chief Justice of England, concluded after his researches – "In its (the resurrection's) favour as living truth there exists such overwhelming evidence, positive and negative, factual and circumstantial, that no intelligent jury in the world could fail to bring in a verdict that the resurrection story is true".

Quite apart from the very strong direct evidence in support of the resurrection, we can also make mention in passing of much further evidence: the fact that Jesus had foretold this event (eg Matthew 26.61); the phenomenal growth of the early Church; the extraordinary conversion of Saul of Tarsus; the martyrdom of ten of the original Twelve; the existence and experience of billions of Christians, down the ages and across the continents; and, last for now but by no means least, that inner conviction in the heart of the individual believer enabling us to know that Christ really is risen, and to know that He really is the Resurrection and the Life!

That is all we need to know, for literally everything else in our human existence flows from these great central truths.

We can join afresh in the great resurrection cry, on this day and every day, with joy and enthusiasm, for such a cry is not folly – it is quite simply true:

"Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!"

10 FAITHFUL SHEEP MINISTRIES

We hope this book has been a blessing for you.

Faithful Sheep Ministries is concerned with the great issues of Truth and Falsehood which lie at the heart of our lives.

We are here to show **the complete reasonableness of believing that the Bible is true**, with all that follows from that for how we are to live our lives; and equally therefore, the complete UN-reasonableness of believing that the Bible is false - a belief whose consequences are all too apparent today.

The Director of Faithful Sheep Ministries is the Rev. Oliver Bayley, an experienced Minister of the Gospel of Protestant Anglican background. Oliver and his wife Judith have served in churches and schools in Britain and overseas, and are now based in Southampton, England.

Oliver has a ministry of writing, preaching and speaking, in which **Faithful Sheep Ministries** plays a key part. You can contact us by email should you wish to discuss a possible invitation for Oliver, such as helping with Sunday preaching, a conference or retreat, midweek meetings, or a church consultation exercise.

Meanwhile, may Christ's "faithful sheep" keep the Faith, for, as the resources we provide aim clearly to show, **Jesus Christ is as much the Way, the Truth and the Life as He has ever been - and the grounds for our believing that simple fact are as solid as they have ever been.**

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