

Easter 2015

The Easter Conspiracy

"The resurrection of Christ is either the greatest miracle or the greatest delusion which history records." Philip Schaff

Debate about the resurrection raises its head on a pretty regular basis. Just a few years ago some headlines in papers read: "A New Debate about the Risen Christ" or another headline "Some scholars are debunking the gospels. Now traditionalists are fighting back. What are Christians to believe?"

According to media headlines we don't have a clue who or what to believe, as they try to sell newspapers by pitting Christian liberals against Christian conservatives.

The reporting by the media is not always encouraging. According to them most of the words of Jesus have been written off as some fictional creation of the early church. All the miracles of the bible have been explained away, including the Resurrection.

But then there remains that nagging question - what happened to the body of Jesus? How do we account for the resurrection records? And why did the disciples and the early church believe them, and sacrifice their lives for this man called Jesus?

The First Easter Conspiracy

People have always struggled with Easter story. What really happened on that first Sunday morning 2,000 years ago in Jerusalem? Did Jesus rise from the dead?

Today we are going to become detectives and look at the clues the surround this case.

It may surprise you to know that there were doubters and sceptics from the very beginning. In fact, Matthew records the very first Easter conspiracy:

While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened.

When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day (Matthew 28:11-15).

If you remember earlier on, it was the Jews who asked Pilate to place guards around the tomb because they remembered that Jesus had said, "After three days I will rise again." The ironic fact is that on Saturday the only people who were thinking about a resurrection were the people who put Jesus to death in the first place. The guards were there because the Jewish leaders feared that something strange might happen at the tomb.

Thus the first Easter conspiracy, the first cover up, was hatched even before the Jesus had risen and was followed up afterwards by bribing the Roman guards.

The Great Cover-Up

Over the centuries sceptics have concocted a number of theories to try and explain away the resurrection of Jesus. There are seven alternatives to explain away the empty tomb. Does anyone know any of the theories?

Theory 1: Jesus didn't die – the swoon theory

Some sceptics have proposed that Jesus survived the crucifixion, swooned on the cross, revived in the tomb, came forth on Easter Sunday and fooled everyone into thinking he had risen from the dead.

Theory 2: The disciples stole the body

But why would they steal the body? All the gospel writers agree that they were not expecting a resurrection. When the women went to the tomb on Sunday, they were expecting to anoint a dead body, not meet their risen Lord.

And if they did why did they all go to their death proclaiming Jesus' resurrection. Men might die for a myth they wrongly believed, but it is unlikely that they would willingly go to their death for a prank.

Theory 3: The Jews stole the body

If the Jews stole the body, then all they had to do was to roll out the dead body of Jesus. End of the story.

Theory 4: The Romans stole the body

This makes no sense because the Romans just didn't care. As far as they were concerned, Jesus was just another dead Jew.

Theory 5: The body just disappeared

I call this the UFO theory. Let's not spend any time on this one!

Theory 6: Mass hallucination

The early Christians suffered some kind of mass psychosis that caused all of them to have visions or hallucinations that they mistook for the risen Christ.

This is just stupid, and where is the body?

Theory 7: Early church made up the story

This is the current position of most liberal scholarship. It actually combines elements of several of the previous theories. But like all the others, it stumbles over the hard facts.

1. First, what happened to the body?
2. Why would the disciples suffer and die for a lie?
3. How do you explain the unanimous testimony that Jesus rose from the dead?

The cross and the empty tomb has been a huge stumbling block from the beginning, and that is to be expected - Listen to this passage from-

1 Corinthians 1:20-25

²⁰ Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?.....²² Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,.....²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

The Evidence You Need to Know

So as detectives let's look at the evidence of why we believe Jesus rose from the dead.

So I need some detectives to look around the church and find some clues that might help work out if Jesus rise from the dead?

None of these evidences on their own prove anything, but when you put them altogether, I believe it is quite convincing.

A. He predicted he would rise from the dead

Predicting your death isn't that special, but anyone who can predict his own resurrection; that is unique. Only the Son of God can fulfil such a prediction.

B. Jesus really died

Nobody on record has ever survived a crucifixion. Actually nobody who has researched Jesus, Christian or non-Christian questions Jesus living and dying.

C. The disciples didn't expect a resurrection

This is one of the most fascinating points. Even though Jesus had repeatedly predicted his resurrection, somehow that truth simply failed to sink in. All four gospels make it clear that before the crucifixion, none of the disciples understood Jesus' references to the resurrection, and in fact it was the Jews who put on the guards to make sure the disciples didn't try any trickery.

D. The women saw him first

In our modern culture we don't appreciate the significance of the fact that the women came first to the tomb. No first-century writer, if they were making the story up, would have put the women at the tomb first because women weren't considered reliable witnesses. The only reason to say that the women saw him first is because that's what actually happened.

E. No one believed it at first

Not only did the disciples not expect a resurrection, Luke 24 makes it clear that the men didn't believe the first reports from the women. The last thing they expected on Sunday morning was a resurrection. In the beginning, it wasn't just Thomas who doubted. None of them believed the early reports and all of them had to be convinced over and over again that Jesus had risen from the dead.

F. The Jews tried to cover it up

Why try to cover up the resurrection if the body is still in the grave? The cover-up and the payoff only make sense if the tomb really was empty. Otherwise,

they just trot out the dead body of Jesus and the resurrection becomes just another story with a bad ending.

G. The stone was rolled away

By a man who was virtually dead!

First, the stone itself was three to six feet in diameter and weighed two to five tons. It took several strong men to roll it into place.

Second, the New Testament indicates that the stone was not just rolled away enough for someone to slip out, but rolled up a slope and right out of the way.

Who rolled the stone away? The disciples? The Roman guards would have stopped them. The Jews? Same thing. The Romans? Not likely. They had no motivation. And who would risk death to do such a thing?

Who rolled the stone away? The bible records that an angel did. Not to let Jesus out, he could walk through walls now, but to let people in to see that it was empty.

H. The tomb was empty

It's interesting to note that all the witnesses agree on this fact. The disciples, the Jews, and the Romans all knew that the tomb was empty. It's true that each group viewed that fact differently but no one disputed the basic assertion that on Easter Sunday morning Jesus was no longer in the tomb.

I. No one ever found his body

Again we come back to the fundamental issue. The Jews never produced his body. In fact, the Jews concocted the first Easter conspiracy precisely because they didn't know what happened to it. The Romans went along with the conspiracy because they didn't know what happened either. If anyone—anyone at all—had produced the dead body of Jesus, the entire Christian movement would have gone the way of so many other short-lived religions across the centuries.

No one has ever produced the body of Jesus and no one ever will. The sceptics simply can't answer the question, "What happened to his body?"

J. He appeared to many people

Taking the gospels together with 1 Corinthians, you get a list like this:

1. First to the women,
2. then to Peter and John,

3. then the disciples on the road to Emmaus,
4. then to the disciples in the Upper Room,
5. then to the disciples and Thomas one week later,
6. then to the disciples in Galilee.
7. And somewhere along the way he appeared to 500 people at once.
8. There were other appearances as well that we cannot date precisely.

Taken together, the list is impressive enough that it cannot be dismissed as wishful thinking or as some as visions or hallucinations. Writing some 30 years later, Paul commented that most of those who saw the risen Christ were still alive and ready to testify to what they had seen.

K. He showed his wounds to Doubting Thomas

When Jesus appeared to Thomas a week after the resurrection he offered the ultimate proof. Spreading forth his hands, he said, "Touch my wounds. See for yourself." When Thomas saw the wounds, he knew at last that it must be true.

L. He ate with the disciples

Luke 24:42, 43 tells us that Jesus ate broiled fish in the presence of the disciples. A ghost doesn't eat fish. Neither does a dead man.

M. The disciples were utterly transformed

Here is one of the most remarkable facts surrounding the resurrection. Whereas before that Sunday the disciples were timid, doubting, unsure, and in general a boring bunch, afterwards they were all utterly, radically and completely transformed. They were literally new men. Suddenly these timid souls became first-century Billy Grahams, totally dedicated to spreading the good news to anyone who would listen. Persecution didn't stop them, opposition didn't faze them, hatred didn't intimidate them, hardship didn't slow them down, the threat of martyrdom didn't stop them.

What made the difference? I suggest that the only possible answer is that these men met the risen Christ and he changed their lives forever.

N. They died testifying to the reality of the resurrection

Church history tells us that of the eleven original disciples (not counting Judas) plus Paul, all died violent deaths for their faith in Jesus. The one exception was John, who spent his final years imprisoned on the island of Patmos. Beyond that, thousands of Christians died in the various Roman persecutions.

Why would men and women die for a myth or a legend? Why would the apostles die for Christ if they knew he had not risen from the dead?

O. For 2,000 years no one has produced a convincing answer to the question, "If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, what happened to his body?"

This is the ultimate unanswered question. Where is the body of Jesus? No one throughout 2,000 years of history has provided a credible answer to that question.

P. Today over one billion Christians unite to proclaim that Jesus Christ is alive

This morning we join with Christians around the world to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord and Saviour. We stand in a long line of believers who proclaim: "He is risen! He is risen indeed."

- A. He predicted he would rise from the dead**
- B. Jesus really died**
- C. The disciples didn't expect a resurrection**
- D. The women saw him first**
- E. No one believed it at first**
- F. The Jews tried to cover it up**
- G. The stone was rolled away**
- H. The tomb was empty**
- I. No one ever found his body**
- J. He appeared to many people**
- K. He showed his wounds to Doubting Thomas**
- L. He ate with the disciples**
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