

Easter 2012 - Have You Heard the Real Easter Story?

April 8, 2012

Good morning Faith family. If you are new, it is great to have you with us on Easter morning! My name is Kurt. I am one of the pastors. This morning, since it is Easter, we will study the resurrection story.

Before we start our study, I have a question, have you heard the real Easter story? Many of us know the Easter story like it was a fairy-tale from a children's book. We don't know a story that has the power change us. This morning, I want to share the resurrection story in a manner which is so compelling that it changed history and will change your life.

I will begin with prayer, then we will get into this morning's message.

Jesus, I thank you for this beautiful morning. I thank you for the chance to gather and worship you. Help this time to be pleasing to you and profitable to us. I ask that you would help us to understand the real resurrection story, not the one of fairy tales and folklore but the one of history. Help all of us to leave with great confidence that the resurrection did take place. I ask that you use the resurrection story to change our lives, like it has it changed the lives of so many others throughout history. Jesus, I ask this in your name. Amen.

To begin, we need to understand the importance of the resurrection. First Corinthians 15 is an entire chapter devoted to the resurrection of Christ. In verses 12 to 14 of the chapter, Paul, like a good baseball umpire, calls it like he sees it. He says that if Christ didn't rise from the dead, our faith is useless. There is no hope beyond the grave. We are just fools wasting our time in church worshipping a dead guy. If Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead, it pulls the bottom piece out of the Christian Jenga game. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, everything about the church and Christianity for 2,000 years of history is a sham.

So the resurrection is a big event. If the resurrection didn't happen, we have nothing. Even worse, if the resurrection did happen, but we are not confident in it, it might as well not have taken place because we will place no confidence in it. This morning, we will look at three lines of evidence for the resurrection to connect with the real Easter story and build our confidence in it. We will look at biblical evidence, circumstantial evidence and finally, historical evidence for the resurrection.

Biblical Evidence for the Resurrection

You need to know that Jesus predicted his resurrection. He talked about it all the time. There are many times in the Gospels where we find him predicting his death and resurrection. Let me share one.

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man 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. And he said this plainly... Mark 8:31–32 (ESV)

Jesus said they would kill him but three days later, he would be back. This is where Schwarzenegger stole his famous line, "I'll be back." It came from Jesus. Naturally, this raises many questions. How will he do it? Dead people don't come out of the grave. Many people in the ancient world, and many today, think Jesus' resurrection was a mistaken fact of history. Here are some of their objections to the resurrection.

Did Jesus die or pass out?

One way people try to twist the real Easter story is they say Jesus didn't die. They think Jesus simply passed out. He looked dead but wasn't dead. Many Muslim scholars teach this. They say that after three days in the coolness

of the tomb, he revived. That sounds reasonable until you think about it, then you realize it is utterly foolish.

Jesus was run through a series of false trials by night. He was flogged. The flesh was ripped off his body leaving his organs hanging out his back. Many men died from floggings because the beatings were so severe. He then carried a cross beam weighing approximately 100 pounds to his place of execution. Five to seven inch nails were pounded into his feet and wrists. Remember, this was the professional mode of execution in the day. Crucifixion was invented to be the most horrifying way to die. From it there is a crossover word in English to describe horrifying pain. We call it *excruciating pain*. Literally that means *the pain of the cross*.

The professional executioner who oversaw the scene confirmed his death. If anyone came down from a Roman cross alive, the executioner went up on the next cross. Since his own life was on the line, the executioner paid close attention to the details of his job. Nobody came off a Roman cross alive. Not only that, but to ensure death, the executioner thrust a sword under his ribs into his heart. Jesus now has a hole in his heart. He is dead. Remember, your heart is not like your fingers. It doesn't come with a backup. When your heart is gone, you don't have nine more to go. You are dead.

When he was taken down from the cross, he was wrapped in 100 pounds of linens and spices. Many of those spices were sticky, like glue, because they were tree resins. He was put into a mummified state. Picture wrapping a body with 100 pounds of Saran Wrap. Even if he was alive, he couldn't move. Then

he was put in a freezing tomb for three days without food, water or medical attention. Do you know why everybody was sure he was dead? He WAS dead!

What if the disciples had the wrong tomb?

Some of you think the reason the disciples thought he rose was because they had the wrong tomb. They lost his address in the graveyard so they created the resurrection story so they didn't look foolish to their friends. The problem is, when you think about this, it doesn't add up.

The Bible tells us Jesus wasn't rich. He was dirt poor. When he died, a man who was a secret disciple, Joseph of Arimathea, stepped forward and gave Jesus his tomb as a burial plot. Very cool thing for Joseph to do. Who was Joseph of Arimathea? He was a well-known man. He was rich. He was powerful. He was a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, which is the council of 70 leaders of the Jews. He was one of the top 70 guys in the nation! He was in the newspaper all the time. Everybody knew him. When it comes to tombs, I don't think he had an unmarked grave. Rest assured, his tomb was large and unmistakable. That is what rich people do. They aren't buried in unmarked graves. Check any graveyard out, you know who was rich. The stone that sealed the tomb weighed several thousand pounds.

Since everyone knew Jesus claimed he was coming back from the dead, the Jewish leaders had the tomb sealed with a Roman seal. Anyone who broke it received the death penalty. They also posted guards to watch the grave. They had Green Berets guarding the tomb. Nobody was messing with it. There was no mistaking the location of the tomb. It was prominent. It had a Roman seal on

it. It was the only tomb in the graveyard that had Green Berets guarding it. The resurrection was not a case of getting the wrong tomb. Everybody knew the right tomb.

If fact, when people claimed Jesus rose from the dead, all they needed to do to disprove the resurrection was bring out Jesus' dead body and drag it through the street proclaiming, "He looks dead to me." They couldn't do that. There was no dead body!

Isn't the resurrection of Jesus a myth, like the Easter bunny?

Some of you heard the resurrection of Jesus is just a myth, like the Easter Bunny or the Tooth Fairy. Some of you heard the resurrection was just fantasy invented by Christians hundreds of years after Jesus lived, after the eyewitnesses were dead and gone. Some of you heard the Jesus of history is fine but the Jesus of the church is corrupted with untrue miraculous stories. You heard the church invented the resurrection years after Jesus was gone to make him into a hero.

The problem is the historical evidence for the resurrection doesn't tell us the resurrection was a late addition. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says he was delivering to the Corinthians a message of first importance. It is the message he first received. Then he shared a creed of the early church that predates any New Testament book. Scholars believe the creed dates between 30 to 36 A.D. In other words, this is one of the earliest church creeds. The church wrote it right after Jesus rose from the dead and everyone could verify it.

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, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 1 Corinthians 15:3–9 (ESV)

The core belief that the early church agreed upon is that Jesus lived, he died on the cross for our sins, and he rose from the grave. He appeared to scores of people, at one point, over 500. In other words, the resurrection is a verifiable historical fact that anyone could examine for themselves by talking to eyewitnesses. It was not a late addition that was added hundreds or thousands of years after Jesus died. The resurrection was the first and foundational piece of the church.

Wasn't the resurrection an idea borrowed from other religions?

Sometimes I hear people say the resurrection is a myth borrowed from other religions. They say the Christians stole the idea of a resurrection from other religions and added it to the church. This can't be true. One of the reasons this doesn't make sense is because the concept of resurrection in other religions was very mythical. It didn't involve a physical body.

In contrast, Jesus' resurrection was not mythical, it was historical. It is factual. It was verifiable. We are repeatedly told throughout the Bible of eyewitness accounts, different times and different places. We are essentially given the ancient equivalent of names, addresses, phone numbers, e-mails and Facebook accounts.

In that day, when video cameras weren't available, the way you verified things was by eyewitness testimony. The Bible gives us hundreds of eyewitnesses. Yes, some other religions have a resurrection concept in them but it is a mythical concept. Only Christians have a tangible resurrection with verifiable evidence. Only Christ's resurrection involved talking, touching and eating with the real resurrected Jesus who is just as real as the person sitting next to you.

Couldn't the resurrection be a hallucination?

One of my favorite parts of 1 Corinthians 15 is when it tells us Jesus appeared to more than 500 people at one time. That is important. Sometimes I hear skeptics say the disciples missed Jesus so deeply, they hallucinated that he was alive. Isn't it weird that 500 people had the same hallucination at the same time? Think about this. I don't know how many of you have experienced an acid trip. I haven't and I hope not many of you have. One thing you know is the hallucination you experience is an individual experience. If Jesus' resurrection was the hallucination of grieving disciples, how do 500 people have the same hallucination at the same time? Hallucinations, by definition, are individual experiences, not group experiences.

This is why we have multiple witnesses in a court room. When we want to make sure something is true, we have multiple witnesses take the stand to verify what happened. When you line 500 people up, put them on the witness stand, and they all say the same thing, that is solid evidence that what they saw took place. Jesus is alive!

Wasn't it just Christians who claimed they met a resurrected Jesus?

This is another good question. It is easy to think the claims of a resurrected Jesus were only made by his disciples, who wished he was alive. When you check the early church, that isn't what you find. What we find is some of Jesus' hard-core enemies were compelled by the evidence of the resurrection. Foremost of those opponents was Paul.

Do you remember what he was doing before he became a pastor? Paul resembled a terrorist. He was working with the Jews to snuff the Christians out of existence. In Acts, when Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned; he was the guy watching everyone's jackets so they could get maximum velocity when they threw rocks at Stephen's head. Paul was on his way to arrest Christians when the resurrected Jesus appeared to him on the Damascus road. Talk about a shocker. Paul began convinced the resurrection was a hoax. He was so convinced of it he was dragging Christians to court, until the resurrected Jesus appeared to him personally. Overnight, Paul went from persecutor to passionate follower of Jesus.

The book of Acts tells us the early Christians wouldn't allow Paul into their church meetings. They thought his conversion was just a ploy to kill them. It is like the President of Iran showing up to your Bible study. Nobody wants to close their eyes when they pray because they know he is just waiting to blow them up. That was Paul - hardcore opponent of Jesus turned passionate follower of Jesus. What changed everything? He met the resurrected Jesus.

Another example of opponents of Jesus turning into followers of Jesus comes from his own family. Jesus had a mother and at least two brothers. Mary, Jesus' mother, was a virgin when she married Joseph. The Bible tells us she stayed a virgin until Jesus was born. After Jesus was born, she didn't remain a virgin. As you know through the Solomon on Sex series, God's will is that women should be virgins until they are married. It is NOT God's will they stay virgins after they are married. If it was, guys would be seriously bummed.

The Bible tells us Mary gave birth to at least two sons after Jesus; they are Jude and James. His brothers did not think he was God. They thought he lost his mind and needed to see the men in the white coats. In one part of the gospels, his brothers went to get Jesus and bring him home thinking he totally lost it. They didn't know what kind of weird berries he ate in the wilderness but they thought it fried his brains because he kept claiming to be God.

What amazes me is that after the resurrection, everything changed. His two brothers went from laughing at him to worshipping him and praying to him! In fact, these brothers even wrote two books in the Bible which are named after them. The books of James and Jude.

Think about this. How many of you have a brother? Would anyone here consider worshipping them as God? I don't think so. After the fifth wedgie, you are convinced they need help from Jesus. What convinced Jesus' brothers to change their thinking and worship him as God? The resurrected Jesus. They met him and had lunch with him.

In addition to his brothers, so did his mother. Now I know our mothers usually love us but our mothers know the truth about us. They changed our diapers. They did our laundry. It is hard to fake out mom. After Jesus rose from the dead, in the books of Acts, we find Jesus' mother part of the first 120 disciples in the upper room praying to him and worshipping him as God.

I know your mom loves you, but your mom will not pray to you and worship you as God. What would it take to convince her you are God? What if you did something only God can do? What if you rose from the dead?

Circumstantial Evidence for the Resurrection.

Let's look at the circumstantial evidence for the resurrection.

What were the disciples' motives?

If you watch crime scene television, you know investigators try to discover a motive. Motive answers many questions. If the resurrection was a lie, what would be the disciples' motives for telling it? When we lie, we always lie to our advantage.

Why would the disciples claim Jesus rose from the dead if it didn't happen? They didn't get more fame, pleasure or money. In fact, all of the disciples, minus one, died a brutal death for refusing to deny their claim of a resurrected Christ. The one guy who wasn't killed was John. They tried to kill him by boiling him in a huge turkey fryer. The problem was, he didn't die. To get rid of him they exiled him to the island of Patmos. Trust me, after hanging out in a turkey fryer, it means you are in agony for life.

Now if these guys were lying, why wouldn't they recant? Why would they say, "You can kill me but I know a guy who beat death. He said I will beat death too."

I lie for things that are advantageous to me, like getting a free lunch. If I had to die an excruciatingly painful death to maintain a lie, I would give it up fast! That never happened to the disciples. You won't hold tight to what you know is false, you only hold tight to what you know is true.

Didn't the teaching of Jesus spread simply because it was good for families and society?

Some of you will say the reason Christianity spread was because it was good for families and for the moral fabric of society. I can't disagree. Commands like "Love your neighbor as yourself" are good for family and society.

Study the book of Acts and we see how Christianity spread. Christians were not going from city to city saying, "Love your neighbor." What were they saying? Jesus is alive! Jesus is alive! It changes everything. Jesus is God. He did what only God can do. He conquered sin and death. Jesus is alive! That is why the church spread. It was a belief in the evidence of the resurrection. It was trusting Jesus' death on the cross as payment for sin and his resurrection as the promise of eternal life. Jesus is alive!

Wasn't the growth of Christianity just like any other religion?

Some of you think the growth of Christianity was just like any other religion. That is untrue. Other world religions began while the founder was alive. When the founder eventually died, they stayed in the grave and their teachings

continued. It is like Ford Motor Company. Henry Ford started it but his company continues.

It is totally different when it comes to Jesus. Jesus was incredibly popular when he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, by the end of the week, the same crowd that welcomed him was shouting to crucify him. There were only a handful of disciples that still believed in him. When he died, those disciples were scattered and their hopes were dashed. Even Peter denied him. What turned it around? What could change defeated disciples, and an angry crowd into one worshipping, following and willing to die for Jesus? Only one thing, a resurrected Jesus!

Some of you still doubt the resurrection. You are hard-core skeptics. Thomas was that way. He was part of the inner core, but even when his buddies claimed Jesus rose from the dead, he wouldn't believe. He said that unless he literally put his fingers into Jesus' wounds, you couldn't convince him Jesus is alive. One week after the resurrection, that is exactly what Thomas did. For all the hard-core skeptics among us, Thomas went in our place and verified that Jesus is alive. Thomas went from a scoffer of Jesus to falling down and worshipping Jesus.

I gave some biblical evidence that the resurrection is true. I also gave some circumstantial evidence. I know some of you are still not convinced. You don't like when I pull stuff from the Bible. You don't think the Bible can be trusted as objective historical fact. I understand where you are coming from. Here is evidence of the resurrection from outside the Bible.

Historical Evidence for the Resurrection

Even though I grew up in a Christian home, I had lots of questions about Jesus. I checked out the evidence of history. Here is some of that evidence. This is evidence from official historians of the ancient world. Their only agenda was to report the facts. They are the Walter Cronkite and Anderson Cooper of their day.

Josephus - Historian for the Roman Government

The first guy I will tell you about is Josephus. He worked for the Roman government. This is not a guy writing a blog on Wordpress. As a news source, he is similar to a major television anchor. He is dependable and reliable. When he wrote, eyewitnesses to Christ's resurrection were still alive. His most famous passage on Jesus is called the *Testimonium Flabium*. It comes from his book the *Antiquities*.

About this time there lived Jesus. A wise man if one ought to call him a man. For he was one who brought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people that accept the truth gladly. He won over many of the Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Christ. When Pilot, upon hearing of him accused by men with the highest standing among us had condemned him to be crucified, those who had 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 that prophesied these and countless other marvelous things about him in the tribe of Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared. - Antiquities, XVIII, 33

So why is Christianity growing? Because Jesus rose from the dead.

Suetonius - Roman historian

This is another credible news anchor. He is a court official under Hadrian. He talks about Jesus twice. First, in his book called the *Life of Claudius* he said,

As the Jews were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus (common misspelling of Christ), he [Claudius] expelled them from Rome. - *Life of Claudius 25.4*

Luke refers to this in Acts 18:2. The Jews in Rome were a huge population. More Jews lived in Rome than in Jerusalem. The Jewish nation in Rome was divided over the identity of Jesus. Half of them believed he rose from the dead. They looked at the evidence and were compelled, just like we are this morning. The other half didn't believe Jesus rose, either because their hearts were too hard or they just refused to believe. This was a huge family fight for the Roman Jews. It got them kicked out of Rome. From this we know Jesus existed and his resurrection was highly debated.

In another work, Suetonius wrote about the great fire that swept through Rome in A.D. 64. Incidentally, Nero, the Roman emperor at the time, blamed the Christians for the fire. They were his scapegoat.

Why did Nero blame the Christians? In Rome, you needed to worship the emperor as God. That worked for most people because they worshipped many gods. Adding worship of the emperor wasn't a big deal. It didn't work for the Christians. They worshipped only one God. They worshipped God the Father and his Son, Jesus. The reason they only worshipped Jesus is because only Jesus proved he was God by rising from the dead. The Roman emperors died and stayed dead. They were false gods. Since Christians wouldn't worship Nero, he blamed them for the great fire of Rome so he could punish them. Here is what Suetonius writes.

[Punishment by Nero was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition.](#) - *Lives of the Caesars, 26.2*

What was the superstition? Jesus rose from the dead. What was the punishment? Christians were rounded up. They were covered in pitch, a spike was driven through their bodies. They were lit aflame to serve as human torches at night. Others were sewn into animal skins. They were put in the coliseum to be torn apart by wild animals and gladiators. Others had ropes tied to their limbs. Horses were whipped into four different directions and they were quartered. Their limbs were torn off so they died a bloody death.

Christians were put to death in large numbers. In spite of this, Christianity didn't go away. Christians just couldn't deny that Jesus rose from the dead. The eyewitnesses were solid. The evidence is solid. It changed everything. There is much more evidence. If you want to read it, check out Josh McDowell's book, [The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict](#). At 760 pages in length, it will give you more than enough evidence for the historicity of Jesus.

Conclusion

The real Easter story is much more compelling than many of us realized. Right now, Jesus is not dead. He is very much alive. He is seated at the right hand of God in heaven answering our prayers.

Every other religious leader is dead. Mohammad, Krishna, Buddha, Gandhi; you name it. They are all dead. They are mulch. They haven't conquered sin. They haven't conquered the grave.

Folks, only Jesus is alive. Right now, he is offering to completely forgive your sin. Not only is he offering to forgive your sin but he promises that when

you die, it won't be the ultimate defeat. It will be the ultimate victory. He will bring you home into his presence in heaven.

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live," John 11:25 (ESV)

I say this because some of you this morning are not Christians. You came in thinking the resurrection was a fairy tale. You thought it was a stupid story for old women. I hope I gave you enough evidence to believe the resurrection is a fact of history. Jesus is just as real as the person sitting next to you. I ask you to give your heart and life to Jesus. Become a Christian today. Ask Jesus to forgive your sins and give your life to him. Jesus is seated in heaven. He is alive. He will hear and respond to your prayer.

Some of you are this morning are Christians but your faith is wavering. My hope is simply that this Easter message helps solidify your faith. I also hope this message helps you with your friends and neighbors that do not know Jesus. I hope it helps you answer their questions. Many of their questions are the same ones we answered this morning. If you would like to review what I said in more detail, a manuscript of this message is available at the website www.christ2Rculture.com. Download it and read it. I hope it helps you.

As we close in a final song, some of you need to confess your sins to Jesus and ask him to forgive them. He will. The Bible promises he will make you into a new creation.

Others of you just need to respond to Christ by worshipping him with a renewed confidence that he is alive and he loves you.

Let's pray.

Jesus, thank you for rising from the dead. Thank you for your resurrection being a fact of history, not a hollow myth or an empty legend. I ask for those who came this morning and didn't know the real Easter story. I ask that you would help them take the first step of faith in a relationship with you this morning. Amen.



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