

The good news of the Resurrection is central to Christianity.¹ It's so important we celebrate it weekly. Every Sunday is a celebration of the Lord's Resurrection.

And, we not only have a weekly celebration of Easter. The good news of the Resurrection is so great that we also have an annual season of Easter. 50 Days. 7 weeks and 8 Sundays. A week of weeks. From the day of Easter through the day of Pentecost. A glorious festival celebrating the central tenet of Christianity: the Resurrection.

Yet, there are many in our culture who don't believe in the Resurrection. There are many who dismiss it as a fairy tale. There are many who try to explain it away.

They attack the Resurrection from several different angles. I want to talk about several of those this morning. And since our Gospel lesson explicitly tries to counteract several of those attacks, we'll be looking at it as well.

We need to consider, what are their arguments? What is the evidence? My initial training was in the physical sciences. One of the things I was taught was to look for explanations that rang true. To weigh the evidence. To seek the most logical explanation.

People don't normally come back from the grave. Dead people usually stay dead. And yet we proclaim that Christ is Risen. So what are the arguments for and against the Resurrection?

The first cluster of attacks on the Resurrection are clustered not on the events of Easter but on Good Friday. I don't want to go into great detail here, but there are a number of different suggestions that Jesus was never raised because he never died.

There are various suggestions. Maybe he was drugged. Maybe he just passed out. Maybe he studied meditation techniques from Eastern Gurus so that he could mimic being comatose. Maybe he was gravely injured but the cool air of the tomb revived him. But, these theories say, he was never really killed.

Two main problems here. First, it presupposes that the Romans didn't know what they were doing. But the Roman army was efficient and vicious when it came to executions. They would sometimes crucify hundreds of people at a time, and none of them survived the cross. The only historical account of people surviving crucifixion is from the Jewish historian Josephus. Three people survived, but only because of an appeal to the Roman governor which led to an order to have the soldiers take them down from their crosses. And even so, despite medical care, two of the three subsequently died from their wounds.

On top of that, the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, and as we hear from the Gospel of John every Good Friday, blood and water poured out.² Medical experts say blood mixed with a clear fluid must have come from a piercing of the heart and the pericardial sac around it. That would indicate that Jesus did not survive the cross, that he was really dead.

¹ This is a slight revision of a past sermon, but the content is important enough to preach it again.

² John 19:34

Second, even if we ignore all that and figure Jesus somehow survived, he would have been in terrible physical shape. Not only did he undergo the agonies of crucifixion. He also survived a flogging that was often fatal in and of itself. I have many problems with Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion*. But one thing that is hyper-accurate in excruciatingly graphic detail is the flogging. I won't go into much detail. But there are ancient descriptions that Roman whips would cut so deeply that bones and internal organs were often visible.

So even if Jesus survived the cross, and the flogging that preceded it, even if he woke up in the tomb, even if he somehow was able to move a very heavy stone in his weakened condition, he would not be in any shape to fool anyone into thinking he had triumphantly come back from the dead. He would have looked like he was still at death's door. A modern hospital would list him as being in critical condition. He would have needed intensive medical care. He would NOT inspire anyone to think that he had triumphantly conquered death and the grave.

These various theories that Jesus never really died are not convincing based on the rules of evidence and logic. Besides, at the time, none of Christianity's opponents suggested he never died. They attacked the Resurrection from a different angle. They said someone must have stolen the body, even though they themselves had set guards at the tomb. They never claimed that Jesus had not really died.

Which brings us from Good Friday to Easter.

The basic attack against Easter is simple: people don't ordinarily rise from the dead.

Sometimes skeptics seem to think that ancient people were unaware of this simple fact. Believe me—first century people were very aware that dead people stayed dead. In fact, given their shorter life spans and often more brutal existence, they were probably more aware than we are of the reality and nature of death.

Yet the early Christians proclaimed that Jesus had died, and yet lives.

So what arguments and evidence suggest that Jesus did rise from death?

Someone once said you can summarize up the case for Easter with 3 words that begin with the letter "E."

The first is "Early." The Resurrection of Jesus was the central proclamation of the Christian Church from its earliest times. It was not something made up later. It was not something that was added on. It was at the core from the beginning. In the book of Acts, on the day of Pentecost, 50 days after the Resurrection, Peter says about Jesus, "God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him."³

³ Acts 2:24

But, some skeptics would claim, Acts wasn't written down until 50 years or so after the fact. Maybe it's just made up.

Which brings us to a lesson we heard 2 weeks ago on Easter Sunday: 1 Corinthians 15. 1 Corinthians was written by Paul only 25 years after Jesus' death. And in it Paul talks about what he was taught when he first became a Christian, which would have been within just a few years of the first Easter.

Paul writes to the Corinthian church, "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures."⁴

From the very earliest days of the church, the Resurrection was at the heart of the good news. E is for Early.

The second "E" word is "Empty." It's consistent in all 4 Gospels. Jesus is placed in the tomb Friday late afternoon. Matthew even tells us that the tomb was sealed and guarded by the authorities. And on Sunday morning, the stone was found rolled away, and the tomb was empty.

An empty tomb by itself is not proof positive of the Resurrection. But as a piece of the testimony it is extremely important. After all, if the tomb wasn't empty, the Jewish and Roman authorities could have ended Christianity very quickly. If they opened the tomb and said, "Here's the body," that would have been it.

But they never did. They agreed the tomb was empty. They offered an alternative explanation—the disciples stole the body. That's very unlikely since the tomb was being guarded.

Besides, what would be the motivation for the disciples stealing the body? There was no precedent for a Resurrected Messiah. In fact, even though Jesus mentioned being crucified before his death, it is obvious that the idea of a crucified Messiah never took hold until after his Resurrection. In Luke, in the story that precedes our Gospel lesson today, 2 disciples are on the road to Emmaus. They've heard that the tomb is empty. They've heard that some of their women have heard the good news that Jesus was raised. But they were still depressed. **THEY DIDN'T BELIEVE JESUS HAD RISEN.** Why?

Because, to them, a dead Messiah was by definition a failed Messiah. It took Jesus walking along side of them, doing a Bible study with them to show them that a crucified Messiah was congruent with what had been prophesied in the Old Testament. And later that day, as we heard in our Gospel lesson today, Jesus does the same with the rest of the disciples. As we heard today, "Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day."⁵

⁴ 1Cor 15:3-4

⁵ Luke 24:45-46

So what was their motivation to steal the body? To be able to proclaim a Risen Messiah even though none of them had previously conceived of the idea of a Risen Messiah? That hardly makes sense.

And why would they make something like this up? And even if they had made it up, why would they all change the way they were living, and why would they all face death rather than deny that Jesus was raised from death? People will often die for what they believe is true. But no one is likely to die for what they know is false.

The tomb was empty. And there was no reasonable reason for the disciples to steal the body. E is for Empty.

The third "E" word is "Eyewitnesses." We get some lists of eyewitnesses in the Gospels. But Paul gives us the most complete list. Back to 1Corinthians 15. Right after he says that the earliest thing he had received was the Jesus died and was raised, Paul talks about all the witnesses to the Resurrection. And remember, this list is decades earlier than even the Gospel accounts.

Paul says that after Jesus was raised, "he appeared to Cephas (Peter), then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all (Paul says), as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."⁶

500-plus witnesses Paul says. And most of them are still alive he says at the time he wrote the letter. If you don't believe me, he's saying—ask them.

And there's one more detail I'd like to add about the eyewitnesses. Though there would eventually be more than 500, the first witnesses were women. In those days, women's testimony was considered unreliable. Women's testimony was inadmissible in court.

If someone were to make up Christianity in the first century, why would they have women as the first witnesses to the most central event? Why are women the first witnesses to the Resurrection in all four Gospels? That's just asking for trouble. That's just inviting skepticism. Why would they say that women were witnesses? There's only one reasonable explanation. The women really WERE the first witnesses—they really did encounter the risen Christ. And later, hundreds of others also encountered the risen Christ.

E is for Eyewitnesses.

Given all the evidence, I've only found one conclusion that makes sense. There's only one conclusion that rings true. Jesus Christ is Risen from the dead. And it changed the way the disciples lived their lives. And that good news can change our lives as well.

⁶ 1Corinthians 15:5-8