

In the 1840s, there was a mystery that astronomers were trying to solve. They knew of 7 planets. There was Earth. And there were the 5 classical planets known to the ancients, and easily visible to the naked eye: Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. And in the 1780's, Uranus had been discovered with the help of a telescope. But now in the 1840's, astronomers had noted that there were some mathematical irregularities in Uranus's orbit. They hypothesized that there was another planet out there, as yet undiscovered. They believed it was making Uranus's orbit speed up and slow down slightly at various times.

The best calculations were completed in 1846, and the supposed position of the planet was sent to an observatory with one of the world's best telescopes. Within a few hours that same evening, the astronomers there were able to locate the planet Neptune, within 1° of where the calculations said it should be. 1° by the way is about the size of a dime at arm's length. That's pretty close. All the best data said that Neptune should be there. And, sure enough, there it was.

There are still similar mysteries in astronomy today. There are similar mathematical irregularities in the orbits of objects 20 times further out than Neptune. The best explanation is that there is a large planet, 10x the size of Earth orbiting in the far fringes of our solar system. Astronomers are searching diligently for it today.

In a similar way, astronomers and physicists today are struggling to define dark matter and dark energy. We have absolutely no idea what they are. But dark matter and dark energy are known by their effects. And the current estimate is that everything that is made of regular matter, everything that is made of atoms, everything we can see and touch, only makes up a fraction of what's out there. Normal matter is now thought to constitute less than 5% of the universe. Dark matter and dark energy together make up the remaining 95%. We don't know what they are. But as bizarre as the thought is, undiscovered dark matter and dark energy are the best scientific explanation for the best data we have.

And I would make the same claim for the reality of something else that is bizarre: the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. I didn't always believe in the reality of the Resurrection. My undergraduate training was in the physical sciences. At that time, I was functionally an agnostic. And if you asked me then, I would have said that I thought that the Resurrection was at best a metaphor, at worst a primitive fairy tale.

But today I believe that the actual Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the best answer for what happened in Jerusalem almost 2,000 years ago. I would argue that the Resurrection, as bizarre a claim as that might be, is the best explanation for the data we have. And I'm planning to share my reasoning with you today.

When it comes to the Resurrection, there are four common objections.

Objection #1 is that dead people stay dead. We're not talking about resuscitation after your heart has temporarily stopped for a few minutes. We're talking really dead. Dead for 36 hours. People who are dead for 36 hours stay dead.

When objection #1 is raised, it usually comes with a touch of modern hubris. "We know that dead people stay dead." We act like that's some sort of modern discovery. Which is so ironic. People in earlier eras also knew that dead people stayed dead. In fact, they were more acquainted with death in their everyday lives than we are. Life was "nasty, brutish, and short." And until the late 19th century, families would take care of their own dead. They wouldn't ship the bodies of their loved ones off to professionals. They would prepare the bodies for burial themselves. They wouldn't put makeup on the corpses to make them look lifelike. They wouldn't put AstroTurf around the grave to make it seem more pleasant. They knew what the brutal and stark reality of death was. They knew dead was dead, really dead.

Jesus' disciples knew that dead people stayed dead. In fact, when Jesus' disciples were first told about the Resurrection, their first reaction was to reject it out of hand. The gospels say that when the women return with the news of the Resurrection this was the disciples' reaction:

"These words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them."¹

Or as another translation says,

"(The disciples) did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense."²

Dead people stay dead? No duh. The disciples believed the same thing. But something happened to change their minds. More on that in a minute.

Objection #2: Well, obviously Jesus' disciples knew he was dead. It was later generations that came along and made up the story that Jesus was resurrected. It was those darn Gospel writers, the theory goes. They crafted these made-up stories about the Resurrection. And a fair amount of time had elapsed between Jesus' life and the writing of the Gospels. 40 years in the case of Mark. 50 some-odd years in the case of Matthew and Luke. Maybe 60-plus years in the case of John.

This theory says that the early Christians never claimed that Jesus was raised from the dead. It was the Gospel writers who invented it, 40, 50, 60 years later. Besides, after so much time had elapsed, there was no way that these Gospel writers could have had any idea what "REALLY" happened.

I would make a couple of responses. Yes, 40 years is a long time. 43 years ago, President Nixon resigned after the Watergate scandal. That was a long time ago. But I know there are many in this room who remember those events. I know I do.

54 years ago, President Kennedy was assassinated. There are still people around who remember that. I was a baby. But I've heard the stories. I know where I was that day because my parents have told me.

¹ Lk 24:11

² Lk 24:11 NIV

Or 60 plus years ago. Eisenhower. Truman. The Korean War. That's well in the past. But there are still some here who remember those events.

Yes, the Gospels were written 40, 50, 60 years after the fact. But that's not outside the realm of living memory. It is possible to preserve eyewitness testimony at that time scale.

But I would make another response as well, and this is far more important. The Gospels were not the first Christian writings to make the claim of the reality of the Resurrection.

The earliest Christian writings, the Epistles, also made that claim. The very earliest is 1Thessalonians, written not 40, or 50, or 60 years after the fact. It was written a mere 16 or 17 years later. That's like remembering the events of Bush versus Gore and hanging chads in Florida. Or it's like remembering the attacks on September 11. That seems relatively recent.

In 1Thessalonians, Paul says we believe in Jesus, "whom God raised from the dead."³

A few chapters later, he says, "since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died."⁴

This idea of the Resurrection was not something that was made up 50 or 60 years after the fact. It was part of the earliest proclamation of THE earliest Christian writing extant.

About five years later Paul would write to the Corinthians,

"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, and that he appeared to (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, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."⁵

Paul wrote these words about 22 years after the Resurrection. He lists a number of original witnesses: Peter and the 12 disciples... James the brother of Jesus and first bishop of Jerusalem... And more than 500 others, most of whom were still alive at the time of writing.

Paul is saying basically, "You don't believe me? Ask them. They were there. Most of them are still around."

But Paul also says something else at the beginning of this section. "I handed on to you... what I in turn had received: that Christ died... and was raised."

This pushes the clock back even closer to the original events. Paul is writing 22 years after the fact. But he references what he was first taught when he first became a Christian. And that would have been a mere 3 to 5 years after the Resurrection.

³ 1Thess 1:10

⁴ 1Thess 4:14

⁵ 1Cor 15:3-9

The Resurrection was not something made up by the Gospel writers decades later. It was part of the earliest proclamation of the Christian church.

Objection #3: OK, it wasn't made up decades later. Then maybe it was made up by those original apostles. Maybe the 12 disciples, along with the other 500 witnesses just make the story up.

That's possible. But that's a heck of a large conspiracy theory. Two or three people might be able to make up a false story, and promulgate the lie. But 12 people? 500 people? No group that large could make something up, proclaim it as fact, and keep it a secret that it was really a made-up lie. Somebody would have blown the whistle. Somebody would have spilled the beans.

Besides, if you're going to make up a story like that, you want it to be ironclad.

But in all the accounts of the Resurrection it is women who are the first witnesses of the Resurrection. That's a flimsy way to start a false claim. Because women's testimony was not regarded as reliable according to the rabbis in the Mishnah. Also, the Jewish historian Josephus writing in the first century famously says, "let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex."⁶ It doesn't make sense to invent a claim that women were the first witnesses of the Resurrection, unless women really WERE the first witnesses of the Resurrection.

Objection #4: Something of a corollary. Maybe the disciples didn't make it up. Maybe it was just wishful thinking. Maybe they wanted to believe so badly that Jesus was still with them that they convinced themselves that he really was alive in some sort of spiritual sense.

Maybe it was self-hypnosis. Ok, that might be possible. But only for a small number, one or two people. Again, it becomes more unlikely if we're talking about 12 people, or 500 people.

Plus the other answer to both objections 3 and 4 is that people might be willing to make up a lie or convince themselves of something that isn't true. But they are very unlikely to be willing to die for a lie.

And yet, all of the original disciples, with possible one exception,⁷ were willing to face death rather than deny the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And these were guys who were hiding out in fear of death on the first Easter. Peter denied Jesus out of fear. The disciples were hiding behind locked doors out of fear of arrest and execution.

⁶ *Antiquities* 4.8.15

⁷ There are mixed traditions about John, that he either was martyred, or that he died in exile of natural causes.

And yet something changed. Within a mere 50 days, something changed. Something made them willing to stand up publically, come what may, and proclaim the astounding news that Jesus was dead, but was alive again, and had appeared to them and to hundreds of others. And because of that, they were no longer afraid of death. They went to their deaths rather than deny this assertion.

In the 1840s the data and evidence in the Solar System pointed to the fact that there was something about the size of a Neptune orbiting in the location of a Neptune. The most logical explanation turned out to be true. There really was a Neptune.

In the early first century, the data and evidence and consistent witness of the early Church also points me to the most logical explanation. Even though it is amazing... Even though it is counter intuitive... Even though it is outside of our normal realm of experience... The most logical explanation to me is that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead.

Brutality does not win. Evil does not win. Death does not win. Hate does not win.

God wins. Life wins. Love wins.

Christ is risen from the dead.
He is risen indeed. Alleluia.