

The Challenge of Easter

The Logic of Easter (turn to Acts 1)

In our days, and it was the same in the first century, someone could ask you or me this question: "you believe in Jesus, and I believe in Buddha, or Mohammed, or Confucius. What makes you right to believe in Jesus, and me wrong to believe in someone else?"

This is an entirely fair question. If we think they are wrong, we need to give an answer that has some appeal to them. The NT has prepared an answer for us.

NOT: "Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God." NT preachers were asked the same question, and that was *not* their answer.

NOT: "The Bible says so," because these other faiths often have a book, too.

BUT: "Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, and Confucius: which did God raise from the dead? Jesus of Nazareth."

It's quite possible that they will not believe that Jesus rose from the dead. We'll deal with that later. But *you and I* need to know why *we* have chosen to follow Jesus and not one of the other people who taught about God. Answer: God raised Jesus from the dead.

Many different people have taught about God, or about spiritual truth and life. Look at this from God's perspective.

Suppose God was looking down on all these teachers and preachers, listening to all of them and watching all of them, and found that one of them was saying exactly the the right things, one spoke the truth about God.

So God wanted all humans to listen to *that* person. How might God let the world know which human was saying the right things? How does God say to the world, *this* is the one to listen to, *this* one has the truth, follow *this* one and no other.

How would God let people know? We can guess what method God might choose, or debate methods, but it's too late. God already figured out how to let the world know which person above all other had it right, and needed to be heard.

God let others reject this one special leader and teacher, and kill him, and then God said "NO!" raising *that one* back to life.

By raising this one leader and teacher back to life, God is saying "NO, do NOT reject *that* person, that's the *last* person on earth you should reject. I am raising him back to life. You listen to *that* person. *Listen* to him."

This is the logic of Easter, and this is exactly how the early church preached. In Acts, the spearhead of the gospel is not that God loves us, or that Jesus died for our sins, or that Jesus is the Son of God. They said some of that.

But the spearhead of the gospel was: "This man taught about God, as many others. God raised this man from the dead, and no other. You are not following this man. What are you going to do about it?"

Resurrection Witness and the Gospel in Acts

The first few verses of Acts talk about Jesus' resurrection appearances. We kind of skip over this part to get to the Holy Spirit verses, but that's not a good idea.

Acts 1:3 - After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.

Later in Acts 1, the Eleven pick a replacement for Judas. I want you to listen carefully what this twelfth will do.

Acts 1:21-22 - It is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²² beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.

And after this, every sermon speaks of the resurrection. And the task of the apostles was to *witness* to this. That's "witness" in Acts. Tell the people you saw Jesus alive after his was killed and buried.

Acts 2:32 - God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact.

Acts 3:13-15 - The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. ¹⁴ You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. ¹⁵ You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this.

Can you feel the logic here? "You people rejected Jesus, but you must change, because God raised him back to life. We saw him alive, and we know it. What will you do?"

Acts 10:39-42 - They killed him by hanging him on a cross, ⁴⁰ but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. ⁴¹ He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify [Greek: "to witness"] that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.

The resurrection is how we know that Jesus is the one God appointed. Notice that in this preaching, the preachers always assume the full humanity of Jesus.

This has sometimes been an embarrassment to us, because the preachers in Acts seem not to know about Jesus being the eternal Son of God. They probably did know more than they said. But in preaching to unbelievers, that's not the point. Let Jesus just be a man, but the man God raised.

In Acts 13 Paul preaches. Paul was did not see the raised Jesus during the 40 days, and so he is not a witness of that. But he still preaches the resurrection, and its witnesses.

Acts 13:29-31 - When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the cross and laid him in a tomb. ³⁰ But God raised him from the dead, ³¹ and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people.

One more, Paul in Acts 17. This text uses the logic of the resurrection up front.

Acts 17:31 - For God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.

God has appointed a man. How do we know which man God appointed. God proved to everyone which man he appointed, by raising him from the dead. That is the evidence. That is why we put our trust in Jesus of Nazareth.

Now turn to 1 Cor 15. We have Paul's version of what he preached. He's going to speak most about witnesses of the resurrection, but he does not call it witnesses of the resurrection. He calls it the gospel. This is the message he preached.

1Cor 15:1-8 - Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ² By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

³ *For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance [Paul was taught this early on, and he memorized it; it was of first importance]: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles [memorized part probably ends here; Paul adds], ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.*

The ***gospel*** is that Jesus died for our sins, and was buried, and was raised the third day, and two thirds of ***the gospel*** is a list of witnesses of the resurrection. This sounds a lot like the gospel they preached in Acts, doesn't it.

Let me repeat the logic of the resurrection. Why do we think Jesus is the one? There could be lots of good answers to that, but when we are talking to unbelievers, the answer is always the same: God raised this man from the dead, and no other.

Evidence for the Resurrection

People will mock the resurrection. I just read to you Acts 17:31. The very next line in Acts says that Paul's audience sneered at him when they heard about the resurrection. What then?

First, let's be clear that no one is even claiming this for their religious leader or teacher. No one says God raised Mohammed or Buddha, or any of the others.

There's no competition. Christians are the only ones with enough audacity, enough preposterous naïveté to claim such. No one else is trying.

Let's admit from the start that we cannot prove the resurrection. Of course it is hard to believe. Never mock a skeptic, as if he or she was a fool not to believe that God raised Jesus from the dead.

The evidence for the resurrection is mainly the difficulty explaining the writings of the early church, and the lives of early Christians, any other way. There are two options for other explanations: either the disciples were fooled, or they were liars.

If Jesus did not rise, the first followers either knew that (liars), or they did not (fooled).

Hoax Let's try on the view that the disciples made up the story of the empty tomb and the resurrection of Jesus. They lied; it was a huge fraud.

The trouble with this is their lives. Early history makes clear that in the first 30 years after Jesus' death, the church grew and spread remarkably. By 30 years there were congregations of Jesus' followers in most Roman cities. That's history, not the Bible.

Early history also makes clear that there was lots of opposition, and many of these early preachers were killed. They explained this: they willingly died because they were persuaded that if they were killed, what happened to Jesus would happen to them.

Would people die for a lie? Others besides Christians have died for truth they believed in. But would people die for a fraud, a hoax, a lie, when telling the truth would keep them alive? That is hard to believe, doesn't really make sense.

There are many NT scholars who do not believe Jesus rose from the dead, and I'll get to them. They have other explanations for what we call the resurrection of Jesus. But none of them, to my knowledge, think it was a hoax. The first generation was far too devoted.

People in the public now will often have this view. There are lots of frauds around, and the resurrection story is another one. People who think that are not very informed. Ask them to explain why the first generation of preachers was so willing to die for their faith.

The NT records an early hoax theory. Matthew 28:12-15 - *When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, ¹³ telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' ¹⁴ If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." ¹⁵ 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.*

The weakness is that these disciples willingly faced death. Death was not a deterrent.

This hoax theory tells us something, though. It makes the empty tomb clear. The body of Jesus had disappeared, it was not in the tomb, the women had not gone to the wrong tomb. Everyone knew which tomb Jesus had been buried in, and it was empty, and there was not body.

This does not prove the resurrection, but it does tell us that the empty tomb stories were undeniable, and that no one could produce the dead body of Jesus.

No scholar promotes the disciples stealing the body as the real explanation, though, because those very disciples were too willing to die for preaching the resurrection.

Disciples Mistaken

Among the NT scholars who do not believe in the resurrection, this is the normal explanation. And they usually do something all these lines: the disciples had some kind of spiritual experience of Jesus being alive again, some kind of group hallucination.

This could be. There are other documented cases of a group having remarkable spiritual experiences. The frequent references to repeatedly eating and drinking with Jesus seem to go beyond a group spiritual experience, but let's grant the possibility.

The problem with this is the empty tomb. A group experience does not dispose of the body of Jesus. No matter how remarkable the experience, and no matter how often it happened, Jesus' corpse would still be in the tomb.

The common answer to this is that after the spiritual experience of the meeting the raised Jesus, legends grew up to support the experience. The empty tomb stories we have in the gospels were legends that grew around that experience, and that's where we get the stories we have in the gospels about the women going and finding the tomb empty.

Let's take a look at this. First of all, there's the hoax theory in Matthew 28. The hoax theory assumes the certainty of the empty tomb, even by the enemies of Jesus.

Secondly, we don't have 100 years for a legend to grow. The Gospels were written about 40 years after Jesus died. Even the skeptics agree with that. And the four Gospels all have basically the same story of the women going to the tomb early Sunday morning.

That means that this "legend" is established pretty early on, which means that we can't say a legend grew. We have to say someone early on made up a story, and told it long and loud. Could that be true?

The main difficulty with this is that in the ancient world, women were viewed as very poor witnesses. They could not tell truth from their imagination, they were too easily swayed into saying what was not true. Women were not trusted to give a clear and accurate account of what they'd seen.

You can see this in the 1 Corinthians 15 Scripture I read. This early bit of Christian teaching, which was taught to Paul and which he passed on whenever he preached, did not list any women witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus. Why?

Because if you were preaching to unbelievers that God raised Jesus from the dead, and you said that the witnesses were women, your audience would laugh at you. It's the same in Acts: when they preach the resurrection to unbelievers, the witnesses are all men.

But, and get this because it is important, when they tell the story of what actually happened, which is what the four Gospels do, the first witnesses are all women. God thought women made fine witnesses.

The point is this: if the disciples had a group experience of the risen Jesus, and later made up a story about the empty tomb to support their experience, *they would never have made up a story about women witnesses*. The preaching in Acts and 1 Cor 15 makes that clear.

The weakness of the hoax theory is that the first generation of preachers was too devoted to Jesus, too willing to face death. Doesn't sound like a hoax.

The weakness of the spiritual experience theory is the empty tomb. A spiritual experience does not get rid of Jesus' body. The weakness of the empty tomb as legend theory is that the crucial witnesses of the empty tomb were women.

The early preachers knew that women were not credible witnesses, and never mentioned them. Why would they make up a story about women as witnesses of the empty tomb?

The resurrection stories are actually quite restrained. If, hypothetically, Jesus did rise from the dead, we'd expect something like what we read. People doubt, they see and don't recognize, they see and don't believe, they don't believe each other.

If they were going to make up a story of the empty tomb, why does no one see Jesus coming out of the tomb? To make up a useful story, *someone* should have seen Jesus come out of the tomb, like Peter and James and John. But no one saw him come out.

There are scholars who don't believe Jesus rose, and understand all these weaknesses quite well, and they just talk about "the Easter Event." They put a cloud over it.

Jesus was crucified and buried, and then (in this thinking) a cloud comes over Jesus and the disciples, and two months later the disciples come out of the cloud preaching the resurrection. But what happened in that cloud? No one knows. It's "the Easter Event."

The main evidence for the resurrection is simply coming up with another explanation, *any* other explanation, that accounts for what even a skeptic sees in this story.

The variety of explanations, the great variety itself, shows how difficult it is for even skeptics to imagine a logical explanation for what the skeptics know to be true, an explanation outside of the actual rising of Jesus.

I have a little booklet here that I want to advertise. I have copies of it at the back for you to take if you want. *The Evidence for the Resurrection*, by J. N. D. Anderson, published by InterVarsity Press. It is 28 pages long, 28 little pages.

This book was written in 1964, but I have read it right through, and it still holds true. Anderson looks at different ways scholars have denied the resurrection, and using the kind of reasoning I have used here he defends the resurrection of Jesus.

I read a different book in my high school years, that spoke in this way about Jesus' resurrection, and I loved it.

Faith goes past reason and logic, but in Scripture it does not go against reason and logic. It goes in the same direction as logic and reason, only farther.

If someone folds their arms and leans back and says, "Resurrection of Jesus? Prove it!" we cannot, not in the terms they are asking.

But if someone will say, "I find this very hard to believe, but if God did raise Jesus, I'd like him to make this clear to me," then there is evidence to help that person.

But I have spoken this way today so that *you* will know why you believe in Jesus and not any of the others, and also so that if someone else asks you why you think Jesus is the way to God and not their teacher, you will have an answer.

The resurrection also throws a different light back over everything Jesus said and did. The resurrection is like God drawing a line under all Jesus said and did, highlighting it all, a huge Divine "**Amen!**" to all of it.

So the resurrection is challenge to the world, and both challenge and encouragement to us. Amen.