



This is a basic manuscript from a sermon at Westminster Church
in Barrie on April 8, 2018 by Matthew Ruttan

The full podcast can be heard here:

<http://westminsterpc.ca/sermon/is-there-evidence-for-the-resurrection/>

Alright, put on your seatbelts, we're going on a bit of a journey this morning!

Let's start with 1 Corinthians 15:16-18, written by the apostle Paul in the mid-50's after the resurrection to a group of struggling Christians in the ancient city of Corinth. Here he's talking about the centrality of the resurrection to our faith:

"For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied."

Yup, if the resurrection didn't happen our faith is "futile" and we are "of all people most to be pitied."

Futile. Pitied.

So yes, the resurrection is central to our faith. It's not out in left field somewhere, its home plate. So with that in mind, and on the heels of Easter Sunday, our question today is this:

Is there evidence for the resurrection?

According to my trusty Webster's dictionary evidence is "anything that provides material or information on which a conclusion or proof may be based, an indication." So exploring the evidence for the truthfulness of something requires the use of our brains—it requires following the evidence. And what is more important than exploring the truthfulness of the resurrection, especially if our faith is "futile" without it?

For me, the biblical rationale for exploring the evidence for the resurrection comes from Jesus himself. In Mark 12:30, he outlines the greatest commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your MIND and with all your strength..." (capitals added). One of the implications of this is that using your mind—your brain, your reason—is a part of your devotion to God.

I once overheard a young person ask an older person this question: "How do I know if the resurrection *actually* happened?" Great question! After all, it's a pretty wild story. A guy came back to life for goodness sakes! Here's the answer they got back: "Well, you just have to believe."

I'm sorry that but that answer just isn't good enough. Reasons matter. Reason to your faith is like walls to your house—it gives it strength, structure, and guards against collapse.

So have you ever wanted to feel more confident about the resurrection? Then this is for you. Have you ever been confronted with "conspiracy theories" but didn't know how to respond? Then this is for you. Have you ever had people criticize your belief in the resurrection and wanted to feel better equipped in how you responded? Then this is for you.

We'll proceed in two parts.

Part 1 falls under this question: *What are the biggest stumbling blocks to people not believing in the resurrection?* In this part I'll present four of the major conspiracy theories and respond to them. What I'm going to show is that what people often think are stumbling blocks to belief turn out to be evidences *for* belief.

Part 2 falls under this question: *What are other pieces of evidence that lend credibility to the resurrection?*

NO MIRACLE BIAS

But first, I need to address something I call the "no miracle bias." If someone is dead-set against miracles, there is nothing anyone can say that will convince them (or you) that the resurrection of Jesus actually happened.

They could even personally see Jesus rise from the dead, turn water into wine, or walk across water, and they still simply wouldn't believe. They have an ideological and philosophical predisposition (bias) against the possibility of miracles. In that situation all you can do is share your views with gentleness and respect, and trust God to work on their heart.

But if anyone is open to the possibility that God created the world, they need to be open—by virtue of their own logic—to the possibility of miracles. Here's why. If God can create the world, he can certainly re-arrange the parts and pieces whenever he wants to. It's totally within his power.

I once heard it described like a watchmaker making a watch. Does that same watchmaker have the ability, after he's made the watch, to turn the dials and re-set the time? Sure he does. That's what miracles are like to God.

PART 1: WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST STUMBLING BLOCKS TO PEOPLE NOT BELIEVING IN THE RESURRECTION?

CONSPIRACY THEORY 1:

JESUS WASN'T REALLY DEAD. HE JUST PASSED OUT, APPEARED DEAD, AND WALKED OUT OF TOMB WHEN HE REGAINED HIS SENSES

In response to this, here are three things to think about.

A. Crucifixion was a form of torture which was too brutal to allow anyone to survive

About the crucifixion, John Mattingly writes, "It cannot be overemphasized that the sufferings endured on the cross were extremely intense and severe. The abominableness of this torture was realized by Rome's most famous orator, Marcus Tullius Cicero, who said, 'Even the mere word, cross, must remain far not only from the lips of the citizens of Rome, but also from their thoughts, their eyes, their ears.'"

Others talk about the brutal nature of the torture that preceded crucifixion and about how horrible the whipping was (which was a public spectacle and shaming ritual), and how it tore open the flesh. Since there were often pieces of glass fixed to the end of the whips, veins were exposed, tearing open the body. Scholars say that the gory depiction of the torture scene in *The Passion of the Christ* starting Mel Gibson was historically accurate.

B. J Warner Wallace, national crime expert, says that the pouring out of blood and water from Jesus' side in John 19:34 is "hidden science" that Jesus was in fact dead

Wallace was an expert on T.V. true crime shows. One of the details he points out that convinced him that Jesus was truly dead on the cross was something he calls a piece of "hidden science." Talking about the body hardening after death and "rigor mortis," he explains that water will collect in your lungs, and how if you pierce that cavity, you will see a separation of blood and water.

With that in mind what do we find in John 19:34? We read that when the soldier pieced Jesus' side with a spear it brought out a flow of "blood and water." For years, some people have said that this was just a made-up detail which perhaps symbolized the waters of baptism and the blood represented in Communion (the Eucharist).

But Wallace has a different take. He says that the Gospel writer "was either so clever that he included some little-known biological fact that nobody would discover for 1800 years or he just reported what he saw. And as a result we have a good piece of hidden science that confirms that Jesus actually died of cardiac arrest and was dead at the point of the body being taken off the cross."

Gerd Lüdemann, the famous atheist New Testament scholar said that it is "historically indisputable" that Jesus was dead before he was taken down from the cross. And the American Medical Association said that, based on the historical and medical evidence, that Jesus was clearly dead even before the sword hit his side.

C. Jesus' body would have been tightly wrapped holding in over 100 pounds of aromatic spices making it hard to move

This might seem strange, but it's a historical detail that a lot of people miss. In fact, it's new to me too. In his book *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, Josh McDowell cites the fact that Jesus' body would have been wrapped tightly holding in over 100 pounds of aromatic spices with three different linen clothes. This is in addition to the fact of him having to roll away a 1.5 to 2 tonne stone from the entrance of the tomb by himself.

CONSPIRACY THEORY 2:

JESUS' BODY WAS STOLEN BY SOMEONE

A. Anywhere from 4 to 20 Roman guards would have been dispatched to guard the tomb and would have been killed if they abandoned their post

Here we need to point out that it would have been very difficult for someone to steal Jesus' body. Another historical fact people often neglect is that there wouldn't have been just one guard watching the tomb. There would have been several, anywhere from 4 to 20. Not only that, but, according to Roman law, the penalty for deserting your post was death!

(One author I read said that if Romans were caught sleeping while on guard they would have their clothes burned first, and then killed!)

B. An edict by Caesar himself called the Nazareth Inscription warns that vandalizing or tampering with tombs, including tampering with a body, was a capital punishment. It is unlikely that frightened disciples would have risked death to take Jesus' body and get past well-armed and violent Roman soldiers.

Do you think it is probable that disciples who ran for their lives and deserted Jesus in his hour of greatest need would then do an about-face in one day's time and risk the death sentence to steal the body, all while getting past a troupe of well-armed and violent Roman soldiers? Not likely.

CONSPIRACY THEORY 3:

PEOPLE MUST HAVE BEEN HALLUCINATING WHEN THEY SAW JESUS ALIVE AGAIN

A. Experts who study hallucinations say that no two people have the same hallucination because it is an internal experience

In responding to these claims, Josh McDowell thought he needed to learn more so that he could understand the idea of hallucinations more thoroughly. He interviewed five experts in the process. They all indicated that no two people have the same hallucination. Why? Because hallucination is an internal experience. The only way hundreds of people could see the same thing ("at the same time," as it says in 1 Corinthians 15:6) and maintain what they said was if they did actually see the same thing: The resurrected Jesus.

CONSPIRACY THEORY 4:

THE CHURCH MUST HAVE MADE UP THE RESURRECTION STORIES TO PROMOTE THEIR OWN CAUSE AND MAKE THEMSELVES LOOK GOOD

This is probably the most popular conspiracy theory and gained prominence in books and movies like *The DaVinci Code*. But there are too many details in the stories of the resurrection that would have *hurt* the spread of Christianity instead of helping it, and there are too many massive shifts in thinking that took place that can only be explained in light of the resurrection. Let me explain with some examples.

A. Jesus says things that might be perceived as signs of weakness, so the only reason they were included in the stories is because they actually happened

For example, on the night before his torture and crucifixion Jesus says "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." (Luke 22:42). Jesus nobly and courageously goes through with the crucifixion to pay for humanity's sins because it's his heavenly Father's will, but the first part of what he said could be perceived as weakness.

Another example is from the cross when he cries out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46) I take the position—along with many others, including some scholars who are much smarter than me—that Jesus was actually quoting Psalm 22 which says the exact same thing. So even though it sounds like a cry of rejection, Jesus is actually using a method of speech called a *synecdoche* which is meant to make us think not just of one sentence, but the meaning of the whole Psalm—a Psalm that includes many allusions to the crucifixion and which ultimately talks about God's triumph and redemption for his people. By quoting Psalm 22 Jesus is helping us understand the meaning of what is happening on the cross.

But to many people, without that background, at first blush it makes Jesus look weak. So there would have been pressure to eliminate these details from the stories. So why are they there?

They're there because the early church knew it was more important to preserve what actually happened than to simply keep the details which would have helped the advance and spread and credibility of Christianity.

B. The fact that women were the first to see the risen Jesus would have hurt the stories of Jesus' resurrection more than it would have helped, therefore it must have happened that way

Let me explain. In 1st century, a woman's testimony was not considered credible enough to be admissible in a court of law. Thankfully we don't think like that anymore. But at the time, that's how many people thought. Therefore, there must have been incredible pressure to change the stories to eliminate that detail to make the resurrection appearances more credible and to help the spread of the faith.

But the details stayed, even if they would have hurt the story's credibility. Why? Because that's what actually happened.

C. The fact that Joseph of Arimathea helped bury Jesus would have been an embarrassing detail to the church

It would have most likely been embarrassing for the church that Joseph of Arimathea, in all likelihood a member of the Sanhedrin who led a trial of Jesus, was the one who helped bury Jesus when all the disciples had run away scared. But again, this is a part of the actual story—so it was left in.

2. WHAT ARE OTHER PIECES OF EVIDENCE THAT LEND CREDIBILITY TO THE RESURRECTION?

Let's move away from addressing conspiracy theories to other pieces of evidence that lend credibility to the resurrection.

A. THE NEW TESTAMENT WRITINGS ABOUT THE RESURRECTION ARE TOO EARLY TO BE MADE UP, AND WERE WRITTEN WHILE THERE WERE STILL LIVING EYE WITNESSES

One of the early writings in the New Testament is 1 Corinthians. Like I said previously it was written in the mid-50's which was less than 20 years after the resurrection. In it we read:

“For what I received I [Paul] passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. 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.” (1 Corinthians 15:3-6, emphasis added)

What this means is that actual living witnesses were still around telling people about what they had seen. If it was untrue, the rumours could have easily been squashed. How? Simply by producing the body! But instead of fading, the movement grew wildly.

Another historical detail is what we find in Mark 15:21. We’re told that Simon of Cyrene helped carry Jesus’ cross. The passage describes him as “the father of Alexander and Rufus.” Now why is that detail there? It’s the ancient version of footnotes. The writer of the Gospel is saying that if you want to know more, go talk to Alexander and Rufus—they were still alive and could let you know firsthand for themselves.

B. THE NEW TESTAMENT SHOWS INCREDIBLE HISTORICAL ACCURACY ON OTHER NON-DISPUTED AREAS, WHICH LENDS CREDIBILITY TO OTHER PARTS OF THE STORY (LIKE RESURRECTION)

Time and time again, as research has been done, and as more and more archaeological discoveries have been made, what we find is that the New Testament is a very reliable source of historical data. Archaeologist Jodi Magness, Kenan Distinguished Professor for Teaching Excellence in Early Judaism at the University of North Carolina, says this: “the Gospel accounts describing Jesus’ removal from the cross and burial are consistent with archaeological evidence and with Jewish law.”

What we find is that what is reported in the Gospels is consistent with what archaeology and other historical data tell us about life in the first century. Therefore, in my mind, this increases the credibility of other parts of the story as well.

We should also keep this detail in mind as well. The combination of two key pieces of evidence (an empty tomb and living eye witnesses) makes the resurrection probable. Here’s why. If the tomb was empty but there were no eye witnesses, it could simply mean that the body could have been stolen (an unlikely scenario which we’ve addressed talked about). And if there were eyewitnesses but no empty tomb, it could simply fuel the conspiracy theory that a bunch of people were having hallucinations (another impossible scenario we’ve addressed.) But together both (a) an empty tomb and (b) eye-witnesses, increases plausibility that he was resurrected.

C. A LARGE GROUP OF PEOPLE STARTING TO THINK IN A RADICALLY DIFFERENT WAY AND VERY QUICKLY—THE BEST EXPLANATION FOR WHICH IS A RESURRECTION

Let me share three examples that I feel are particularly compelling.

First, people started worshiping Jesus virtually overnight

Philippians 2 is acknowledged by scholars to be one of the early documents of the New Testament. And one of the features that makes it unique is that it quotes what many consider to be a hymn or song about Jesus which goes back even further. In Philippians

2:10-11 we read, “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord.” That’s about worship.

We also read in John 20: 28 what the disciple Thomas said when he saw the risen Jesus: “My Lord and my God!” It’s an act of worship which Jesus accepts. In Matthew 28:17 just before Jesus leaves his disciples and gives them the “great commission” to go and make disciples, they “worshiped him.” Then the martyr Stephen in Acts 7:59 prays to Jesus. Again, it’s an act of worship.

For us today, this may not seem like a big deal. But we need to remember that Jewish people in the 1st century (and remember that the early disciples were all Jewish) adhered to a strict monotheism, which means they only worshiped the one true God of the Bible and did not deviate. This was a very serious thing. They did not believe in many gods like the Greek people around them. There was even a commandment about not worshiping other gods. So how, virtually overnight, did people come to worship Jesus as Lord? How did a change in practice happen so suddenly, a change that would have otherwise perhaps taken generations to implement?

It’s because they had come to realize that (a) God was personally present in Jesus, and (b) that he had been raised from the dead.

Second, the day for worship and rest switched from Saturday to Sunday

Again, this might not seem like a big deal. But again, Jewish people in the first century were deeply entrenched in a Saturday-only policy when it came to when they worshiped God. And remember all those rules about the Sabbath that people were always debating in the Bible? That’s because there were strict rules about when they worshiped.

But the Jewish followers of Jesus started to worship on a totally different day, Sunday. That was a massive change in practice. The main reason why this happened was because it was the day of the resurrection. And that had changed everything.

Third, the disciples experienced radical life-change, going from cowards to lions to courage overnight, often giving their lives for their faith.

For example, all of the disciples fled from Jesus and abandoned him in his hour of greatest need. Describing his arrest, Mark 14:50 simply states that “everyone deserted him and fled.”

But after the resurrection, they went from cowards into lions of courage. Most of them died and were martyred as they defended their faith.

And do you know what? You don’t die for a lie. Let’s imagine that you and your friends devise a resurrection story to make yourselves look good. And then let’s say an assassin comes to you, points his rifle at your heart, and tells you to take it back or he’ll shoot you.

Oh, and he has the authority of the government to do so. Are you really going to die for a lie? No, you're not. You don't die for a lie. The great philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal once said, "I [believe] those witnesses that get their throats cut."

Then consider the Christians living in Rome when the brutal and violent Nero was Emperor. They were arrested and burned publicly with tar. They could have recanted—but didn't. Another figure from history is Pliny the Younger who governed Bythynia in the early 2nd century. He led trials of Christians (as evidenced in his Letter #96) and had them put to death if they didn't renounce Christ. Many of them didn't. And he even gave each of them three chances to renounce or face death!

Okay, seatbelts still on? I know that I've said a lot. So let's summarize!

Part 1. What are the biggest stumbling blocks to people not believing in the resurrection?

Conspiracy theory 1: Jesus wasn't really dead. He just passed out, appeared dead, and walked out of tomb when he regained his senses

To this we say:

- Crucifixion was a form of torture which was too brutal to allow anyone to survive
- J Warner Wallace, national crime expert, says that the pouring out of blood and water from Jesus' side in John 19:34 is "hidden science" that he was in fact dead
- Jesus' body would have been tightly wrapped holding in over 100 pounds of aromatic spices making it hard to move

Conspiracy theory 2: Jesus' body was stolen by someone

To this we say:

- Anywhere from 4 to 20 Roman guards would have been dispatched to guard the tomb and would have been killed if they abandoned their post
- An edict by Caesar himself called the Nazareth Inscription warns that vandalizing or tampering with tombs, including tampering with a body, was a capital punishment. It is unlikely that frightened disciples would have risked death to take Jesus' body and get past well-armed and violent Roman soldiers.

Conspiracy theory 3: People must have been hallucinating when they saw Jesus alive again

To this we say:

- Experts who study hallucinations say that no two people have the same hallucination because it is an internal experience

Conspiracy theory 4: The church must have made up the resurrection stories to promote their own cause and make themselves look good

To this we say that there are too many details in the stories of the resurrection that would have *hurt* the spread of Christianity instead of helping it, and there are too many massive shifts in thinking that took place that can only be explained in light of the resurrection. For example:

- Jesus says things that might be perceived as signs of weakness, so the only reason they were included in the stories is because they actually happened
- The fact that women were the first to see the risen Jesus would have hurt the stories of Jesus' resurrection more than it would have helped, therefore it must have happened that way
- The fact that Joseph of Arimathea helped bury Jesus would have been an embarrassing detail to the church

So what we've seen is that arguments people think are stumbling blocks to belief actually turn out to be evidence for belief.

Part 2. What are other pieces of evidence that lend credibility to the resurrection?

The New Testament writings about the resurrection are too early to be made up, and were written while there were still living eye witnesses, and could have been easily squashed

The New Testament shows incredible historical accuracy on other non-disputed areas, which lends credibility to other parts of the story (like resurrection)

A large group of people starting to think in a radically different way and very quickly—the best explanation of this is a resurrection

- People started worshipping Jesus virtually overnight
- The day for worship and rest switched from Saturday to Sunday
- The disciples experienced radical life-change, going from cowards to lions to courage overnight, often giving their lives for their faith

TWO IMPLICATIONS

There are many implications to all of this, but let me share two.

Here's the first: *If he's risen, he's right.*

The resurrection of Jesus is divine vindication that he was who he said he was, and that what he said was true. So if he's risen...his teachings and wisdom and truth are right for you. If he's risen... the comfort and peace he offers are right for you. If he's risen... the direction and guidance he gives are right for you. If he's risen... the eternal promises of God are offered to you.

Here's a second implication. As Christians, the foundation of our faith is solid: The resurrection of Jesus Christ.

THE RUSH OF REASON

Lee Strobel was the legal editor of the *Chicago Tribune* newspaper. He also didn't believe in God. He felt that anyone who believed in the resurrection of Jesus was a fool. One day his wife announced that she had become a Christian. So Strobel decided to put his investigative and legal skills into full gear to disprove the resurrection of Jesus. After all, if you can disprove the resurrection everything else falls apart.

He spent the next two years reading, researching, talking to experts, and surveying all the evidence he could find. At the end of those twenty-four months of studying historical data he decided, Yes, Jesus was who he said he was and he came back from the grave. In the face of all the evidence he could no longer deny it.

At that moment, he became a Christian. He asked God to forgive his sins, and put his faith in Jesus as the Lord of his life. What I love about Strobel's story is how he describes the moment of his conversion:

“Some people have a rush of emotion at that moment. I didn't.
Do you know what I had? *The rush of reason.*”

When thinking about the resurrection, it's about faith, yes. But it's also about reason and following the evidence. Your mind is a part of your devotion to God. Reason to your faith is like walls to your house—it gives it strength, structure, and guards against collapse.

Know this. If he's risen, he's right. And the foundation of our faith is solid: The resurrection of Jesus Christ.