

“Did Jesus Literally Rise From the Dead?”

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by Rev. Jeremiah Montgomery

This week I would like us to consider together one of the most ridiculed claims of the Christian faith – the belief in the literal, bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

No honest person can deny that the New Testament makes this claim. All four of the Gospel accounts end with people claiming to have seen Christ in the flesh. Those who attempt to water down this testimony by positing a less-than-literal resurrection contradict the very words of Jesus: “See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have,” (Lk 24.39).

It is precisely this insistence on a bodily resurrection that so many modern people – even many churchgoers – find embarrassing. They will acknowledge that a man named Jesus once walked the earth. They will concede that he suffered a horrific death by Roman crucifixion. But to insist that Jesus literally rose from the dead... isn’t that a little bit like believing the world is flat?

The example of a flat earth is actually very helpful in addressing this objection. Very few of us today believe that the world is flat. But why not? *Not* because we have each flown into outer space and witnessed the curvature of our planet firsthand. Rather, we believe the earth is a spheroid on the basis of *reliable testimony* and the *absence of contradicting evidence*. Let’s apply this same criteria to the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Is the testimony of the New Testament reliable? Consider the sheer honesty of the Gospel accounts. When the first reports of the resurrection came in, we are told that all of the apostles were skeptical (Lk 24.11). Even after ten of them were convinced, “Doubting Thomas” persisted in his skepticism for over a week (Jn 20.24-31).

Have you ever marveled at the sheer honesty here? The Bible itself admits that *the apostles* had their doubts! They were real people like us, and the idea of resurrection was not a piece of popular folklore easy to digest. Yet if the whole thing were propaganda, don’t you think the editors of the New Testament would have left out this unflattering episode?

But there is more. The apostle Paul hangs *the entire integrity of the Christian faith* on the literal resurrection of Jesus: “if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain,” (1Cor 15:14). Read that sentence again.

Do you understand the titanic risk Paul is taking here? He is writing less than thirty years after the crucifixion. If Paul knew that Jesus’ body was actually buried somewhere, would he have written such a dangerous statement? Don’t you think he would have hedged his bets, just in case some clever investigator found the body? For that matter, if the body of Jesus was in the ground to be found, wouldn’t the Romans have exhumed and paraded it? What better way to discredit “the sect of the Nazarenes” (Acts 24.5)?

But the body remains missing. The tomb of Jesus Christ is empty to this day. There is no evidence that contradicts the testimony of the New Testament, and the Gospels display an honesty not found in mythology. All of this points us toward an inexorable conclusion: the testimony of the New Testament *is* reliable. And if so, then we are drawn to an even more significant conclusion...

The bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ was no hoax. The resurrection is literal history, and the rest of the New Testament spells out the far-reaching implications.

Maybe you're not convinced. Maybe you're still skeptical. I can respect that. But with respect, I would ask you to consider honestly... what if you're wrong? Aren't the claims of the New Testament at least worth investigating? Who really runs the risk of being a "flat-earther" on this question – the one who pursues the evidence wherever it leads, or those who refuse even to look?

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