

Luke 24:36-43

Removing all Doubt

As we have noted before, the resurrection is the cornerstone of the Christian faith. Without it, we are truly lost, “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins” (1 Corinthians 15:17). Naturally, then, those who choose to challenge the authenticity of the Christian faith, begin with an attack on the historical reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Their motive is simple. If doubt can be cast on the resurrection of Jesus, then doubt is cast on all Jesus said during His lifetime. For after all, Jesus had predicted His resurrection.

“²⁹As the crowds were increasing, He began to say, ‘this generation is a wicked generation; it seeks for a sign, and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah. ³⁰For just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation’” (Luke 11:29-30).

And the Old Testament did so as well,

“For You will not abandon my soul to Sheol;
Nor will You allow Your Holy One to undergo decay” (Psalm 16:10).

So if the resurrection of Jesus is brought into question, so then is all of Scripture. And there are other implications. If the parts of the Bible related to the resurrection are not true, then how can Christians argue that the other parts of the Bible are reliable. And this means that all of Christian doctrine is then brought into question. After all, Christian doctrine is based (or at least should be based) on the truths of Scripture. But if the resurrection didn’t happen, then parts of the Bible are false, then we can’t know which parts of the Bible are true, then we can’t base our doctrine on the Bible.

Let me give one example. Christians have taught from the very beginning “that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9). It is the essence of biblical soteriology. It is the bedrock of our statement of faith. But if some parts of the Bible are false, then how do we know this statement by Paul is true?

So we must look closely at the resurrection and see if the biblical account is true. In doing so, we need not fear. Even apart from Scripture, the logic itself is too compelling to deny the integrity of the biblical account of the resurrection. We can have complete confidence that the narratives of the gospel writers are accurate, and that means we can have complete confidence in the implications of the resurrection both for the truth of Scripture as well as what the resurrection has to say about the Christian life.

Let us begin by understanding that Jesus was truly dead. Even the Roman executioners acknowledged that Jesus was truly dead. The medical detail of blood and water being flowing out together when Jesus’ side was pierced was offered by John, not the physician Luke. The Romans soldiers did not break His legs because there was no need. These skilled executioners recognized He was already dead.

Then we must remember that His body was attended to by those who loved Him. As they prepared His body for burial, hurried though they were, they must have hoped for any sign of life. Jesus' body was carefully wrapped, and surely they must have noticed if His heart beat even the slightest or if He drew even the faintest breath.

And His burial was witnessed by many. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, along with their servants, carried the body to the tomb and placed it within. Several women who loved Jesus dearly followed the solemn procession and watched from a distance. They saw the tomb, they saw the body placed within, and they saw the tomb sealed.

On Sunday morning, the tomb was found empty, and that truth was acknowledged by both believers and revilers of Jesus alike. The Jews admitted it, as did the Roman soldiers assigned to guard the tomb. So convinced they were of the emptiness of the tomb, and its implications, that they came up with a story to explain why the tomb was empty. Notice that. They did not deny that the tomb was empty, they instead offered a different explanation of why it was empty. Ironically, the last people to believe the tomb was empty were the disciples.

Finally, Jesus appeared to many different people at many different times after His death, burial, and resurrection. He appeared to them singly (Mary Magdalene) in small groups (Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus), and in groups of hundreds. It simply is not reasonable to argue that these events can be explained by Jesus only being in a coma (the swoon theory), some conspiracy by the disciples, the women going to the wrong tomb, or mass hysteria and hallucinations.

In this part of his narrative, Luke brings his narrative of the resurrection to its climax. We have first seen witnesses of the empty tomb and the angels claiming Jesus had risen. Then Jesus appeared to men on the road to Emmaus. Now Jesus makes an appearance to the entire group. And in doing so, He gives them undeniable proof of His resurrection.

The Men from Emmaus

When Jesus suddenly revealed Himself, and then just as suddenly vanished, the two men with whom He had been walking on the road to Emmaus were overwhelmed. Leaving their unfinished meal at the table, "they got up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem" (v. 33). When they arrived there, no doubt out of breath as a result of the hurried pace with which they had raced the nearly seven miles to the city, they went to the place where they knew the followers of Jesus were staying.

It was sometime Sunday evening, certainly after the last meal had been eaten. In Jerusalem, the apostles, and undoubtedly others too, were gathered behind locked doors. As John explained in his narrative, "the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews" (John 20:19). The disciples of Jesus feared the Jews might use the empty tomb and the rumors of a risen Messiah as a pretext for violence against the followers of the rebellious rabbi they had executed on Friday. Some were probably telling stories about times they had spent with Jesus. Other tried to talk about something else. The mood was sombre and funereal.

Their location was probably a secret, since these followers of Jesus feared the Jews, but the two men knew the location, were recognized, and allowed in. As they had hoped, they “found gathered together the eleven and those who were with them” (v. 33). The eleven was simply a common way of referring to the closest disciples. The women were also there, Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and others. Perhaps some had left, like these two from Emmaus, but most it seems had stayed in Jerusalem, at least for the time being.

Cleopas and his friend caught their breath and began speaking quickly. They affirmed what the women had been saying earlier that morning, that “the Lord has really risen and has appeared to Simon” (v. 34). And then “they began to relate their experiences on the road and how He was recognized by them in the breaking of the bread” (v. 35). Remember that the story of the women had not been believed, except where it had been confirmed by Peter and John. Now these two men lent their voices to the affirmation. All that the women had said was proved true. We can excuse them if they uttered an “I told you so” or two to the disciples.

Now everyone must have begun speaking over one another. Different reports were shared about events of the day. Remember that the men from Emmaus had been gone several hours, and no doubt other reports of the resurrection had been reported by those in the room. But while they were all speaking, the reports of Jesus’ resurrection were rendered irrelevant by His appearance.

The Appearance

Without elaboration, Luke simply records that “while they were telling these things, He Himself stood in their midst” (v. 36). It is difficult to think of a briefer account of such a profound event in all of sacred or secular literature. Suddenly, Jesus was among them. He did not enter through the door (which was locked anyway) or through some open window. He had simply appeared. The shock of His presence must have left those in the room speechless. We might wonder why the men who had seen Jesus on the Emmaus road were as astonished as the others. Also, Peter apparently had already seen the risen Lord (1 Corinthians 15:5). By this point they had all agreed that Jesus must have risen from the grave. Therefore, we can conclude that it was the manner of His appearing that provided the shock.

Jaws dropped. Everyone became quiet. Breaking the silence, Jesus immediately spoke, “peace be to you” (v. 36). These words were perfectly suited to the moment. They were the very words those in the room needed to hear, since “they were startled and frightened and thought that they were seeing a spirit” (v. 37). This was not surprising, after all what other conclusion could they draw from the sudden appearance of a man they had recently buried?

But it was not that His body was dazzling in its brightness or that they beheld some transfiguration glory. After all, He *looked* just like any other man. Mary Magdalene had believed Him to be a humble gardener when she first saw Him at the tomb. The two men on the road to Emmaus thought they were speaking with just another traveler (though one who was remarkably uninformed on recent events). It was the method of His appearance that was the shock. The room was secure. He had not opened a door. He had not climbed through a window. He had simply appeared before them. Naturally, they thought He was an apparition of some kind.

But let us reflect seriously on Jesus' words. Jesus spoke to their fear when He said "peace be to you" (v. 36). This was no mere greeting, but a statement of truth that is embedded in Christian doctrine.

"¹⁴For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, ¹⁵by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. ¹⁷And He came and preached peace to you who were far away, and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father" (Ephesians 2:14-18).

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7).

And we must consider to whom these words were spoken. These men were truly afraid. They had been afraid because their beloved leader had been killed by the Romans at the instigation of a mob of Jewish leaders. Could they be next? Then they were afraid because they thought they were seeing a ghost? Finally, as they realized this was the risen Lord, they were afraid because they knew they had not behaved with much loyalty in the last three days. What would Jesus say to them now that He had proved Himself the Son of God? Jesus calmed each of these fears. He quieted the fears of those who had fled in the garden. He offered peace to those who had feared to stay close to Him during the crucifixion. He offered reconciliation to those who had doubted His resurrection. He said those words to those who had abandoned all hope and left Jerusalem for home. These men had proved themselves cowards. They had proved themselves unworthy. Yet no word of rebuke was spoken. Jesus offered simply a soft, gentle message of forgiveness and restoration.

Jesus understood. These men did not need to be reminded of their failure. They did not need to be embarrassed. They knew they had denied Him. Imagine Peter, if you can. They knew they had been afraid. They knew they had not believed. Jesus knew too, so there was no need to say anything but "peace be to you."

Undeniable Proof

The astonished, disbelieving looks on their faces were all too evident. They still could not take it all in. So, Jesus asked rhetorically, "why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?" (v. 38). It was meant as only the mildest of rebukes; He recognized the impossibility of their belief considering the circumstances of the last three days. But there was no reason for them to be afraid. There was no reason for them to panic and run out into the streets. To demonstrate more tangibly His reality, Jesus offered to show them the *stigmata*, "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" (v. 39).

Despite the fact that throughout history, people have appropriated the *stigmata* in an attempt to glorify themselves, we must recognize that the purpose of Jesus showing the wounds of His crucifixion was to increase the faith of His disciples. We also must understand the miracle involved here. That Jesus had a body so like ours that the wounds were still present but so unlike ours that He could simply appear in time

and space is beyond our ability fully to comprehend. Jesus' point was to prove that He was real and truly risen, as opposed to some phantom or apparition. We must appreciate the fact that Jesus reached down to the smallness of their faith to prove Himself.

And prove Himself He finally and truly did. Scripture makes it clear that Jesus had a *real* human body. He had a body that not only could be seen, but be touched. He had a voice that could be heard. As we will see, He had a body that could take in nourishment. But He also had a body that could appear anywhere and move with impunity (there is no reason to assume Jesus walked back to Jerusalem after He vanished from the inn at Emmaus).

When believers are resurrected, we too will have such bodies.

“²⁰For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; ²¹who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself” (Philippians 3:20-21).

“⁴²So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; ⁴³it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; ⁴⁴it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body” (1 Corinthians 15:42-44).

But still the disciples hesitated in their belief. But it was not because they lacked evidence. It was simply too good to be true. Finally, “when He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet” (v. 40). They had living, tangible proof, that Jesus was alive. But we ought not to be too critical of these followers of Jesus. We must remember they had seen Jesus die. It would not be the only time these men and women were difficult to convince once that had come to believe that someone they loved was beyond hope.

“¹¹When Peter came to himself, he said, ‘now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.’ ¹²And when he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. ¹³When he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer. ¹⁴When she recognized Peter’s voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate. ¹⁵They said to her, ‘you are out of your mind!’ But she kept insisting that it was so. They kept saying, ‘it is his angel.’ ¹⁶But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened the door, they saw him and were amazed” (Acts 12:11-16).

Even after seeing Jesus, even after hearing Him speak, and even after touching Him, “they still could not believe it” (v. 41). Their joy was too much. It simply could not be true. Continuing to try to help them in their unbelief, “He said to them, ‘have you anything here to eat?’” (v. 41). Jesus asked for some food and ate with them. As prosaic as that seems, that appeared to at least have altered the tense mood of the room. “⁴²They gave Him a piece of a broiled fish; ⁴³and He took it and ate it before them.” (v. 42-43). Everyone calmed down, and they enjoyed a meal.

Takeaways

First, we must note that we are permitted to use our senses and reason in establishing our faith. Our faith is never required to be blind. And there is much in the way of historical evidence to argue for the fact of the resurrection.

Theologically, the fact of the resurrection must be affirmed by all believers for three reasons. First, it is only through the actual resurrection of Jesus that we can be certain that His atoning work on the cross was accepted by God. Second, the resurrection affirmed Jesus' complete victory over sin and the spiritual death it brings. If He had not conquered death, then neither can any believer. If His atoning sacrifice was not accepted, we are dead in our sins. Finally, it is proof that our faith is not misplaced. We can have complete confidence that the resurrection of Jesus was a real, historical event, and therefore the promise of our resurrection is a real promise that will be fulfilled in history as well.