

# The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus

## TEACHER NOTES

This class contends that Jesus bodily rose from the dead—not as simply as a point of theology, but as first-century history. It proceeds by arguing that the fact of early Christian belief in resurrection is so unlike its pagan and Jewish surroundings that it must have its own dramatic explanation (Parts I and II), and that the best explanation is that Jesus, in fact, was resurrected from the dead. The class concludes (Part III) with arguments for the historical case for two specific parts of the Easter story: the empty tomb and the appearance of Jesus to his followers. Part III is organized as questions that students can ask to those with whom they are sharing the gospel.

Much of this class is derived from N.T. Wright's outstanding book, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (2003). One caution here: if you mention Wright repeatedly in the class, tell the class that he is cited as a historian, not as a theologian.

As you are preparing, consider the footnotes. In a handful of places the footnotes add additional examples which you can use or substitute with the material above the line, as desired. Familiarity with this content will also generally help with your preparation.

The class concludes by mentioning the *Alexamenos graffito*. On the handout there is a QR code for the audience to view this image.

## PRINCIPAL REFERENCES

N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (2003)  
Michael Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus* (2010)

# The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus

MANUSCRIPT

Christianity is worthless, Christians are fools, and the church deserves not our pity but our contempt, **IF** [pause]

If what? [pause]

If Jesus of Nazareth was not raised from the dead.

So says the Apostle Paul in fifteenth chapter of his first canonized letter to the church in Corinth. “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. . . . If in Christ we have hope in this life only we of all people are most to be pitied.” (15:17–18).<sup>1</sup>

In this letter, typically dated around the mid-first century, Paul quotes a saying that other Christians, decades earlier, began repeating to summarize the story of what happened to Jesus. This saying Paul himself “received” and it underlines his message:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures . . . (15:3–4a).

What did Paul mean when he said Jesus was raised? The conventional view of unbelieving scholars goes something like this: (1) Judaism had vague and various understandings of “resurrection” in which that term could mean different things; (2) Paul did not believe in a *bodily* resurrection but maintained only that Jesus was raised in a spiritual sense; (3) the first Christians said Jesus had been resurrected in that he was exalted or glorified in heaven, and later came to speak of an empty tomb or claimed to have seen Jesus; (4) the Easter stories in the four gospels were written to bolster this second-stage belief; (5) the reported sightings of Jesus were religious—possibly

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<sup>1</sup> All scripture references are taken from the English Standard Version.

hallucinatory—experiences; (6) whatever happened to Jesus’s body, if he was even buried, he was not literally raised from the dead.<sup>2</sup>

This morning we are going to challenge that view. We will start by unpacking ancient Greek and Jewish beliefs about death and resurrection. Within that context, we’ll analyze resurrection belief in early Christianity. We will then consider the Easter stories, particularly with respect to two claims: the empty tomb of Jesus and his appearances to his followers and enemies.

## **1 GRECO-ROMAN AND JEWISH BELIEFS ABOUT THE AFTERLIFE**

In his speech at Pentecost, Peter boldly proclaims Jesus’s resurrection from the dead.<sup>3</sup> Did he mean Jesus was alive in his heart in some squishy, spiritual sense? Or did he mean that Jesus, after being thoroughly dead and buried, walked out of his tomb alive again?

To begin answering that question, we need to know more about the Greek word *anastasis* [Pr: uh-na-sta-cis, rhymes with metastasis], which meant standing or getting up after death. When the followers of Jesus spoke of “resurrection” (*anastasis*) they were not inventing a new word; they were using a word with well-known connotations in classical and Jewish thought.

For the ancient Greeks, resurrection was impossible and undesirable. For ancient Jews, resurrection was a future, end-of-the-world event for all God’s people.

### **1.1 Life after death in Greco-Roman belief.**

If Greeks had an Old Testament, it was the works of Homer. And for Homer, the road to the underworld was a one-way street. There is no coming back from death. Plato’s work centuries later is akin to a New Testament for the ancient pagan world. And for Plato, the world and our bodies are not good so an embodied resurrection is not good either.

To be clear, when the ancient Greeks spoke of (and denied) resurrection, they were not denying a conscious, spiritual existence after death. But they were very much denying embodied return into a this-world kind of life. *Anastasis* or resurrection was not possible, and if it were it was hardly good news.

- The view of Homer might well be summed up by Achilles’ words to Priam mourning his dead son Hector: “You must endure, and not be broken-hearted. Lamenting for your son will do no good at all. You will be dead yourself before you [*anastesis*] bring him back to life.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* 7 (2003).

<sup>3</sup> Acts 2:31.

<sup>4</sup> *Iliad*, 24.549-51 (trans. Rieu).

- Likewise in Aeschylus' [pr. Es-skuh-luhs] play *Eumenides*, a drama about the origin of the Athenian judicial system (think: ancient Greek *Hamilton*), Apollo tries to dissuade the Athenian high-court from ordering capital punishment by reminding them that death exceeds even the power of Zeus: "Zeus could undo fetters, there is a remedy for that, and many means of release. But when the dust has drawn up the blood of a man, once he is dead, there is no return to life [*anastasis*]."<sup>5</sup>
- Plato's view of the afterlife also denied any hope of resurrection, but for a different reason. For Plato, human souls would be reincarnated into other creatures after death—with the ultimate goal being to break the cycle and enter the disembodied world of knowledge.<sup>6</sup> Death itself is not bad, that is why Socrates rejects the fear of death.<sup>7</sup> To come back from the dead is a failure, akin to going back to jail. And Celsus, the second-century Greek philosopher who wrote extensively against Christianity, scorned resurrection as "disgraceful" and said physical bodies ought to be thrown away as "worse than dung."<sup>8</sup>

## 1.2 Life after death in ancient Judaism

The Jewish hope of resurrection emerges from that commitment to the goodness of creation. Unlike Plato, the Jews saw the body as stamped with image of the good Creator and God of Israel. The arc of the biblical story begins with the goodness of the created world until it is soiled by sin and humanity loses its chance to have unending life. As the story unfurls, God elects and delivers a people from slavery in Egypt to a promised land to dwell with him. The Mosaic tabernacle symbolizes the garden and the lost fellowship with God. The children of Israel rebel against God but cry out again from within exile. And in the exilic writings come the clearest passages conveying Israel's hope—not only of national restoration, but of an embodied existence after death.

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<sup>5</sup> Aesch. *Eumen.* 644–47 (trans. Herber Weir Smyth 1926). More examples that could be offered. Sophocles depicts death as also more powerful than the love and grief of a daughter. As the Greek Chorus reminds Electra, mourning her murdered father Agamemnon, her tears and prayers will not bring him back from the dead (word used *anastaseis*). Her sister later confronts Electra to ask "Can I ever raise the dead to life?" To which Electra coldly replies "I am not so foolish." See Sophocles, *Electra* 137–39, 940. In other stories, attempts to return from the underworld end in failure and sometimes punishment. Orpheus attempts to retrieve his lost bride Eurydice from the underworld, but on the journey looks back at her in violation of Hade's condition, and she disappears. Or Sisyphus tells his wife to leave his body lying in the public square; when he arrives in the underworld, he complains about this dishonor and is allowed back to the upperworld to scold his wife, where he then refuses to return to Hades until he is dragged back by Hermes and forced to roll a boulder endlessly up a steep hill. These stories fortify the conclusion that to the pagan world, death is a one-way street. See generally Wright, *Resurrection* 32–84.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., *Phaedo* 64c, 67d, 106e, 107d–e; Wright, *Resurrection* 49 n.97 ff.

<sup>7</sup> *Apol.* 41c; Wright, *Resurrection* 49 n.95.

<sup>8</sup> Origen, *Against Celsus* 5.14 (quoting Heraclitus).

Isaiah prophecies: “Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead.”<sup>9</sup>

This idea of picked up by Daniel, who also prophecies that at the end of days “[M]any of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.”<sup>10</sup> Just as sleep was a well-understood euphemism for death, so here becoming awake means not a different *kind* of sleep but the abolition of death, *i.e.*, a bodily resurrection.<sup>11</sup>

Many Jews thus hoped for a life after “life after death.” This life was not a disembodied existence, but a restored, bodily life in a new creation. It was not a reconstrual of death but the *reversal* of death.

By the time Jesus and the apostles arrived on the scene, most Jews had a beliefs about these texts and what happened after death. The Sadducees, we know from Matthew, Mark, and Luke, “say there is no resurrection.”<sup>12</sup> In marked contrast, the Pharisees *did* believe in resurrection: the faithful Israelite who died, after a period of spiritual existence with the Patriarchs, would later be raised from the dead at the end of the world. Paul exploits this debate when he is on trial before the Jewish Council in Acts 23.

When Paul and the other apostles talked of resurrection, they meant bodily resurrection. For the spectrum of beliefs about life after death, Christians were with the Jews against the pagans and, within Judaism, with the Pharisees against the Sadducees.

## 2 RESURRECTION BELIEF IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

From the start, Christianity was a resurrection movement. Christians held firmly to a two-step afterlife: (i) death and some kind of spiritual existence with God in heaven, followed by (ii) a new bodily existence in a remade world. There is nothing like this in paganism; this is a thoroughly Jewish belief. But within Judaism, there are no fewer than seven early Christian modifications to the Jewish view. That is the sharp point any historian must face when trying to determine what happened to Jesus: why did Christian belief take the shape that it did?

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<sup>9</sup> Is. 26:19.

<sup>10</sup> Dan. 12:2.

<sup>11</sup> Deliberately omitted from this sample of resurrection texts in the OT is Job 19:26 (“And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God”). As N.T. Wright points out, this passage is difficult to translate and most modern versions, including the ESV, note that the could be “yet *without* my flesh I shall see God”—which completely changes the meaning. Wright, *Resurrection* 98.

<sup>12</sup> Matt 22:23, Mark 12:18, Luke 20:27. See also Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.16.

## 2.1 Why did early Christian belief take the shape that it did?

The first Christians universally hoped for a bodily resurrection. [turn to 1 Corinthians 15 and read vv. 3-8] Paul identifies Jesus as the Christ, meaning, Messiah. That is an astonishing way to describe someone who Rome had crucified. Paul does not call Jesus is righteous but departed hero looking down from heaven. He calls Jesus the messiah—the savior of Israel. Why? Paul tells us: it was because Jesus was raised from the dead. For Paul, Jesus’s resurrection literally happened. That is why Paul insists this fact is verifiable by a list of living eyewitnesses. As in Greek and Jewish literature, resurrection is a literal, physical event.

But note especially that Paul is passing on what he *previously received*. That is, Paul is quoting an *earlier* Christian saying about Jesus.

Even Gerd Lüdemann, nonbelieving NT professor at Göttingen, Germany dates this saying of the church “to the first two years after the crucifixion of Jesus...not later than three years . . . between 30 and 33” AD.<sup>13</sup>

James Dunn (Professor at Durham University) concludes the date even earlier: “This tradition, we can be entirely confident, was formulated as tradition **within months of Jesus’ death**.<sup>14</sup>

Neither of whom are conservative evangelicals. If they are correct, than it is impossible that the resurrection was gradually added to Christianity long after the first followers of Jesus died.

Christian resurrection belief is not only striking in that it is early. It is also striking in how sharply it branches off from Judaism in consistent and novel ways. Judaism was systematically rethought around Jesus, particularly his resurrection, in no less than seven ways.

1. *Unanimity of resurrection belief*. While the Sadducees and Pharisees debated resurrection, the Jesus movement was unanimous in their belief that Jesus was raised and that resurrection was the hope of those united to Jesus.
2. *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day*. In second-temple Judaism, many people believed in a future resurrection, but it was not central to their everyday faith and practice. For Christians, however, belief in bodily resurrection is at the center, so the gathering day moves from the Sabbath

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<sup>13</sup> Gerd Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Jesus* 171–72, (trans. Bowden, 1994). Likewise Robert Funk, founder of the radically skeptical Jesus Seminar, concludes “...The conviction that Jesus had risen from the dead had already taken root by the time Paul was converted about 33 C.E. On the assumption that Jesus died about 30 C.E., the time for development [of the 1 Cor. 15 saying] was thus two or three years at most.” Robert Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *The Acts of Jesus* 466 (1998).

<sup>14</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* 854–55 (2003).

(Saturday) to the Lord's day (Sunday). Why? Because of what happened to Jesus.

3. *The resurrection body will be physical, but imperishable.* Jewish thought did not have a description (let alone stories) of the resurrected body; Christians, however, described the resurrected body as “imperishable”<sup>15</sup> and “incapable of decay.”
4. *The resurrection event is split in two.* Jews thought the resurrection would happen at the end of time. Christians agreed, but argued it had happened once to one person in the middle of time. Hence Paul again in 1 Corinthians 15:20 describes Jesus as the “first fruits” of a harvest which guarantees that there will be more to follow him. Resurrection will happen in two stages, first Jesus, and second, all Jesus's people.
5. *God is collaborating with his people in bringing the new creation.* Christians do not sit on their hands and wait for Jesus to come back; they began evangelizing the world and building churches. So Paul writes to the Galatians that God had broken in to the “present evil age” by raising Jesus from the dead.<sup>16</sup> Because new creation has begun, those who believe the gospel are the true children of Abraham, the ethnic boundary markers of God's people fall away, and Paul can say to the Galatians that “neither circumcisions counts for anything nor uncircumcision.”<sup>17</sup>
6. *Metaphorical use of resurrection changes.* Where Judaism used resurrection as a metaphor for restoration of Israel after exile, Christians used resurrection metaphorically by dying-and-rising with Jesus through baptism.<sup>18</sup>
7. *Resurrection merges with messiahship.* In Judaism, no one expected the messiah to rise from the dead, because no one expected the messiah to die. No Jew could have imagined after his crucifixion that Jesus really was the Lord's anointed. But very early on Christians said Jesus was the Messiah precisely because of his death and resurrection.

These novel Christian beliefs about Jesus are an historical fact that must itself be explained. Why did Christianity take this shape? As Paul makes clear in 1 Cor. 15, it was not that Christians had a vague sense that Jesus was somehow still with them spiritually; it was because Jesus had been raised from the dead—which simultaneously explains the sudden emergence of a resurrection movement within Judaism and a transformed resurrection belief within that movement.

A crucified would-be Messiah carried along by a mushy, vaguely-spiritual resurrection is not a better explanation of early Christian belief. There were

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<sup>15</sup> 1 Cor. 15:42-44, 52.

<sup>16</sup> Gal. 1:1-4.

<sup>17</sup> Gal. 5:6-7.

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., Col. 2:12.

many Messianic pretenders around the time of Jesus.<sup>19</sup> In Acts, Luke tells us about a revolutionary Theudas who rallied 400 men to his cause until “he was killed” and “all his followers were dispersed.”<sup>20</sup> Simon Bar-Kochba, leader of the last Jewish revolt against Rome (AD 132-35), was hailed as the Messiah until he was defeated by Emperor Hadrian’s army, marched in a parade of captives to Rome, publicly flogged, and executed.<sup>21</sup> All of these would-be messiahs were killed and the followers scattered. Christianity without a physical resurrection is as strange as imagining that a group of Jewish revolutionaries kept calling Simon Bar-Kochba the messiah after he was destroyed and humiliated by Israel’s enemies.

## 2.2 Resurrection in the Gospels

Another fact that must be explained is the content of the Gospels. They read more like breathless reporting, not a sanded-down sermon or a legend.

The Easter stories themselves contain hardly any OT references, spiritual motifs, or legendary embellishment. In contrast, the story of Jesus’s resurrection in the Gospel of Peter (a second-century forgery), tells of Roman soldiers beholding stone over Jesus’s tomb roll itself away, three men and an animate cross exit the tomb, the heads of the men expand and stretch up to heaven and voice cries out “‘Have you preached to them that sleep?’ The answer that was heard from the cross was, ‘Yes!’”<sup>22</sup> In short, this is exactly the kind of made-up story you would expect: religious spectacle and embellishment.

The gospels are stark by its simplicity in comparison.

In sum, the earliest Christians believed that Jesus of Nazareth was bodily raised from the dead. This belief was the basis of their recognition that Jesus was the messiah and lord as well as their hope for their own future bodily resurrection. The question we now must face: what caused this belief in the resurrection of Jesus.

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<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 17:278-84.

<sup>20</sup> Acts 5:36; see also *id.* 21:38.

<sup>21</sup> See N.T. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God* 165–66 (1992).

<sup>22</sup> The Gospel of Peter (Sam Gibson trans.); see also, e.g., The Acts of Pilate 13:1 (“We saw an angel descend from heaven, and he rolled away the stone from the mouth of the cave, and sat upon it, and he shone like snow and like lightning. And we were in great fear, and lay like dead men. And we heard the voice of the angel speaking to the women who waited at the tomb: “Do not be afraid. I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here. He has risen, as he said. Come and see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead and is in Galilee.”).

### 3 HE'S NOT HERE, HE IS RISEN: EASTER AND HISTORY

Cicero described the “cross” of crucifixion as so shameful as to be removed from even the thoughts of Roman Citizens.<sup>23</sup> Tacitus called it a slave’s punishment.<sup>24</sup> “It is hard today to understand just how offensive the idea of a crucified messiah would have been to first-century Jews,” says agnostic NT scholar Bart Ehrman.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Islam rejects Jesus’s crucifixion as a Jewish lie,<sup>26</sup> even though Jesus’s death by Roman crucifixion is one of the most attested events of the ancient world.<sup>27</sup> If there was anything that would surely stop a religious movement, it would be so-called savior’s crucifixion.

Why didn’t it stop the followers of Jesus? Why are there any Christians?

There are two key pieces of the Easter story that sharpen the question: (i) Jesus’s empty tomb and (ii) the appearance Jesus to his disciples and Paul. Alone, neither is much evidence of resurrection. An empty tomb without appearances suggests grave robbery; appearances with a sealed tomb suggests hallucinations or visions, both of which were well known in the ancient world.

#### 3.1 Why Was Jesus’s Tomb Empty?

After Jesus died, the Gospels tell us that Joseph of Arimathea requested Pilate’s permission to remove Jesus’s body from the cross and bury him before sundown, in keeping with Jewish law. Joseph then wrapped his body in linen and “placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock.” Matt. 27:59–60.<sup>28</sup>

Challenging this account, John Dominic Crossan argues that Jews did not give criminal an honorable burial and the more likely event is that Jesus’s crucified body was thrown into a ditch or common grave with other criminals.<sup>29</sup> But there are good reasons to think Jesus was honorably buried:

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<sup>23</sup> M. Tallius Cicero, *Speech before Roman Citizens on Behalf of Gaius Rabirius, Defendant Against Charge of Treason*, (William Blake Tyrrell, ed.).

<sup>24</sup> Tacitus, *Histories* 4.11; see also Tom Holland, *Dominion* 1-20 (2019).

<sup>25</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* 163–64 (2012). For vivid medical explanation for the horror of crucifixion, see William D. Edwards et al., *On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ*, 255 J. Am. Med. Assoc. 1455, 1455 (1986).

<sup>26</sup> The Qur’an 4:157 (trans. Sahih International) (“And for their saying, ‘Indeed, we have killed the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, the messenger of Allah.’ And they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him.”).

<sup>27</sup> See, e.g., *The Annals of Tacitus* 15.44 in 5 Loeb Classical Library 285 (1937), [https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Tacitus/Annals/15B\\*.html](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Tacitus/Annals/15B*.html); Lucian, *The Death of Peregrine* 11–13, in 4 THE WORKS OF LUCIAN OF SAMOSATA 83 (trans. H.W. Fowler & F.G. Fowler, 1949), <https://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/luc/wl4/wl420.htm>.

<sup>28</sup> See also Luke 23:53; John 19:41.

<sup>29</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* 392-93 (1993).

- As a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, Joseph of Arimathea, is unlikely to be a Christian invention. Portraying the followers of Jesus as so poor that one of the Jewish leaders had to donate a tomb is not compelling propaganda.
- The gospels' account that Jesus was taken down from the cross and buried in the unused, rock-cut tomb of Joseph of Arimathea is consistent with Jewish burial customs. Rome permitted Jews to bury crucifixion victims according to their custom.<sup>30</sup> And according to Jewish law, persons like Jesus that were executed as criminals could not be buried among the honored dead of a person's family.<sup>31</sup> So Jesus would either have to be buried in a graveyard for other criminals or placed in a fresh (empty) tomb. And it is likely that a wealthy person with connections to the Sanhedrin is the most likely case to provide Jesus with a fresh tomb. Joseph of Arimathea giving Jesus a fresh tomb fits perfectly. After reviewing the entire burial account in the Gospels, Jewish archeologist Jodi Magness concluded that these events are "consistent with archeological evidence and Jewish laws."<sup>32</sup> Dr. Magness further stated that other hypotheses, for instance that Jesus would likely have been buried in disgrace "is based on a misunderstanding of the archeological evidence and Jewish law."<sup>33</sup>
- The burial story in Gospels is also consistent with archeological evidence. Contrary to skeptics who claim that crucified victims would never have received a decent burial, archeologists have found the remains of a crucified man in an ossuary (bone box) in Jerusalem.<sup>34</sup> That is extraordinary because nearly all Jerusalem tombs have been broken into and disturbed and wealthy Jewish families were unlikely to become victims of crucifixion.

There are two primary arguments to conclude Jesus's tomb was found empty.

*First*, the Gospels would probably not have invented the empty tomb story and made the first eyewitnesses a group of women. The testimony of women was not given much credence in first-century Jerusalem.<sup>35</sup> Any later legendary story would surely have made male disciples like Peter or John the discoverers of the empty tomb. As Jewish scholar Geza Vermes concludes: "In the end, when

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<sup>30</sup> Josephus, *Jewish War* 4.5.2 ("Jews used to take so much care of the burial of men, that they took down those that were condemned and crucified, and buried them before the going down of the sun.").

<sup>31</sup> Mishna Sanhedrin 6:5.

<sup>32</sup> Jodi Magness, "What Did Jesus' Tomb Look Like?" 32.1 Biblical Archaeology Review 38, 40–43, 45–49 (2006).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> See Joseph Zias & Eliezer Sekeles, *The Crucified Man from Giv'at ha-Mivtar: A Reappraisal* 35 Israel Exploration J. 22, 22 (1985).

<sup>35</sup> See Josephus, *Antiquities* 4.219 ("From women let no evidence be accepted, because of the levity and temerity of their sex."). Critics of Christianity like Celsus exploited this detail, arguing that the resurrection was based on the testimony of an "hysterical woman" in the early morning light. See R. Joseph Hoffmann, *Celsus on the True Doctrine* 61–62 (1987).

every argument has been considered and weighed, the only conclusion acceptable to the historian must be . . . that the women who set out to pay their last respects to Jesus found to their consternation, not a body, but an empty tomb.”<sup>36</sup>

*Second*, the empty tomb is enemy attested. In Matthew, the Jewish leaders claimed that the disciples stole the body.<sup>37</sup> Justin Martyr, writing in the mid second century, reports that Jewish leaders were still claiming that the disciples stole Jesus’s body.<sup>38</sup> Tertullian writes that some people claimed that the Gardner had stolen Jesus’s body.<sup>39</sup> All of these arguments answer *why* the tomb was empty; they don’t contest that the tomb was empty.

### **3.2 Why did Jesus’s followers experience what they believed to be bodily appearances of Jesus risen from the dead?**

*First*, we are on solid historical grounds to conclude that many people had experiences of seeing Jesus after his death. The accounts of Jesus’s appearances come from multiple independent and early sources. The gospels and epistles all report that Jesus appeared, taught and ate with his disciples. Because of the quality of these sources, atheist scholars like Gerd Lüdemann grant that individual disciples of Jesus sincerely believed they had seen Jesus alive again. He writes: “it may be taken as historically certain that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus’s death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ.”<sup>40</sup>

*Second*, we have good reason to believe that the followers of Jesus were not lying about having these experiences. Many of the disciples of Jesus were ultimately martyred for their belief in the resurrection. While martyrdom does not prove that a belief is true, it does mean that it is sincerely held. And unlike al Qaeda terrorists or the members of the Jim Jones cult, who were merely taught their religious beliefs second-hand, the disciples of Jesus claimed to have witnessed the risen Jesus and died for that belief. As Muslim author Reza Aslan concedes, “one after another of those who claimed to have witnessed the risen Jesus went to their own gruesome deaths refusing to recant their testimony. That is not, in itself, unusual. Many zealous Jews died horribly for refusing to deny their beliefs. But these first followers of Jesus were not being

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<sup>36</sup> Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian’s Reading of the Gospels* 41 (1981).

<sup>37</sup> Matt 28:13.

<sup>38</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 108, reprinted in 1 Philip Schaff, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (2000) (“You not only have not repented, after you learned that He rose from the dead, but, as I said before you have sent chosen and ordained men throughout all the world to proclaim that a godless and lawless heresy had sprung from one Jesus, a Galilæan deceiver, whom we crucified, but his disciples stole him by night from the tomb, where he was laid when unfastened from the cross, and now deceive men by asserting that he has risen from the dead and ascended to heaven.”).

<sup>39</sup> Tertullian, *Of Spectacles* ch. 30 (noting that some claimed the Gardner stole Jesus’s body so that “his lettuces might come to no harm from the crowds of visitants”).

<sup>40</sup> Gerd Lüdemann, *What Really Happened to Jesus?* 80 (trans. John Bowden, 1995).

asked to reject matters of faith based on events that took place centuries, if not millennia, before. They were being asked to deny something they themselves personally, directly encountered.”<sup>41</sup>

*Third*, Jesus’s appearance to Saul of Tarsus shows that these appearances cannot be dismissed as grief hallucinations. Saul was a zealous Pharisee who saw Christianity as heresy. He had zero inclination to mourn the death of Jesus or be fooled by a grief-stricken vision. Something, or *someone*, transformed Saul the persecutor of Christianity to Paul, its defender and martyr.

## CONCLUSION

On the plaster wall of a room in Rome is carved an ancient (possibly first-century) piece of graffiti. It depicts a man hanging on a cross, wound in his side, with the head of a donkey. The inscription reads: “Alexamenos worships God.”<sup>42</sup> **[Tell the audience to pull up the QR code image if they want to see it too.]**

To the ancient world, Glen Scrivener writes, the message was clear: “the man on the cross is not God; he’s an ass.”<sup>43</sup>

But early Christians did not cover up that Jesus had been crucified. Their belief in his divinity was not in spite of his death but *because of it*. The disciples who scattered like lambs in the garden of Gethsemane were transformed into lions for the cause of Christ. Why? The answer they gave was that they had seen the risen Jesus.

Naturalistic explanations of the start of Christianity are third-rate rationalizations. If Jesus survived the cross his disciples would have gotten him medical attention, not proclaimed his divinity. If Jesus really died and his disciples’ experiences were grief hallucinations, Paul would have never converted and kept arresting Christians for heresy. Had these superstitions persisted, Rome or the Jewish leaders would have exhumed Jesus’s body to refute claims that the resurrected King has alive.

But none of that happened. Christians proclaimed Jesus, who was humiliated and tortured to death by Rome, to be Israel’s long-awaited **messiah**; the most violent and educated adversary of these early Christians was converted and proclaimed Jesus as the God of Israel; and these early Christians went to torturous deaths proclaiming to have seen Jesus bodily raised from the dead.

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<sup>41</sup> Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* 174 (2013). For historical research on the martyrdom of the apostles, see Dissertation by Sean McDowell, Historical Evaluation of the Evidence for the Death of the Apostles as Martyrs (2014), [https://repository.sbts.edu/bitstream/handle/10392/4857/McDowell\\_sbts\\_0207D\\_10221.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://repository.sbts.edu/bitstream/handle/10392/4857/McDowell_sbts_0207D_10221.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y).

<sup>42</sup> See Glen Scrivener, *The Air We Breathe* 24 (2022).

<sup>43</sup> *Id.* at 25.

What changed Jesus's followers? Why did assemblies of pagans and Jews assemble together to worship this Jesus, singing hymns to his Name and sit sharing one communion and one baptism?

The answer is because something happened on Easter.

History can take us no farther. It can force the question. It can lead us, as historian N.T. Wright puts it, like Moses to the windy shores of the parting Red Sea. But it cannot make us cross. Faith must be what moves us to take the step and walk forward.

Jesus's resurrection is astonishing. It means that the true and living God was tortured to death like a slave in order to save sinners. The suffering servant of Isaiah 53 is also Israel's victorious messiah, overthrowing not evil kingdoms like Rome who deal in death, but death itself.

Jesus defeated death by defeating sin. As Isaiah foretold, God laid on Jesus "the iniquity of us all."<sup>44</sup> As horrible as Roman scourging and crucifixion was, the real drama of Jesus's death was unseen: God poured out his holy and just wrath for sin on the innocent Son of God. The punishment we deserved for our sin was laid on Jesus. After bearing the wrath for *our* sin, death could no longer hold Jesus in the ground. His resurrection proves that atonement was achieved. Though Jesus, Isaiah writes, "poured out his soul to death," God "shall prolong his days"—that is, in resurrection. The suffering servant died and came back; thus "shall see his offspring"<sup>45</sup>—all those who repent of their sins and trust in Jesus. Because of Jesus's death and resurrection, our sins are forgiven and we can hope in resurrection too.

That is why the followers of Jesus spread the gospel in spite of the world's mockery and cruelty. They went to their deaths to share that good news. The "message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing," Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, "but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

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<sup>44</sup> Is. 53:6.

<sup>45</sup> *Id.* at 53:10, 12.