

CHRIST IS RISEN INDEED!

- Evidence for the Resurrection

“And declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of Holiness, by the Resurrection from the dead.” Romans 1:4

In 1815 all of Europe agonized in suspense waiting for news of the impending battle between the Duke of Wellington and the French emperor Napoleon. For over 25 years Europe had been convulsed by the French Revolution, the mass executions of French nobles, the guillotine, and two decades of Napoleonic wars, which had turned all of Europe into a battlefield. And, just when they had thought that the threat was over, with Napoleon defeated and in exile on Elba, Napoleon had returned, mustered a huge army and marched to destroy the British Army under the Duke of Wellington. People waited in great anticipation for news of the critical battle, which would decide the future of all of them.

A sailing ship semaphored (signaled with coded flags) the result of the decisive battle. A signalman on the top of Winchester cathedral decoded the message from a ship in the channel: *“Wellington defeated...”* then fog obscured the ship and the message was sent out throughout the British Isles: *“Wellington defeated!”* Shock and depression spread with the devastating news. Then several hours later, when the fog lifted, the signal was completed: *“Wellington defeated the enemy!”* As the full message of the decisive victory at Waterloo was proclaimed throughout the land there was tremendous rejoicing. Wellington’s victory at Waterloo ushered in 99 years of peace in Western Europe.

The bodily Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is tremendously important. Death is man’s greatest enemy, and it has conquered all men – but Christ. Cities and nations, like people, are born and grow for a season, and then fade away. Homes, clothes, even vehicles, wear out and eventually go back to dust, just as do their owners. The Bible describes this universal reign of decay and death as *“the bondage of corruption”* (Romans 8:21). In science it is recognised as the Second Law of Thermodynamics – the Law of Increasing Entropy. Left to themselves, every system tends to become disordered, to run down and eventually die. All the founders of great religions and movements have died and you can visit their graves. Zoroaster, Confucius, Buddha, Muhammad, Marx, and Lenin. They are all dead and decayed in the grave. But Jesus Christ is alive!

So, what difference does that make? You may ask. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is vitally important because it demonstrates Christ’s victory over death, it gives hope to all mankind, it shows that eternal life is available to believers, it points to the ultimate triumph of God over all evil, and it provides an indisputable proof that the message about Jesus Christ, as both Judge and Saviour, is true. *“Because He has appointed a Day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man Whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.”* Acts 17:31

THE RESEARCH OF SKEPTICS

The Resurrection is so important and foundational to Christianity that it has been targeted for the most relentless attacks. Frank Morison, a lawyer, determined to disprove the Resurrection and thereby undermine Christianity. The result of his exhaustive investigations was his conversion to Christ and the publication of his book: *“Who Moved the Stone?”* which decisively demonstrates the overwhelming evidence for the Resurrection.

A skeptical university lecturer, Josh McDowell, determined to disprove Christianity by investigating evidence against the Resurrection. The result was his conversion to Christ and publication of the monumental: *“Evidence That Demands a Verdict”* which exhaustively and conclusively presents documentation and evidence upon evidence substantiating the historical truth, factual accuracy, archeological evidence, manuscript evidence, fulfilled prophecies, transformed lives, and other indisputable evidences which support the fact of the Resurrection of Christ from the dead and the truth claims of Christianity.

Thomas Arnold, Professor of History at Oxford University, one of the greatest historians of the 19th Century wrote: *“I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better, fuller evidence of every sort,*

to the understanding of a fair enquirer, than the great sign which God has given us that Christ died and rose from the dead.”

Simon Greenleaf, recognised as one of the most skilled legal minds ever produced, developed the Harvard Law School. He is recognised as the top authority on what constitutes sound evidence. Simon Greenleaf made a thorough and exhaustive examination of the objective evidence and the testimony of the four Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. In his book: **“The Testimony of the Evangelists”** (Baker, 1874) he concluded: *“It was therefore impossible that they could have persisted in affirming the truths they have narrated, had not Jesus actually risen from the dead, and had they not known this fact as certainly as they knew any other fact.”*

Simon Greenleaf declared that any court of law, if presented with the evidence of the Resurrection, would have to give a verdict in favour of the integrity and accuracy of the Gospel writers and the fact of the Resurrection.

One of the most popular books ever written, and most successful films ever produced, **Ben Hur**, was a result of a skeptical challenge to General Lew Wallace to the authenticity of Christ’s Resurrection, and a careful examination of the evidence.

What are the facts? The religious leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees, who had campaigned and conspired to have Christ arrested and executed on trumped up charges, had a compelling interest in disproving any claims of the Resurrection. They had presumed that the execution of Jesus would eliminate this threat to their religious power base and silence His supporters. These Jewish religious leaders had great concerns about the corpse of Jesus and they approached the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, for a military detachment to secure the tomb (Matthew 28:62-64).

The Roman governor’s priority in the volatile province of Palestine was to preserve peace and stability. He recognised the political problems that would ensue if anything happened to this religious Teacher whom he had three times declared innocent, and ultimately washed his hands in front of the crowd declaring, *“I’m innocent of this Man’s blood”* (Matthew 27:24). His wife had warned him: *“Don’t have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of Him.”* (Matthew 27:19)

Pilate was only too aware that a travesty of justice had taken place, and the last thing he needed was a review of his shameful conduct and dereliction of duty in this case. Ensuring that the victim’s corpse remained buried was definitely in Pilate’s political interests as well. *“Take a guard”, Pilate answered. ‘Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how’. So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.”* Matthew 27:65

THE ROMAN GUARD

As the chief priests had approached the Roman governor, and as the Greek word *Koustodia* is used to describe the detachment of soldiers, it was evidently a Roman guard. If only a temple guard had been used, there would have been no need to approach Pilate to issue the order. Additionally the concern of the guards after the Resurrection to be protected from consequences from the governor (Matthew 28:14) confirms that those guarding the tomb were Roman soldiers. The detachment would have consisted of at least sixteen soldiers with four men placed directly in front of the entrance of the tomb, on duty, at any time. Under Roman military law any guard who deserted his post, or who fell asleep on duty, would face crucifixion. Typically, if Roman soldiers allowed a prisoner to escape they would face the same sentence as the prisoner – in this case crucifixion.

The seal placed on the stone at the entrance to the tomb signified the administrative authority, and only an authorised officer of Rome would be permitted to break the seal. Anyone breaking a Roman seal without permission would be tracked down and executed.

Although the intention of the religious and political leaders had been to ensure that the phenomenon of Jesus ended at the tomb, their extraordinary security measures have only served to confirm the truth that they had murdered an innocent Man and that Jesus Christ was truly the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, *“the*

firstborn from the dead, and the Ruler of the kings of the earth...the One Who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forever more.” Revelation 1:5, 18

CHRIST’S VICTORY OVER DEATH

“Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it. His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. And the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men. But the angel answered and said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus, Who was crucified. He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and indeed He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him. Behold I have told you’. So they went out quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to bring His disciples word. And as they went to tell His disciples, behold Jesus met them, saying ‘Rejoice!’, so they came and held Him by the feet and worshipped Him. Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me.’” Matthew 28:1-10

ATTEMPTS TO AVOID THE TRUTH OF THE RESURRECTION

To explain away the empty tomb, the enemies of the Gospel have had to resort to some desperate deceptions. The first was to suggest that the disciples had stolen the body. This incredible theory suggests that those same disciples who had slept in the garden, fled at His arrest, denied Him before a young woman, were hiding in fear behind locked doors, could have unitedly overcome sixteen professional Roman soldiers, dared to break a Roman seal, moved a two tonne tomb stone, just to steal a corpse! A dead Messiah would have served absolutely no purpose for the disciples. What possible motivation could they have had, even had they possessed the ability to overcome the military, political and logistical obstacles? They had nothing to gain and everything to lose. Everyone of the disciples suffered severe persecution, most dying as martyrs for the Faith. **Would you die for a lie?**

DID JESUS REALLY DIE?

Others have questioned whether Christ had really died on the cross. Perhaps He only fainted? This swoon theory would have us believe that the Roman soldiers, who were professional killers, (the centurion in charge, would most probably have supervised dozens if not hundreds of executions), had failed to ensure that this high profile political prisoner was not actually dead. Considering the vicious flogging which the Lord had already endured, the excruciating torture of crucifixion, and the spear thrust into His side, with blood and water flowing out, all provide convincing evidence of death.

Yet, those advocating the swoon theory would have us believe that One Who had endured such savage flogging, crucifixion, and a spear thrust to the heart, could not only have survived the legendary Roman military efficiency, but that He was revived on a cold slab in a cold tomb. Further that He somehow disengaged from the grave clothes, and one hundred pounds of spices, ointments and wrappings which had effectively mummified Him, rolled away the two tonne stone, overpowered, or eluded, the Roman soldiers, and somehow found and impressed the disciples with His Deity? These suggestions have only to be mentioned in order to be dismissed as unbelievable.

THE EMPTY TOMB

Another desperate attempt to explain away the Resurrection of Christ has been that they went to the wrong tomb. All of them. Mary Magdalene, Peter, John, the other women, all went to the wrong tomb. And somehow neither the Pharisees, nor the Sadducees, nor the Roman soldiers, nor Joseph of Arimathea, whose tomb it was, thought to point out that the tomb was in fact still occupied! However, this theory is also impossible, as the tomb was not in a cemetery, but in a garden privately owned by Joseph of Arimathea. There was no other tomb in that garden.

THE ABSENCE OF THE BODY

And all that the Roman and Jewish leaders had to do in order to end Christianity forever was produce the corpse of Jesus. But they couldn’t do it. Even when the Apostle Peter stood up on the day of Pentecost and proclaimed: *“Therefore, let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you*

crucified, both Lord and Christ.” Acts 2:36. “And with great power the apostles gave witness to the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus.” Acts 4:33. And many thousands in Jerusalem, including many Pharisees, came to faith in Jesus Christ.

THE CRISIS OF CREDIBILITY

To the Jewish religious leaders, this was their worst nightmare, a disaster. The proclamation of the Resurrection of Christ undermined their power and credibility. Thousands of their followers now believed that they had condemned an innocent Man, the Messiah Himself. The new religion of Christianity was undermining the power base and credibility of the Pharisees and Sadducees. If the body of Jesus could have been found, Christianity could be stopped dead in its tracks and the threat to the religious status quo would have ended. Since they desperately needed Jesus’ corpse, the Jewish leaders would have used every means at their disposal to hunt it down and find it – if that was possible.

THE TESTIMONY OF EYE WITNESSES

However, we are not only dealing with the empty tomb, and the absence of the body, but the testimony of eyewitnesses. On at least twelve separate occasions Jesus Christ was seen after rising from the tomb. Mary Magdalene (John 20:11-18; Mark 16:9); the other women (Matthew 28:8-10); Peter (Luke 24:34); the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35); ten of the disciples (Luke 24:36-43; John 20:19-24); all eleven disciples, eight days later (John 20:24-29); seven disciples by the Sea of Tiberius (John 21:1-23); to five hundred at one time (1 Corinthians 15:6); to James (1 Corinthians 15:7); to all eleven apostles, and others, at the Ascension (Acts 1:3-12); Paul (Acts 9:3-8); and John (Revelation 1:12-18), all saw the Lord bodily raised from the dead.

To explain away the testimony of all these eyewitnesses, enemies of Christianity suggest that these were merely hallucinations, perhaps as a result of hypnosis or hysteria. However, while hallucinations tend to be unique psychological experiences of an individual, we are here dealing with a large number of individuals, who at different times, in different groups, in different places, both indoors and outdoors, on a hilltop, along a roadside, by a lake shore, all saw the Lord. They saw Him, they ate with Him, they saw the wounds in His hands and in His side.

And far from being gullible, it would appear that His disciples were very skeptical and slow to believe. Thomas declared that he would not believe that Christ had risen unless he personally placed his fingers in the nail prints in His hands and feet and his hand in the wound in His side.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE DISCIPLES

Not only do we have the testimony of the eyewitnesses, but the dramatic transformation of the disciples. The Resurrection of Christ from the dead transformed the disciples’ grief to joy, their cowardice to boldness, their skepticism to faith and their doubt to determination. It turned Saul, the persecutor of the church into Paul the apostle of the church.

It also transformed society and history. It changed the Jewish Sabbath into the Christian Lord’s Day. What else could explain the replacement of Saturday as the Jewish day of rest into Sunday as the Christian Lord’s Day? The Resurrection transformed a Jewish remnant into the worldwide Christian Church. Over 2-Billion people worldwide describe themselves as Christians who believe in the Resurrection of Christ from the dead. The very existence of the largest religious movement in the history of the world is another powerful evidence of the truth of the Resurrection.

Jesus Himself had prophesied His Resurrection from the dead. And because of His fulfillment of this, we can be absolutely certain that Jesus Christ is God with us, as He claimed. By His Resurrection we can know that our sins are forgiven through His blood sacrificed on the cross of Calvary: *“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that Whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”* John 3:14-16

Because of Christ's death on the cross we can rejoice that our sins are paid for – we are forgiven, justified by faith.

Because of Christ's Resurrection from the dead we can rejoice in the prospect of eternal life.

Because of Christ's Ascension we can know that He has all authority and that His Great Commission will be accomplished on earth.

Because of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost we do not need to trust in our own abilities, but in His power alone. *“Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit says the Lord.”*

William Sangster – the church leader and hymn writer – suffered from increasing paralysis which finally prevented him from even being able to talk. On his last Easter before he died, he wrote: *“How terrible to wake up on Easter and have no voice to shout, ‘HE IS RISEN’, far worse, to have a voice and not to want to shout!”*

We serve a risen Saviour! Death is defeated. Christ has risen – victorious over death, hell, satan and the grave.

Jesus Christ is the Resurrection and the Life. He who believes in Christ, though he may die, yet shall he live (John 11:25).

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” 1 Peter 1:3

Dr. Peter Hammond
Frontline Fellowship
PO Box 74
Newlands 7725
Cape Town
South Africa
Tel: 021-689-4480
Fax: 021-685-5884
E-mail: admin@frontline.org.za
Web: www.frontline.org.za