

## In Defense of Easter (Part 2)

In the previous article, four central facts were presented concerning Jesus' resurrection. (1) Jesus died by crucifixion and was buried in a known tomb. (2) Jesus' tomb was found empty by a group of His women followers. (3) Jesus' disciples *believed* that He rose from the dead and appeared to them. (4) Key Jewish figures who once were hostile and skeptical were converted to belief in and worship of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> These facts cry out for an explanation, but not just any explanation will do. Whatever inference we make should be simple, it should not be *ad hoc*, and it should have greater explanatory scope, power, and plausibility than the alternatives.<sup>2</sup> In other words, we want to make an inference to the best explanation. This article will argue that among the options that have been proposed, the resurrection hypothesis—that God raised Jesus from the dead—is far and away the best explanation. Several other naturalistic theories have been offered, however, as competitors. The most common of these is the hallucination theory.

**Hallucination?** According to this view, there was no actual resurrection. Instead, Jesus' postmortem appearances were hallucinations or mental visions. It is surprising that this theory has so long endured. It is fraught with problems. For example, it is an extraordinarily weak explanation of fact #3 since all of the appearances were reported to be *bodily* (Lk. 24:28ff). Also, how could so many different people, at different times and places all independently hallucinate a physically risen Christ “especially since they perceived Him through multiple modes of perception: sight, hearing and touch?”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, hallucinations are private and individual in nature. By contrast, many of the postmortem appearances were public and to large groups (e.g., to the twelve, to more than 500 people at one time). Again, hallucinations are typically associated with something for which people are hoping. Not so the disciples. They dismissed the initial reports by the women having given up Jesus for dead (Luke 24:11). This hurdle is particularly relevant for Saul and James. To call it ‘unlikely’ that they would hallucinate a risen and glorified Jesus when they viewed Him as a false Messiah and cursed by God is putting it mildly. Thus, it does not account for fact #4 either. The hallucination theory also fails in any way to account for fact #2, the empty tomb. Had the sensational story of Jesus' resurrection been the product of hallucination, it would have been easily laid to rest by a visit to the tomb. Last but not least, the hallucination theory is anachronistic – it reads current understanding back into the culture of first-century Judaism. For the intellectually honest, this is not a minor problem. According to Dr. Ross Inman, there was, “no Jewish expectation for a single (i.e., individual) resurrection prior to the final resurrection of the dead at the end of time” (parenthesis added).<sup>4</sup> “The disciples, therefore, confronted with Jesus' crucifixion and death, would only have looked forward to the resurrection at the final day and would probably have carefully kept their master's tomb as a shrine, where His bones could reside until the resurrection. They would not have come up with the idea that He was already raised.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, the hallucination theory fails.

**Conspiracy?** Another standard theory is that the disciples stole the body and then conspired together to lie about the resurrection as a way to cover their tracks. Here too, the problems are overwhelming. For starters, there was no motive for them to attempt such a thing. According to detective Jim Wallace, crimes are committed for one of three reasons: financial greed, sexual lust, or the pursuit of power. Not only are all of these contrary to Jesus' teaching to which each of the apostles subscribed, none of the disciples gained any of these from their claims. Not one of them profited financially from their testimony. Each earned a reputation for sexual reservation and modesty. And none of them became powerful. If anything, they gave up power to associate with the Christian cause. Saul of Tarsus, for example, was already a respected and established leader within the Jewish religious elite, yet he forsook it to join the very group he formerly persecuted.<sup>6</sup> A second problem is that even if they possessed a motive, they lacked the means to carry it out. “The disciples were not the movers and shakers of ancient Israeli society, but a bedraggled assemblage of tax collectors, fishermen, and other commoners. Convicted Watergate felon and Christian convert Charles Colson makes a telling comparison. He recounts the desperate efforts made by himself and Nixon's inner circle to try to cover up the Watergate break-in. “With the most powerful office in the world at stake, a small band of hard-picked loyalists, no more than ten of us, could not hold a conspiracy together for more than two weeks.” Despite their power and their loyalty to a corrupt president, “after just a few weeks the natural human

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<sup>1</sup> Ross D. Inman, “The Resurrection of Jesus” (Classroom Lecture Notes, SWBTS, Spring 2017).

<sup>2</sup> James Porter Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*: Downers Grove, Ill. : InterVarsity Press, c2003, 2003), 62.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas R. Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics : A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith*: Downers Grove, Ill. : Nottingham, England : IVP Academic ; Apollos, c2011, 2011), 556.

<sup>4</sup> Inman, *The Resurrection of Jesus*

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/scholarly-writings/historical-jesus/jesus-resurrection/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://coldcasechristianity.com/2014/why-understanding-criminal-motive-is-so-important-to-christians/>

instinct for self-preservation was so overwhelming that the conspirators, one by one, deserted their leader.”<sup>7</sup> A third problem is that it is inconsistent with the evidence. The conspiracy theory imagines a group of bold men, willing to attack all the powers that be. The Gospels, by contrast, record them scattering at Jesus’ arrest and hiding behind locked doors for fear of the Jews (Jn. 20:19). The theory also has no explanation for how the stone was rolled away and Jesus’ body sneaked past the Roman guards stationed at the tomb (Mt. 27:62-66). It cannot account for the embarrassing fact that women were the first to testify of the empty tomb. It doesn’t explain fact #4, the radical conversion of Saul and James since an empty tomb by itself would not have led to their conversion. And most difficult of all, the conspiracy theory has no explanation for fact #3, the disciple’s *sincere* belief in Jesus’ resurrection and postmortem appearances. With literally nothing to gain, why would they suffer excruciating, bloody deaths to maintain a known lie? In light of these problems, it is safe to dismiss the idea of conspiracy as completely implausible, even absurd.

**Wrong Tomb?** If the story of the resurrection wasn’t a premeditated lie, perhaps it was simply a mistake. “Maybe in the fog of the early morning, the women went to *an* empty tomb. But it was the wrong tomb! Then Peter and John also went to this wrong tomb, and then the other disciples, and then the Jews and the Romans, and even the angel went to the wrong tomb!”<sup>8</sup> Apart from its obvious absurdity, the theory fails to explain the facts. Consider fact #1. The location of Jesus’ burial in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea was known (John 19:41). The women were present at the sepulcher for His interment and thus knew its location (Luke 23:55). But let’s say that His followers did repeatedly go to the wrong tomb. This still doesn’t account for their abrupt conviction that Jesus had risen, much less that He had appeared to them (fact #3). Moreover, the Gospels are clear that the empty tomb alone did not convince even devoted followers such as Mary Magdalene (John 20:11-13). If it did not convince His disciples, how much less would it persuade an enemy like Saul or a skeptic like James?<sup>9</sup> When Peter began preaching the resurrection on the Day of Pentecost, it would have been a simple thing for His enemies to go to the correct tomb and produce the body.<sup>10</sup> The theory fails at every point and can hardly be considered a serious objection.

**Jesus Didn’t Die?** Another popular theory, sometimes called the ‘swoon theory,’ is that Jesus didn’t actually die on the cross but rather fainted from exhaustion. Then later, in the cool of the tomb, He revived, escaped the tomb and appeared to His followers. This theory betrays staggering ignorance both of the human body’s natural recuperative abilities and especially the Roman’s proficiency in execution. Crucifixion was a routine exercise in 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel. The Romans had perfected it to a science complete with a standard protocol. For example, crucifixion causes death through asphyxiation. To breathe, victims were forced to stand upright by resting their weight on the nails through their feet. Therefore, breaking of the legs would hasten death. The legs of the thieves crucified next to Jesus were broken because the Passover was approaching and Jewish law forbade leaving bodies on the cross on that Holy Day. Nevertheless, that step in the procedure was omitted in Jesus’ case. It was unnecessary because He was obviously dead already. It is impossible that Jesus could have survived the scourging, crucifixion, and spear. Moreover, since the governor had personally condemned Jesus to death, the soldier’s own lives were on the line. It is unthinkable they would risk death by not finishing the job. Furthermore, Pilate interrogated the centurion to make sure that Jesus had died and only after receiving confirmation did he release the body to Joseph of Arimathea (Mark 15:42-45).<sup>11</sup> This theory also invites the obvious question of how Jesus escaped the tomb. This was no mean feat considering He had been wrapped like a mummy, coated with hardening spices, and then sealed in a pitch black room with a massive stone that can’t be moved from the inside. Provided He did manage it, how did He elude the guards? Mike Licona paints the comical scenario: “Imagine Jesus, half-dead in the tomb. He wakes up in the dark and wants to get out. So He takes His hands which have been pierced by nails, places them on an extremely heavy stone, and pushes it out of the way. Then He’s met by the guards who say, ‘Where do you think you’re going, pal?’ He says, ‘I’m out of here, guys.’ And then he beats them up! Then He walks perhaps miles on pierced and wounded feet to find His disciples. Finally, He locates them and knocks on the door. Peter opens the door and sees Jesus hunched over in this pathetic and mutilated state and says, ‘Wow, I can’t wait to have a resurrection body like yours!’ No, he would have said, ‘Let’s get you to a doctor. You need help!’”<sup>12</sup> This theory hardly accounts for fact #1, but it does nothing at all for facts #3-4. It offers no explanation for the disciple’s sincere belief in a risen and

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<sup>7</sup> Charles W. Colson, *Loving God*: Grand Rapids, Mich. : Zondervan Pub. House, c1983, 1983), 120-121; cited in Douglas R. Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics : A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith*: Downers Grove, Ill. : Nottingham, England : IVP Academic ; Apollos, c2011, 2011), 559.

<sup>8</sup> <https://americanvision.org/4364/the-body-snatcher-wrong-tomb-and-legend-theories-of-the-resurrection/>

<sup>9</sup> Ross D. Inman, “The Resurrection of Jesus” (Classroom Lecture Notes, SWBTS, Spring 2017).

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.blueletterbible.org/faq/don\\_stewart/don\\_stewart\\_1351.cfm](https://www.blueletterbible.org/faq/don_stewart/don_stewart_1351.cfm)

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Mike Licona vs. Richard Carrier, “*Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?*” Veritas Forum, UCLA, 2004

glorified Messiah who had personally appeared to them. Nor does it account for the radical conversion of Saul and James.

**Jesus Rose Again!** The utter failure of every natural theory leads us straight back to the view held by Christians for over two millennia: God raised Jesus from the dead. Not only does it take the eyewitness accounts of Jesus' death and burial seriously (fact #1), it accounts for all the other facts as well in a clean, simple, and powerful way. The tomb was empty because God raised Jesus bodily from the dead (fact #2). The disciples came to the abrupt *belief* that Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to them because they were actual eyewitnesses of His majesty (fact #3). James and Saul had a personal encounter with the risen Lord resulting in their radical transformation from skeptic and enemy to devout followers (fact #4). These facts, especially when combined with Jesus' prior claims to divinity and prediction of resurrection (Mark 2:1-12; 14:61-65), give compelling evidence that our Lord is risen indeed.