

The Case for Easter
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March 31-April 1, 2018

In honor of April Fools' Day falling on Easter, I came across a website called, "Top 100 Hoaxes of All Time." Coming in at number one is the *Swiss Spaghetti Harvest* from 1957. A BBC news show aired footage of Swiss peasants pulling strands of spaghetti down from trees. So many people fell for this that many called in wondering how they could grow their own spaghetti tree!

Another popular hoax happened twenty years ago when Burger King unveiled the *Left-Handed Whopper*, especially designed for the 32-million left-handed Americans. According to the advertisement, all the condiments were rotated 180 degrees for the benefit of their left-handed customers. The following day Burger King issued a statement to let people know this was a hoax. But that didn't stop thousands of customers from requesting the new sandwich. Amazingly, many others requested the "right-handed" version when they came in!

Closer to home, a report showed up on Facebook this past week that a *Five Guys* restaurant was opening in Davenport! That would be fantastic. But then on Monday, KWQC reported that this, unfortunately, was another hamburger hoax.

Some say that Christianity is counterfeit but we're going to learn that the centerpiece of Christianity is a fact of history, not a fable or hoax.

Are you aware Christianity crumbles if the resurrection never happened?

Listen to 1 Corinthians 15:14-19: ***"And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain... And 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 are of all people most to be pitied."***

With the resurrection removed from Christianity there is nothing left. Is our faith really founded on irrefutable reality? Or is it just a holy hoax? Is it historical fact or only for those who are hysterical fanatics? Let's find out, shall we?

I'm going to do my best to distill the overwhelming data about the Resurrection into some bite-size chunks because your name has come up for jury duty. Imagine this auditorium as a courtroom and each of you are sitting in the jury box. Before

we begin, I'd like to point out that there's a response card in the rack in front of you. I'd like everyone to take out one of these cards and just hold it on your lap. We'll come back to it later.

Please lean in and listen carefully so you can render an informed verdict when we're finished. The stakes are high...we can't afford to get this wrong.

Court is now in session. Here then are some compelling forensic facts.

Exhibit A: The Scriptures

I present to you Exhibit A. As we begin our investigation we're fortunate to have a ton of textual evidence to examine. Days before He was crucified, Jesus made this statement in Mark 10:34: ***“And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise.”***

We see right from the beginning that Christianity is anchored to history. Listen to what a physician named Luke, known as a scientific historian, recorded in Acts 1:3: ***“He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.”***

The word ***“presented”*** means, *“to stand or place at hand.”* The resurrected Jesus stood right next to people. Notice there are ***“many”*** or ***“much”*** proofs. The word ***“proofs”*** comes from the word that means *“demonstrated proof, verifiable evidence, and sure signs.”* Plato and Aristotle used this word to denote the strongest proof possible. Some translations use the phrase, *“infallible proof.”* The Good News paraphrase puts it like this: ***“He appeared to them in ways that proved beyond doubt that He was alive.”***

As a member of the jury, you get to decide whether these proofs are convincing and compelling. In contrast to spaghetti trees, I believe you will find the evidence to be both overwhelming and verifiable.

Exhibit A is the Bible. I now present to you Exhibit B – The Empty Tomb.

Exhibit B: The Empty Tomb

Jewish, Roman and Christian sources all agree the tomb of Jesus was empty on Easter morning. Let's consider four evidence streams.

- **Stone.** A very large (*megas*) stone estimated to weigh about two tons, was rolled in front of the entrance to the tomb. These big boulders were often rolled into place down an incline so that they would be virtually impossible to budge. One expert has testified it could take up to 20 men to remove a stone this size from the entrance.

In John's gospel we read that the rock was "*taken away*" from the entrance. The primary root means to be "*lifted up*." I saw power like this down in Biloxi as a result of Hurricane Katrina 12 years ago, when entire portions of a bridge were picked up and moved to another location. Frank Morrison calls the stone, "*the one silent and infallible witness to the whole episode.*"

- **Seal.** Matthew 27:66 tells us that a tamper-proof official Roman seal was stamped into a sealing compound that held a rope stretched across the stone. This seal stood for all the power and authority of the Roman Empire. Anyone who broke this seal would incur the wrath of Rome and would face automatic execution by crucifixion upside down.
- **Soldiers.** After this ginormous stone was in place, a contingent of up to 16 Roman soldiers was assigned to secure the tomb. Some pictures you may have seen show one or two men standing around in kilts, holding a spear in their hands. That's simply not the case. These gladiators were human fighting machines, trained to protect the tomb against an entire battalion. These men paid very close attention to their responsibilities because the penalty for sleeping on duty was death.
- **Strips of Cloth.** The tomb was not completely empty on Easter because the linen grave clothes were left behind. Some forensic scientists believe these strips were in the form of a body, like the empty chrysalis of a caterpillar's cocoon. Evidently the spices and resins had hardened into the shape of Jesus' body.

John 20:5-7 describes Peter and John running to the tomb. John must have been in better shape because he arrived first: "*He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen.*"

This could not have been a robbery because thieves wouldn't have made it past the guards, broken the seal, rolled the stone up the hill and out of the way, unwrapped the body and then folded the headpiece neatly. Grave robbers would have thrown the garments in disorder or left them on as they ran out with the body.

Skeptics have not been able to explain away the empty tomb. Mark this down. The enemies of Jesus have never presented the body of Jesus! The very fact that Jewish and Roman authorities sought alternative explanations demonstrates that the empty tomb was historical fact. All they had to do to squash Christianity was to produce the body of Jesus. The empty tomb remains one of the strongest pieces of evidence for the resurrection.

Exhibit C: Eyewitnesses

Exhibit A is the terrific textual evidence of the Scriptures. Exhibit B is the empty tomb. That leads us to Exhibit C – the overwhelming testimony of eyewitnesses.

The premier proof that Jesus rose from the dead is that more than 515 eyewitnesses saw Him on 12 different occasions, over a period of 40 days. If you look at the number of appearances, the number of witnesses, and the consistency of the accounts, their combined testimony is profound.

Those who saw the empty tomb and then met Jesus were convinced He was alive. They never wavered on this truth and never changed their story, even under the pain of persecution.

The early Christians did not believe Jesus had risen just because of the empty tomb – they believed because they saw Him with their own eyes. Acts 2:32: ***“This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses.”***

Jesus gave unquestionable proof He was alive! After His resurrection, He appeared to a woman in the cemetery. Later that same day, He walked through a closed door and talked with his frightened followers who were huddled in a locked room. In the evening, he walked side by side with two men as they made their way down a road. He appeared to believers and doubters; to tough-minded people and tenderhearted souls.

Several saw Him on more than one occasion, some were alone, and others were in large groups. The apostle Paul, when writing to a group of new Christians, laid it all out in 1 Corinthians 15:4-7: “...***He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.***”

Let me illustrate. I was in a car accident several years ago when we lived in Rockford. Since the accident happened early in the morning, there were no eyewitnesses. When the police officer arrived on the scene, the first thing he wanted to know was whether or not anyone had witnessed the accident. Because no one had he couldn't really be sure what happened. I had an account of how I saw it – and the guy who plowed into me had his story (even though it was pretty lame). As a result, the officer concluded we were both 50% at fault.

Now, imagine if there was one eyewitness who saw everything and testified that my version of the story was true. Officer Friendly would be more inclined to believe my account, wouldn't he? How about if there were three eyewitnesses corroborating my take of what happened? It'd be even stronger if 12 people were willing to testify that I was in the right as I drove my faithful Ford through that fateful intersection.

My case would be even stronger if 100 people saw what happened. It would be airtight, and totally convincing if over 515 people were lined up on the corner of Highcrest and Alpine, and saw everything unfold in front of their very eyes. I've never heard of a trial that had over 500 witnesses.

To put this in perspective, if we were to call each of them to the witness stand to be questioned and cross-examined for just 15 minutes each, and we went around the clock without a break, it would take from breakfast on Monday until dinner on Friday to hear them all. After listening to nearly 129 straight hours of eyewitness testimony, who could possibly walk away unconvinced?

Friends, that's how strong the case is for the resurrection of Jesus! Over 500 different individuals were willing to testify they had seen the resurrected Christ. When Christianity was birthed, these eyewitnesses were still alive and could be questioned. In a similar way, in order to confirm that 9/11 really happened all we would need to do is talk to the people who lived through it. In effect, the early

church could say, *“If you don’t believe us, you can ask those who saw Him with their own eyes.”* *The accumulated weight of all these eyewitnesses is overwhelming.*

The Scriptures are Exhibit A. Exhibit B is the Empty Tomb. Exhibit C is the testimony of eyewitnesses.

Exhibit D: Changed Lives

There’s one more compelling argument for the Resurrection. Distinguished members of the jury, I enter into evidence Exhibit D: Changed Lives.

Something happened to radically reorient this original group of followers. It’s difficult to exaggerate how devastating the crucifixion must have been for the disciples since they had pinned all their hopes on Jesus. What faith they possessed had turned to fear when He died, leaving them discouraged, disoriented and depressed.

Instead of confronting the disciples for not standing with Him in His time of need, Jesus appeared to them and said, *“Peace be with you.”* This overwhelming peace gutted their guilt, pulverized their problems and addressed their feelings of failure. Their fear was replaced with rejoicing. Peter was changed from a coward who had denied Christ three times to a man of courage who became one of the pillars of the new church.

Let me ask you a question: *What motivated them to go everywhere and proclaim the message of the risen Christ?* Was it the promise of prosperity? Power? Popularity?

These ordinary men were transformed from frightened wimps into faithful witnesses, they moved from doubt to determination, from confusion to conviction, from fear to faith. Listen to how they died and see if it sounds like they were just making up the Resurrection:

- Matthew was martyred in Ethiopia while leading a worship service
- Mark was dragged through the streets until he was dead
- Peter, Simeon, Andrew, and Philip were crucified
- James was beheaded
- Bartholomew was flayed alive

- Thomas was pierced with lances
- James was thrown from the temple and stoned to death
- Jude was shot to death with arrows
- Paul was boiled in hot oil and beheaded

Members of the jury, I argue the only thing that could have possibly changed their lives so dramatically was the Resurrection of Jesus Christ!

Not only did the resurrected Christ impact this group of individuals, His life-changing power has transformed billions of people.

Around 90 guys from Edgewood heard former Major League Baseball player Darryl Strawberry speak in Davenport last Saturday. Jesus has done some major changes in his life. Here's how he puts it: *"I was once very lost and tormented, but now I am found and free in Christ Jesus. I want everyone to experience the saving and transforming power of Jesus Christ. Here I am, a baseball superstar, falling into the pits, having everybody write you off, and then having God say, 'I'm going to use your mess for a message.' How beautiful is that?"*

Jesus has also changed my life. And, from talking to many of you, I know He has transformed yours as well. His life-changing power is just as available today as it was to that group of frightened followers on Easter Sunday night.

Though you might agree with the strong evidence for the Resurrection, some of you are bored with it because it doesn't do much for you. The data, simply put, does not seem relevant to your life.

News You Can Use

I want to wrap up my argument by showing the Resurrection is full of news that you can use. *Christianity is true and it applies to you!* Here are five implications that arise out of Easter.

1. Doubt is dealt with. Like Thomas, who wouldn't believe unless he actually could touch the wounds of Jesus, the evidence for the Resurrection can displace doubt from your mind. I invite you to come back next weekend as we begin a new series called, *"Now is the Time"* for a message called, *"Getting Started Again."*

2. Loneliness is lifted. The Resurrection proves you matter deeply to God. Jesus died for you as payment for your sins and rose again to demonstrate how important you are to Him. I like what Paul Tripp says, “*Look into the empty tomb. If God could do this, there is simply nothing inside or outside of you that He is unable to handle.*”

3. Weakness is wiped out. Do you lack the power to change? Do you ever wish you could break those bad habits in your life? Friend, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is available to you right now.

4. Guilt is gutted. Have you ever wanted to get rid of the guilt in your life? The Resurrection is final proof that God accepted the sacrifice of Jesus as your sin substitute. John 8:24: “*Unless you believe that I am He you will die in your sins.*”

5. Death is destroyed. Because Jesus is alive, death will never have the last word; a rising is promised for every dying, and a new beginning for every ending. One reason the movie *I Can Only Imagine* is so popular right now is because it shows how Jesus changes lives, that heaven is forever, and that born again believers will see their saved loved ones again.

Closing Argument

In considering the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, are you ready to reach a verdict?

Exhibit A: How do you explain the overwhelming testimony of the Bible?

Exhibit B: How do you account for the empty tomb in light of the stone, the seal, the soldiers and the strips of cloth?

Exhibit C: How do you argue against multiple witnesses?

Exhibit D: How do you get away from the fact the Resurrected Christ changes lives to this day?

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is perhaps the best-attested event in all of history! The evidence is compelling and all the claims of Christ have been validated. C.S. Lewis once said, “*Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of no importance, and if true, is of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important.*”

If you're still not settled and want to do some more investigating, that's totally cool. Here are two practical resources:

1. Please pick up a free copy of *The Case for Easter* as you leave.
2. Consider attending the *Truth Conference* to be held on April 20-21 at Calvary Church of the Quad Cities. Josh McDowell, known for his book, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, will be one of the speakers. There's more information in the bulletin.

McDowell tells about a student who once told him all of his questions about Christianity had been answered. McDowell was happy and asked, "*Are you then going to become a Christian?*" The student told him that he did not want to do that. When asked why, he answered: "*Frankly, because it would mess up the way I'm living.*"

The evidence is incontrovertible and therefore it demands a verdict! And yet, some of you will still choose not to believe because it's really a moral issue – you don't want to surrender your will to Him. It's tough to give up the way you've been living and to let the Lord lead your life. It's not that people *cannot* believe; it's that many *will not* believe.

Some April Fools' jokes are funny but the Bible says it's not funny to be a fool. The Bible defines a fool as someone who disregards God's Word. The ultimate description of a fool is found in Psalm 14:1: "***A fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'***"

In Luke 12, Jesus describes a man who lives by a very popular motto: "*Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow I die.*" Here's what Jesus says about that in verse 20: "***Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?***"

Ultimately, we're not really members of a jury but rather we're defendants who must face a righteous Judge. We've been declared guilty because of our sins. But here's the amazing thing. We're guilty of the crime of sinful rebellion but His Son has done the time for us. He took our place and our penalty so we can be pardoned.

The resurrection demands a response. This is no joke...Jesus rose from the dead!

Members of the jury; what's your verdict on the Resurrection? Forensics and faith are friends because Christianity is set both in history *and* it is supernatural. There are compelling reasons to believe but you must also receive in order to be converted. John 1:12: ***“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”***

That's the formula of saving faith: **Believe + Receive = Become.**

The words Jesus said to Thomas are relevant to us today: ***“Stop doubting and believe.”*** If you want to go to heaven, you must be in Christ and Christ must be in you. You can't remain neutral. Either Christ was raised from the dead or He wasn't. *What's your verdict?*

Would you close your eyes and pray this prayer with me if it represents where you're at right now?

God, I have failed big time and have been living like a fool. I admit I'm a sinner. I repent by turning from how I've been living and trust what your Son did on the Cross when He died in my place, paying the price for all that I've done. Thank you that you meet me right where I'm at and you call me by name. You know me and for some reason you love me. I want to be at peace with you. And even though I can't see you, I choose to believe you. I believe you died on the Cross and rose again on the third day. And now I receive you into my life. Save me from my sins. I believe and I receive so that I can become your child. Grant me resurrection power to live the rest of my life, not for me, but for you. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

I'd like everyone to take out the response card again. I want to ask you to respond to the reality of the resurrection.

There are at least three groups of people here.

- 1. Some of you just prayed to receive Christ as your Savior.** If that's you, please fill out your contact information and check the box, *“Received Christ.”*
- 2. Perhaps you're not ready but would like more information.** If so, please check the box, *“Explore more about Christ,” “Attend April Next Steps Group,”* or *“More info about Edgewood.”*
- 3. If you've been saved for some time, could you write the year you believed, received and became born again?**

Judges often poll a jury to confirm their vote. I wonder how many of you are ready to declare you believe Jesus died in your place, He was buried and He rose from the dead. If you believe this and you've received Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, please raise your hand.

We're going to declare our belief in the resurrection as we sing, "This I Believe." But first, let me pray.

Closing Song: "This I Believe"

In Revelation 1:18, Jesus says: "***I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.***" Look at the evidence and as Luke 1:4 says, you will "***know the certainty of the things you have been taught.***"

→ Please take your response card and drop it in the basket as you exit the sanctuary.

Easter Custom

Leader: *He is risen!*

Response: *He is risen indeed!*