

Chapter #11

The Insufficiency of Alternate Explanations for the Resurrection and Marks of Authenticity

In the last chapter we began to examine the eyewitness testimony concerning the resurrection of Jesus Christ by reading their accounts in the four Gospels. At this point in our apologetic, we can enter the Bible itself as evidence, since we've already proven it to be a historically reliable document and worthy of unbiased consideration. Our conclusion was that the eyewitnesses to the resurrection were in fact reliable, credible witnesses who appear to be basically honest. We applied the same test to their testimony that we would to any witness in a court of law. And Matthew, Mark, Luke and John passed with ease. Everything points to their honesty in reporting events: they had nothing to gain and everything to lose by propagating a lie. But what if they only *thought* they were telling the truth? What if they were deceived or mistaken? These are questions that are addressed in cross-examination. Since we don't have the original witnesses to question, we will rely on an examination of alternate explanations for the resurrection. Is there a theory that accounts for all their mistaken beliefs? Is there a more plausible explanation of events? By testing the viability of other theories, we in essence test the accuracy of our eyewitnesses.

If the eyewitnesses are credible, how else can we explain their testimony?

1. THEY WERE DECEIVED.

They appear to be honest witnesses because they really did believe that Jesus had risen from the dead. But He didn't. It was all a part of a grand plot to deceive Jesus' followers.

Theory #1: Jesus wasn't really dead.

In this view, also known as the "swoon" theory, Jesus never really died. Death by crucifixion was to be a long, slow, agonizing death. But Jesus wasn't on the cross long enough to actually die.

John 19:31-33 *Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jews did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.*

Mark 15:44 *Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died.*

Instead, Jesus was just unconscious. His body was taken down and, after three days of rest, inhaling aromatic spices, He was revived and His disciples mistakenly believed He had risen from the dead. In one of these popular views, Jesus actually plotted to deceive His disciples. He told Judas when to betray Him:

John 13:27b *"What you are about to do, do quickly," Jesus told him"*

Jesus had conspired with Joseph of Arimathea to be "killed" just before the Sabbath began, so that He wouldn't be kept on the cross for more than a few hours. He arranged for standers-by to administer to Him a

powerful drug that put Him into a trance, thereby fooling the guards into thinking He was dead.

John 19:29-30 *“A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus’ lips. When he had received the drink, Jesus said, “It is finished.” With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.”*

But does the evidence support such a theory? First, it is highly improbable that Jesus would teach virtue and righteousness while perpetrating the greatest hoax in history. It is equally implausible that after suffering excruciating torture and loss of blood from flogging, and having gone three days without food or medical attention, that Jesus could look good enough to convince His disciples He had conquered death. John R. W. Stott asks if it is possible for us to believe,

“...that after the rigour and pains of trial, mockery, flogging and crucifixion He could survive thirty-six hours in a stone sepulchre with neither warmth nor food nor medical care? That He could then rally sufficiently to perform the superhuman feat of shifting the boulder which secured the mouth of the tomb, and this without disturbing the Roman guard? That then, weak and sickly and hungry, he could appear to the disciples in such a way as to give them the impression that He had vanquished death? That He could go on to claim that He had died and risen, could send them into all the world and promise to be with them unto the end of time? That He could live somewhere in hiding for forty days, making occasional surprise appearances, and then finally disappear without any explanation? Such credulity is more incredible than Thomas’ unbelief.”¹

These considerations aside, though, there is ample evidence that Jesus really did die on the cross. Notice John’s description of the crucifixion:

John 19:33-35 *“But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus’ side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe.”*

“We are told on eyewitness authority that blood and water came out of the pierced side of Jesus.... the eyewitness clearly attached great importance to this. Had Jesus been alive when the spear pierced His side, strong spouts of blood would have emerged with every heart beat. Instead, the observer noticed semi-solid dark red clot seeping out, distinct and separate from the accompanying watery serum. This is evidence of massive clotting of the blood in the main arteries, and is exceptionally strong medical proof of death. It is all the more impressive because the evangelist could not possibly have realized its significance to a pathologist. The blood and water from the spear-thrust is proof positive that Jesus was already dead.”²

Bishop E. LeCamus of La Rochelle, France, added,

“Besides, a man in a swoon is not revived ordinarily by being shut up in a cave, but by being brought out into the open air. The strong odour of aromatics in a place hermetically sealed would have killed a sick person whose brain was already seized with the most unyielding swoon. In our days, rationalists of every stripe reject this hypothesis, which is as absurd as it is odious, and all agree that the Crucified Jesus really died on Friday.”³

This theory that Jesus wasn’t really dead also assumes complete stupidity on the part of the Roman guards who verified that He had actually died. So, maybe He did actually die. Could the disciples still have been deceived?

Theory #2: Someone stole the body.

This is a simple explanation for the empty tomb. In fact, Matthew records its roots.

Matthew 28:11-14 *“While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money,*

telling them, “You are to say, ‘His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.”

From a practical standpoint, this assumption is ludicrous. What would the disciples have gained from stealing the body and pretending Jesus had risen? We’ve already proven them to be honest men who weren’t even expecting a resurrection before it actually occurred. They were fearful and in hiding. Since Matthew and John were disciples, they presumably would have been party to this plot and so could not have been merely deceived. They would have been the deceivers, which is inconceivable in light of our last chapter. And would it really have been possible for someone — anyone — to have stolen the body?

Matthew 27:63-66 “Sir,” they said, “we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise again.’ So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first.” “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 28:13 “You are to say, ‘His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.’”

Matthew gives us details that have never been disputed, that the tomb was sealed and guarded. A Roman Guard generally consisted of four men, one of which would keep watch while the other three rested. They were armed with a Roman pike (a 6-foot-long javelin), a shield, a 3-foot sword and a dagger. And they were exacting in their attention to duty. Three questions immediately come to mind:

(1) ***How could they have fallen asleep?***

They had not the slightest interest in the task to which they were assigned. Their sole purpose and obligation was rigidly to perform their duty as soldiers of the empire of Rome to which they had dedicated their allegiance. The Roman seal affixed to the stone before Joseph’s tomb was far more sacred to them than all the philosophy of Israel or the sanctity of her ancient creed. Soldiers cold-blooded enough to gamble over a dying victim’s cloak are not the kind of men to be hoodwinked by timid Galileans or to jeopardize their Roman necks by sleeping on their post.⁴

Historians recount the price to be paid by a Roman soldier who fell asleep on duty; such negligence was punishable by death. Rome didn’t become a world power by allowing laxity among its armed forces. The annals of Roman military history recorded some of the disciplinary measures:

In 418 [cases], standard bearer lagging in battle, slain by general’s own hand; in 390, asleep on duty, hurled from the cliff of the Capitolium, in 252, negligence, beaten and rank reduced; in 218, negligence, punished; in 195, lagging, struck with weapon.⁵

But what if this had been a temple guard and not a Roman guard? The temple guard was just as exacting in its punishment for falling asleep on duty. *The Jewish Encyclopedia* states that those on watch were not allowed to sit down, much less to sleep. The captain of the guard saw that every man was alert, chastising a priest if found asleep at his post, and sometimes even punishing him by burning his shirt upon him, as a warning to others.⁶

It is highly implausible that a trained guard, either Roman or Temple, under the fear of strict punishment or even death, would admittedly fall asleep on his post.

(2) ***If they did fall asleep, how did they know Jesus’ disciples stole His body?*** If the soldiers had claimed that they fell asleep and awoke to find the body missing, their story might be believable. But they specifically claimed the disciples stole the body, which would have been impossible for them to know. And if they somehow did know that it was the disciples who stole the body, why weren’t they immediately arrested? One writer commented,

That the Jewish rulers did not believe what they instructed and bribed the soldiers to

say, is almost self-evident. If they did, why were not the disciples at once arrested and examined? For such an act as was imputed to them involved a serious offence against the existent authorities. Why were they not compelled to give up the body? Or, in the event of their being unable to exculpate themselves from the charge, why were they not punished for their crime?... It is nowhere intimated that the rulers even attempted to substantiate the charge.⁷

(3) ***How could the stone have been rolled away without them being awakened?*** Assuming again that they really did fall asleep, is it even remotely possible that the stone that had been sealed could have been moved without waking them? Mark 16:4 records that the stone in front of the tomb was very large. A copyist's note inserted in parentheses in the text of Mark 16:4 in the fourth-century Codex Bezae read, "And when he was laid there, he (Joseph) put against the tomb a stone which twenty men could not roll away."⁸ This is significant, because if it had been the copyist's own interpretation, the note would have been in the margin. Writing the comment within the text would indicate the copyist's reliance on an older text, possibly one from the first century. The comment could be eyewitness testimony concerning the size of the stone.⁹ If 11 men attempted to move a stone that required 20 men to move, don't you think their grunting and groaning would have awakened a highly trained Roman or Temple guard?

Nothing about this alternate explanation for the resurrection is plausible. If the disciples, or anyone else, had stolen the body, would they have taken the time to remove the graveclothes?

John 19:38-40b *With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs.*

John 20:5-8 *He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed.*

Seeing the graveclothes lying in the tomb certainly convinced John that the body hadn't been stolen. A thief is usually in a hurry, especially when a sleeping Roman guard is close by. Some writers even gather from this description of the graveclothes that they were untouched, as if Jesus's body had simply disappeared from within. A thief would have no reason to make it appear as if Jesus had risen in such a way, and the disciples, distraught as they were, would probably not have thought of it.

John Chrysostom of Antioch (347-407 A.D.) wrote,

"For indeed even this establishes the resurrection, the fact I mean of their saying, that the disciples stole Him. For this is the language of men confessing, that the body was not there. When therefore they confess the body was not there, but the stealing it is shown to be false and incredible, by their watching by it, and by the seals, and by the timidity of the disciples, the proof of the resurrection even hence appears incontrovertible."¹⁰

2. **THEY WERE MISTAKEN.** Maybe the disciples weren't deceived by Jesus or by others. Maybe they were just mistaken. They wanted so much to believe Jesus wasn't really dead that they jumped to conclusions and assumed He had risen.

Theory #3: They went to the wrong tomb.

One theory explains that Jesus did plot to deceive His disciples into thinking He had risen from the dead, but the soldier piercing His side with a spear was unexpected. Joseph claimed Jesus's body, as had been arranged, but Jesus died within a few short hours. Wanting the disciples to think He was alive, Joseph laid Him in an unmarked tomb. When the women came on the first day of the week, they went to the wrong tomb. The gardener tried to explain, but the women misunderstood.

John 20:15 *"Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."*

When the man said, "He is not here," what he intended to say was, "He's over there." He was trying to tell the distraught women where the body really was. Most who hold to the "wrong tomb" theory don't believe Joseph intentionally put the body in a different tomb. They assume that the women, in their distress and grief, simply went to the wrong tomb.

John 20:1 *Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance*

It was dark and Mary mistakenly went to the wrong tomb. But, if it were still dark when Mary arrived at the tomb, a gardener wouldn't have been working. If it were light, she wouldn't have gone to the wrong tomb. Would it have been likely that the women went to the wrong tomb?

Matthew 27:61 *Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.*

Mark 15:47 *Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid.*

Luke 23:55 *The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it.*

Even if Mary did go to the wrong tomb, you would have to believe that later, after the disciples learned from the women that the body was missing, the other disciples also went to the wrong tomb. Surely Joseph of Arimathea could have solved the entire problem by taking them to the right one. This wasn't a public cemetery; it was a private burial ground. It wasn't possible to mistake it. But if everyone did indeed go to the wrong tomb, you can bet the Sanhedrin would have found the right one and promptly produced the body to settle the whole mess once and for all.

Theory #4: The Resurrection was a hallucination.

Could it be that the disciples were mistaken in a different sense? Maybe, out of their desire for Christ to be alive, they hallucinated and only thought they saw the risen Christ. They themselves admit that they didn't recognize Jesus and thought He was a ghost:

Luke 24:13-16 *Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him.*

Luke 24:30-31 *When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight.*

Luke 24:36-37 *While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost.*

Is it possible that all of the disciples had the same hallucination at the same time? Not according to expert opinion:

It is absolutely inconceivable that as many as (say) 500 persons, of average soundness of mind and temperament, in various numbers, at all sorts of times, and in divers situations, should experience all kinds of sensuous impressions — visual, auditory, tactual — and that all these manifold experiences should rest entirely upon subjective hallucination. We say that this is incredible, because if such a theory were applied to any other than a "supernatural" event in history, it would be dismissed forthwith as a ridiculously insufficient explanation.¹¹

The disciples were not gullible, but rather cautious, skeptical and "slow of heart to believe." They were not susceptible to hallucinations. Nor would strange visions have satisfied them. Their faith was grounded upon the hard facts of verifiable experience.¹²

“Faith did not create the appearances; the appearances created faith.”¹³

“But if the visions of the risen Saviour were hallucinations, why did they stop so suddenly? Why, after the Ascension, does one not find others still seeing the coveted vision? By the law of development, says Dr. Mullins, hallucinations should have become chronic after five hundred had been brought under their sway. But now hallucination gives place to a definite and conquering programme of evangelisation.”¹⁴

Hallucinations have never stimulated people to undertake a work of enormous magnitude, and, while carrying it out, to lead lives of the most rigid and consistent self-denial, and even suffering. In a word,... we are constrained to agree with Dr. Sanday, who says, “No apparition, no mere hallucination of the senses, ever yet moved the world.”¹⁵

It is obvious that the eyewitnesses were neither deceived nor mistaken in their accounts of the resurrection. None of the alternate explanations accounts for all the evidence. There can be only one conclusion: Jesus did in fact rise from the dead.

What are some other marks of authenticity?

(1) It was women who first discovered the missing body and encountered the risen Christ.

Women in the first century were treated as second-class citizens and their testimony regarding anything was considered unreliable. In fact, women were not permitted to testify in a court of law, so suspect was their credibility. If a crime were committed and witnessed by five women, the suspect would be freed because of lack of testimony. Their witness simply held no water. If the resurrection were a fabrication, the last thing the disciples would have done is have women be the first witnesses. That would make the entire account suspect. Men should have been the first to see the empty tomb and the risen Lord. Then it would have been properly verified. The inclusion of women in the Easter story lends authenticity. There was no attempt to change the facts to make them more acceptable to first-century Jews.¹⁶

(2) The empty tomb was never denied.

“The empty tomb stands, a veritable rock, as an essential element in the evidence for the resurrection. To suggest that it was not in fact empty at all, as some have done, seems to me ridiculous. It is a matter of history that the apostles from the very beginning made many converts in Jerusalem, hostile as it was, by proclaiming the glad news that Christ had risen from the grave and they did it within a short walk from the sepulchre. Any one of their hearers could have visited the tomb and come back again between lunch and whatever may have been the equivalent of afternoon tea. Is it conceivable, then, that the apostles would have had this success if the body of the one they proclaimed as risen Lord was all the time decomposing in Joseph’s tomb? Would a great company of the priests and many hard-headed Pharisees have been impressed with the proclamation of a resurrection which was in fact no resurrection at all, but a mere message of spiritual survival couched in the misleading terms of a literal rising from the grave?”¹⁷

“The early Jewish polemic against the Christian message about Jesus’ resurrection, traces of which have already been left in the Gospels, does not offer any suggestion that Jesus’ grave had remained untouched. The Jewish polemic would have had to have every interest in the preservation of such a report. However, quite to the contrary, it shared the conviction with its Christian opponents that Jesus’ grave was empty. It limited itself to explaining this fact its own way.”¹⁸

“The church was founded on the resurrection, and disproving it would have destroyed the whole Christian movement. However, instead of any such disproof, throughout the first century, Christians were threatened, beaten, flogged and killed because of their faith. It would have been much simpler to have silenced them by producing Jesus’ body, but this was never done.”¹⁹

Jesus' tomb never became a shrine for the early church. It was Constantine's mother who, in the fourth century, had a church built on the site to commemorate Christ's death and resurrection. The early Christians viewed the tomb as irrelevant, because Christ was no longer in the tomb.

(3) **Jesus didn't just appear to believers.**

It has been argued that Jesus only appeared to those who already believed in Him. But nothing is further from the truth. In fact, at the time of His resurrection, none of His disciples believed in Him. Peter had already denied Him three times. All but John were in hiding while He was being crucified. None of them believed the women's testimony. It wasn't until they saw Him that they were made believers. James, the half-brother of Jesus, was a skeptic until He encountered the risen Christ. Paul was a Pharisee who was actively persecuting Christians when He encountered Christ on the Damascus Road. He became a believer because He was convinced, not because He was predisposed to believing.

The final mark of authenticity, which we have mentioned several times, is the uncompromising faith of those who saw the risen Lord. They staked their lives on the reality of what they saw. No one can doubt their sincerity and certainty of what they proclaimed.

What does it all mean?

In chapter 9, we concluded that in order to prove a religion true, we must find a synthetic statement on which the entire religion is based and prove it true by empirical evidence. The fact of the resurrection is the cornerstone of the Christian faith; our entire religion depends on its historicity. Because it is a historical claim it is verifiable, and therefore fits our definition of a synthetic statement. By examining the credibility of the eyewitnesses to the resurrection and showing the implausibility of any alternate explanations for their accounts, we have proven that the resurrection must be true. Therefore, by logical corollary (using deductive logic), Christianity must be true. George Ladd noted, "The only reason for not accepting the biblical hypothesis is the conviction that it cannot be true."²⁰ Empirical evidence proves it to be true. Since no other religion offers a verifiable truth claim that can be proven (and is therefore considered "nonsense"), and since Christianity claims exclusivity, then we must assume Christianity is the only true religion.

Jesus had prophesied that He would rise from the dead. The fact that He actually did (a feat no other being has ever accomplished), raises the probability of the accuracy of everything He taught to a very high degree. He said He was the only way to the Father and to heaven. And His words are attested to by the greatest miracle ever — His resurrection from the dead. But Jesus made another claim that precludes any other religion from being true. He claimed to be God. Many who claim to be His followers deny that He ever taught such a doctrine. In our next chapter we'll look exclusively at this claim and its importance to the Christian faith.

End Notes

¹ Quoted by Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, Inc., 1972), p. 234.

² Michael Green, quoted in *Evidence*, p. 199.

³ *Evidence*, p. 200.

⁴ Albert Roper, quoted in *Evidence*, p. 210-211.

⁵ George Curie, quoted in *Evidence*, p. 213.

⁶ p. 81, quoted in *Evidence*, p. 215.

⁷ Edward Gordon Selwyn, quoted in *Evidence*, p. 242.

⁸ *Evidence*, p. 208.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 208.

¹⁰ Quoted in *Evidence*, p. 238.

¹¹ Thomas J. Thornburn, quoted in *Evidence*, p. 249.

¹² John R. Stott, quoted in *Evidence*, p. 255.

¹³ George Eldon Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), p. 138.

¹⁴ E.F. Kevan, quoted in *Evidence*, p. 255.

¹⁵ T.J. Thornburn, quoted in *Evidence*, p. 255.

¹⁶ Steven Collins, *Championing the Faith: A Layman's Guide to Proving Christianity's Claims* (Tulsa: Virgil Hensley Publishing Co., 1991), p. 141.

¹⁷ J.N.D. Anderson, quoted in *Evidence*, p. 217.

¹⁸ W. Pannenberg, quoted in *Evidence*, p. 225.

¹⁹ *Evidence*, p. 225.

²⁰ Ladd, p. 140.