

Body of Proof

Part One

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Body of Proof¹ ***The Missing Evidence***

Back in the 1800s when the primary form of media was the newspaper, there was a series of articles printed that claimed life had been seen on the moon – everything from animals to aliens – and people believed it.

In the 1930s, radio was the primary form of media, and there was a dramatic broadcast about aliens attacking major cities in the world, called “War of the Worlds.” It was so lifelike that people believed it and there was widespread panic.

In the 1950s television became a primary source of information, and the BBC aired a hoax news story about a family in Switzerland that harvested long strands of spaghetti from local trees. It was meant to be a joke, but people in England believed it was true, with many people contacting the BBC to ask how they could grow their own pasta trees at home.

Today, social media is a breeding ground for conspiracy theorists and hoaxsters claiming everything from alien lizard people living among us to people being clones to the moon landing being fake to a flat earth. It doesn't help that 24-hour news services have become so sensational that often you can't tell the difference anymore between them and social media. And don't get me started on the stories that politicians tell.

The fact is that many of the stories we hear today are recycled myths from years and years ago that have had embellishments to fit modern technology. It's always been that way with people. Since we have this propensity to make up stories, and make them larger every time we tell them, how do we know that the Resurrection of Jesus the Christ isn't just a two-thousand-year-old embellished urban legend? Is there any way to investigate the resurrection and find out the truth?

Whenever there is an investigation into a legal case, investigators will pore over the finest details, interviewing people of interest and witnesses and gathering information and data in order to come to a correct conclusion. When they've finished their work, the sum of the evidence is called a “body of proof” – where all the individual pieces of evidence are taken together as a complete whole. A single piece of evidence might be weak on its own, but a large body of proof makes an argument much harder to refute.

Last week we concluded Mark's gospel by looking at some evidence of the truth of the resurrection of Jesus. Today we are continuing from there for three Sundays in a series we're calling “Body of Proof” – we'll get a large volume of evidence to the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. These sermons are going to be in a style that's called “apologetics.” The term doesn't mean that I'm apologizing for what the Bible says;

¹ Sources: Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan) 2009, 2016
Jeremiah Johnston, *Body of Proof* (Bethany Publishers, Minneapolis) 2023

it's a term that describes a systematic and rational defense – in this case of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Did Jesus really rise from the dead? If he didn't, then his torture, crucifixion and death are nothing more than another human tragedy. As horrible as it was, without the resurrection it doesn't do much for you and me.

But if Jesus *did* rise from the dead, then his suffering and death for us takes on a powerful, life-altering and history altering impact that allows us to be forgiven of sin and in a relationship with God and gives us an entirely different level of living that endures beyond our own graves and into eternity.

Many of us believe it is true that Jesus really did rise from the grave but many of us who believe do so simply because we've been told it was true – on blind faith. Now, faith is a very important thing, and ultimately faith involves believing what we can't actually see or prove with our finite minds. But our faith is not blind; ours is an *informed faith*. If something is true even in the realm of faith, there will be evidence to back it up. So we want to find the evidence of the resurrection. And we begin today by looking at...

The Missing Evidence.

My dad had a master's degree in criminal psychology and retired as commander of communications for the Oregon State Police, but for several years he served in the criminal division. He was an expert fingerprint analyst and lead investigator. When I went to work for the Oregon State Police, my dad told me that a good investigation isn't just about looking at the evidence that is *there*, but it's also about considering the evidence that is *missing*, because many times investigators can find the truth by what is missing as much as they can by what is present. In this case, the missing evidence is the body of Jesus; his body was *not* in the tomb.

I want to remind you of what we talked about last week as we concluded our series in the Gospel of Mark, talking about three of the prominent theories that attempt to disprove the resurrection and explain away what happened to Jesus' body. One theory was that his body was stolen, another was that the women went to the wrong tomb, and the third was that the resurrection appearances of Jesus were all hallucinations. We were able to refute those theories, so if you weren't with us I'd encourage you to go back and watch it or better yet download the manuscript and read it.

But the interesting thing about those theories is that they all start at the same place: they all agree that Jesus' body was *not* in the tomb that Sunday morning. They just try to find some other way to explain it. So let's start with that today: with the missing evidence – that Jesus' body was *not* in the tomb.

We all know that in a murder case, it's nearly impossible to prove it without a body. In this case, it isn't that Jesus was never seen. It's that first he was seen alive, then he was seen crucified and dead, then he was seen alive again after being in the tomb for three days. If we believe the gospel accounts, this isn't a matter of a missing body so that we'll never know what actually happened. No; it's a matter of Jesus being alive – even to this day, even after suffering and dying in such horrible and excruciating ways. For Christians, the empty

tomb is an enduring proof of Jesus' claim to be God. The Apostle Paul, a former skeptic turned believer, said in 1 Corinthians 15:17:

“If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.”
(1 Corinthians 15:17)

Here's the thing: Christianity without the resurrection is not Christianity at all. The resurrection is the fulfillment of everything in the Old Testament and the proof of everything in the New Testament. *If it is true*. Skeptics claim that what happened to Jesus' body is still a mystery; that there's not enough evidence to reach a firm conclusion. But countless others (including me) say the case is closed – that there is conclusive proof that the tomb is empty and Jesus is alive.

Lee Strobel was an investigative journalist and atheist who set out to prove that Jesus was not God, and he did not rise from the dead. But the more he investigated, the more he became convinced that Jesus *is* the Christ and he really did rise from the dead. He joined the ranks of others throughout history who all tried to disprove the resurrection and ended up believers, like CS Lewis (the Oxford Scholar), Larry Sanger (the Wikipedia Co-founder), Rosaria Butterfield (tenured professor of English and lesbian activist), Francis Collins (the founder of the Human Genome Project), Sir Lionel Luckhoo (an attorney listed in the Guinness book of Records as the most successful lawyer) – and many, many more.

Lee Strobel wrote a book entitled, “The Case for Christ” as a result of his studies to disprove Christ. And in his book he asks some hard questions that we are going to look at today, one of which is...

1. How secure was the tomb?

The reason this is an important question is because the tighter the security was around the tomb, the more difficult it would be for the disciples to tamper with Jesus' body.

So to answer this question, let's first look at the design of the tomb. Archeologists have been able to get an accurate description from excavations of first century sites.

Outside the entrance to the tomb there was a slanted groove that led down to a low entrance, and a large disk-shaped stone (probably at least six feet in diameter and a foot thick) was rolled along this groove and ledged into place across the entrance – which was a doorway cut out of the wall of the rock tomb. While it would have been easy for someone to roll the stone down the groove in order to close the tomb, it would have taken several men to roll it back up the groove in order to open it. So it would have been very secure.

Then there was the presence of the guards. Some have argued that, since only Matthew records the guards being ordered to stand watch over the tomb, that maybe there weren't really any guards there. But think about how things went. After the resurrection, the disciples said, “Jesus has risen from the dead!” The Jewish religious leaders said, “His body was stolen!” The disciples said, “There were guards at the tomb to prevent that!” The Jewish religious leaders said, “They fell asleep!” And the disciples said, “You bribed the guards to say that they fell asleep!”

But if there were no guards at the tomb, the conversation would have gone like this: “Jesus is risen!” “His body was stolen!” “There were guards at the tomb to prevent that!” And the Jewish religious leaders would have said, “What guards? There were no guards! You’re making things up!” But the Jewish religious leaders did *not* say that – they never denied the presence of the guards. Otherwise they wouldn’t have made up the story of the guards falling asleep.

So the tomb was sealed with a huge stone, and it was guarded by soldiers. Both sides agree to that. It was definitely a secure place, which rules out that anybody would have tampered with Jesus’ body.

So then...

2. What about the contradictions?

If you lined up the resurrection stories in all four gospels, you will find that there are several discrepancies in the details.

Dr. Michael Martin is the Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at Boston University and is an atheist. One of his main arguments against the resurrection is the differences in the details of the Gospel accounts. This is what he writes: “In Matthew, when Mary Magdalene and the other Mary arrived toward dawn at the tomb there is a rock in front of it, there is a violent earthquake, and an angel descends and rolls back the stone. In Mark, the women arrive at the tomb at sunrise, and the stone has been rolled back. In Luke, when the women arrive at early dawn, they find the stone had already been rolled back. In Matthew, an angel is sitting on the rock outside the tomb, and in Mark a youth is inside the tomb. In Luke, two men are inside. In Matthew, the women present at the tomb are Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. In Mark, the women present at the tomb are the two Marys and Salome. In Luke, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary the mother of James, Joanna, and the other women are present at the tomb. In Matthew, the two Marys rush from the tomb in great fear and joy, run to tell the disciples, and meet Jesus on the way. In Mark, they run out of the tomb in fear and say nothing to anyone. In Luke, the women report the story to the disciples who do not believe them and there is no suggestion that they meet Jesus.”

Dr. Martin’s not wrong; there *are* those discrepancies in the details. But he’s looking at it from a philosopher’s point of view, not a historian’s point of view. See, a philosopher would say, “if something is inconsistent, the philosophical law of contradiction means you must throw out the entire story.” But a historian looks at the story, sees the inconsistencies, and notices that all of them are in the *secondary* details, while the *core* of the story is the same in all four accounts. The core or primary details are these, and they are all the same in all four gospels: Joseph of Arimathea takes the dead body of Jesus, puts it in a tomb, the tomb is visited by a small number of women followers of Jesus early on the Sunday morning following his death, and they find that the tomb is empty. They see a vision of angels saying that Jesus has risen. Later they see Jesus himself.

See, a historian doesn’t throw the baby out with the bathwater. The *secondary* discrepancies don’t bother a historian at all; in fact, *they actually validate the story*. Let me give you an example: in a court of law, when there are several witnesses to a single crime, if

all the witnesses all agree on every little detail, then the court is immediately suspicious because they are likely in collusion. In other words, they probably got together to get their stories to match. So, if several of you walked out of here and saw a hit and run accident on the street out front, one of you would say the car that sped off was blue, another would say it was green. One would say he was traveling 35 mph, and another would say he was speeding. But you'd all agree that there was a hit and run.

So if all the gospel stories were exactly the same, you would assume that, since Mark was written first, then Matthew, Luke and John would have just copied from Mark. Instead, they each have distinct *secondary* details.

Here's an actual example from history: There are only two accounts of Hannibal crossing the Alps to attack Rome in 218 BC. Neither of the two accounts are of eyewitnesses, and both have irreconcilable and incompatible differences. But there is not one historian at any time or anywhere that doubts the event itself actually happened. With Jesus we have *four eyewitness accounts*.

And actually, with the Gospels, it's not too hard to reconcile the stories. Like the time of day that the women visited the tomb. One writer says it was at nighttime, another says it was early morning. But both agree it was around dawn. So, if *I* was writing the story, I'd say it was nighttime, because it was dark. But if my neighbor Brandon was writing the story, he'd say it was morning, because he's a welder that travels distances for his job, and he's out of the house before five AM. We're both describing the same time but from different perspectives.

As far as the groups of people who were at the tomb and who wasn't, none of the Gospels give a complete headcount. More than likely there was a whole gaggle of disciples and each writer simply named certain ones.

Keep in mind, too, that Mark's gospel was the earliest written, and it was probably written from Peter's accounts. As I said last week, there isn't any other ancient historical event that is recorded and written down so close to the actual event.

If you apply the same historical principles to the gospels that are applied to *any* other ancient event, the discrepancies actually make the accounts even *more* certain.

So if the tomb was secure, and the accounts are reliable, then regarding the missing body, let's look at...

3. The affirmative evidence.

Since we've refuted the idea that the tomb was not secure, and as a result could not have been tampered with, and by using historian's standards to evaluate the discrepancies we've shown their authenticity, let's now look at the evidence that supports the missing body and the empty tomb.

First, the empty tomb is in...

- **The earliest records.**

Paul's testimony in 1 Corinthians 15 says this:

"Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born." (1 Corinthians 15:1-8, niv)

This was written by Paul in about 55 AD – just a little over 20 years from the resurrection. It was written so close to the event that, like we said last week, if it weren't accurate, it would have been very easy to dispute. Paul was saying, "Just ask any of these people," and he came with the receipts.

By historical standards, Paul's account is better than something happening right now and then you hear about it on the six o'clock news this evening.

The second affirmative evidence is...

- **The site of Jesus' tomb.**

The location of his tomb was known to both Christians and Jews. If the tomb was not empty, it would've been impossible for a movement to have been founded on the belief in the resurrection to have ever come into existence in the very same city where the man had been publicly executed and buried.

Third is...

- **Mark's Gospel** itself.

Scholars can tell by the grammar, language, and style of writing in the original Greek that Mark got his account of Jesus' death and the resurrection from an earlier source. The evidence indicates that Mark's account comes from around 37 AD – *just a few years after Jesus' death*. That wouldn't even have been enough time to make things up. Remember when I said that Paul's account would be like hearing it on the six o'clock news? Well Mark's account would be like watching it happen live, historically speaking. There is no other major ancient historical event that has accounts so close to the actual event.

And besides that...

- **Mark's Gospel** account **is simple**.

Some of you might be familiar with other accounts that were written two hundred years later, or more. Some of these are part of what's called the Apocrypha – like the Gospel of Thomas. These were not included in Scripture because they cannot be verified as eyewitness accounts, and in many cases have sensational stories that are out of character for Jesus or the disciples. They contain lots of expanded and exaggerated details, like Jesus coming out of the tomb with power and brilliant glory and appearing to everyone including the priests, Jewish authorities, Roman guards and officials. See, that's the way legends are created; people add more and more details hundreds of years later to validate their stories when there's no one left to refute it. But Mark's gospel is simple; it doesn't have any extraneous information or legendary characteristics.

The fifth piece of affirmative evidence for the resurrection is the unanimous testimony that...

- **The women discovered the empty tomb** first.

All of the accounts agree that it was the women who saw the empty tomb first. Here's why that's important: in that day and age, in that culture, women were on a very low rung of the social ladder. They were less than second class. There was an old Jewish proverb that said, "Let the words of the Law be burned rather than delivered to a woman." There was another saying that said, "Blessed is he whose children are male, but woe to him whose children are female." A woman's testimony was considered worthless and wasn't even allowed as legal evidence in a Jewish court of law at that time. So it is absolutely mind-boggling that all four gospels tell us that the women saw the empty tomb first. If the account of the empty tomb was made up or written at a later date they would *never* have used women in the story at all; they would've made men the first ones to arrive at the tomb, and probably some kind of prominent men in order to make it even more convincing. For sure not lowly women.

Lastly, the fact that the earliest Jewish testimony and the written...

- **Jewish history**

...all admits that the tomb was empty. In other words, nobody – not even Jesus' enemies – claimed that Jesus' body was still in the tomb. Instead, the question has always been, "What happened to Jesus' body?"

The Jewish leaders put forth the lame story that the guards fell asleep – clearly they were grasping at straws. But here's the point: they all started with the assumption that the tomb was empty! Why? Because they knew it was!

So the question is, even with all this evidence, why would it be hard to accept that a man could have risen from the dead? As many holes as there are in other theories, isn't it easier to believe those theories than it is to believe that this spectacular miracle could actually happen?

Well, with that question it's no longer a historical issue, it's a theological question about whether or not miracles are possible. Could God have performed a miracle by raising Jesus from the dead? It's not really so difficult to come to that conclusion – it only takes a belief that God exists. As long as the existence of God is even a possibility, then it's entirely acceptable that God would act in human history by raising Jesus Christ from the dead.

All other theories have failed to put Jesus back in the grave. That's because he won't go back – because he is alive today. Will you accept it?

Pray

Benediction: May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. (Romans 15:13)