Pastor Michael O'Neill. October 4, 2026

Body of Proof
Part Three

The Circumstantial Evidence

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Body of Proof[1]
The Circumstantial Evidence

In 1932 something in the news kept people riveted, and that was the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby. Bruno Richard Hauptmann was arrested, and his trial on extortion and murder relied entirely on circumstantial evidence. Investigators matched tool marks on the homemade ransom ladder to tools in Hauptmann's garage, and attic flooring wood matched a missing section of the ladder's rail. Handwriting analysis and hidden ransom money further sealed the conviction.

In 2002, for weeks every news outlet covered the investigation and trial of Scott Peterson. Ultimately, he was convicted of the murder of his wife, Laci, and their unborn son. The prosecution's case had no eyewitnesses or direct physical evidence linking him to the murder site, but they built a strong circumstantial case that included evidence of an extramarital affair, and also from using his computer search history (that included searches for ocean currents in the San Francisco Bay where Laci's body later washed ashore).

Three years ago another trial was all over the news: Alex Murdaugh. He was a South Carolina attorney who was convicted of the murders of his wife and son. The state lacked a murder weapon or direct eyewitnesses to the shootings, instead proving guilt through a large collection of circumstantial data, especially a cellphone video taken by the victims just moments before the murder that placed Murdaugh at the crime scene – contrary to his alibi.[2]

Circumstantial evidence is a powerful tool in the court of law. It is evidence made up of indirect facts that, all combined together, by inference allow you to draw rational conclusions.

Let me give you a simple illustration. Everyone look at me. Now, close your eyes. Okay, open your eyes. Now, nobody saw me walk over here (unless you cheated or you're watching online). But the circumstantial evidence tells you some things. Before you closed your eyes, where was I? You closed them. A certain amount of time passed – the amount of time it would take me to walk over here. You heard my voice – where did it sound like it was coming from? When you opened your eyes, where was I? Logically, then, you know by putting together the circumstantial evidence that without any reasonable doubt, I walked from there to here. You could come up with alternative theories, like I teleported here or was kidnapped and carried over here, but there is no proof that can outweigh the circumstantial evidence.

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

[2] Link here to Google search results

Today we are concluding our series called "Body of Proof." 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.

Over these three Sundays we will have given you a large volume of evidence to the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. These sermons are in a style that's called "apologetics." Apologetics doesn't mean that I'm apologizing for what the Bible says; it means I'm giving a systematic and rational defense – in this case of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We've looked at the missing evidence: the fact that his body was not in the tomb. We've looked at the appearance evidence – that there were many eyewitnesses and documented creeds that prove he was alive. Today we are looking at…

The circumstantial evidence.

The event of the resurrection is pivotal to your faith in Christ if you are a believer in Jesus. If you are not a believer in Jesus, the resurrection is what you must resolve if you call yourself an honest seeker of truth. If you are not seeking truth, then you are wasting your time and your life.

The Apostle Paul knew the centrality of the resurrection to our faith, because he wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:

> "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith…and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead." (1 Corinthians 15:13-20, niv)

It is imperative that we resolve this issue, so this morning I'm going to give you circumstantial evidence that, combined with what I've already shared with you in previous messages altogether makes an open and shut case for the fact of Jesus Christ being resurrected from the dead (go to our website if you haven't been with us). In just the brief messages I have given you, which don't even cover a small percentage of the evidence, you already have more evidence that most court cases need to find the truth and come up with a verdict. *You will need to make a decision with the evidence that you hear*. And the first exhibit I'd like to present to you is…

Exhibit one: the disciples died for their belief.

Think about the disciples when Jesus was crucified. They were lost, confused, discouraged, and depressed. They were no longer confident that Jesus had been sent by God, because

Jewish law said that anyone who was crucified was considered to be cursed by God. The crucifixion meant this new movement with Jesus as their leader was dead in its tracks – buried along with Jesus.

Then, after just a short period of time they are gathering together again, they are suddenly abandoning their jobs and careers, and are committing themselves to spreading a very specific message: that Jesus Christ died on a cross, was returned to life, and was seen alive by them and hundreds of others. And, they were willing to spend the rest of their lives telling people about this *without any payoff* – at least from a human point of view. It's not like they were going to make wads of money on this. The only thing waiting for them was painful and torturous deaths – persecuted for their beliefs. Their lives were filled with hardship because of it – they face beatings, starvation, they were ridiculed and imprisoned. Ultimately, all but one of them was executed for their belief; and the other one died in exile. *And they willingly and gladly faced those things.*

Now, you might think, "Sure, that's admirable – but in history others have died for their beliefs, too, and those beliefs have been different than Christianity." But let me respond this way: people will die for their religious beliefs if they sincerely believe they are true, but people won't die for their religious beliefs if they know their beliefs are false. The disciples were the ones in the position to know without a doubt whether or not Jesus had risen from the dead. They claimed that *they* were the ones who saw him, talked with him and ate with him. If they were NOT absolutely certain, they would not have allowed themselves to be tortured to death for proclaiming that the resurrection happened. Either they were ALL telling the truth and willing to die for it, or they were ALL telling a lie and willing to die for it. Would you do that? Neither would they. They saw him firsthand alive again.

I heard a story of a Children's Church teacher who had just finished telling her first graders about how Jesus was crucified and placed in a tomb with a great stone sealing the opening. But she wanted to share the excitement of the resurrection, so she asked, "And what do you think were Jesus' first words when he came bursting out of that tomb alive?" A little girl leapt out of her chair and shouted excitedly, "I know, I know!" The teacher said, "Good! Tell us what you think Jesus' first words were?" The little girl thrust her arms in the air and said, "TA-DA!" She was guessing but the disciples were not, and they were willing to die for it.

The second piece of circumstantial evidence is…

Exhibit Two: the conversion of skeptics.

In forensic science, there is a rule known as the Lockyear Principle that, to put it simply says that "every touch leaves an impression." There have been many criminals who have hated the day that that principle was discovered, because their fingerprints, their touch, has left a traceable impression.

Some of us can vouch for the fact that when our lives have been touched by the risen Lord, it has left an impression. And one of the convincing proofs in Scripture and history has been the conversion of skeptics – hardened critics who didn't believe in Jesus before his crucifixion and were to some extent dead set against Christianity – who then turned around

and dedicated their lives to the Christian faith after Jesus' death. There is no good reason for this except that they had an encounter with the resurrected Christ.

One example is that of James, the brother of Jesus. The gospels tell us that Jesus' siblings, including James, were embarrassed by him and they thought he was crazy. They did not believe him. And in Jewish culture at that time it was very delegitimizing for a rabbi to have his family not believe in him, so the gospel writers would not have any motive for making that known if it wasn't true. But later, the Jewish historian Josephus (not a Christian), tells us that James, the brother of Jesus, had become the leader of the Jerusalem Church, and he was stoned to death because of his belief in the resurrection of his brother Jesus. Why did James' life change? The Apostle Paul tells us in the creed that we looked at last week: because the resurrected Jesus appeared to him.

And what about Paul? He was a Pharisee – one of the best, on his way to being one of the most powerful. And he hated anything that was a threat to traditional Jewish ways. In his mind, this movement of people who followed Jesus was something that needed to be eliminated by all means possible. And that is just what he did; he worked out his anger against Christians by hunting them down and having them executed.

But then, suddenly he joined the movement! What happened? Well, every scholar agrees that Paul wrote several letters (or books) in the Bible, including Galatians. And in that book he tells us what caused him to make a 180-degree turn and become the chief spokesperson for the Christian faith. By his own writing he says it was because he had an encounter with the resurrected Christ, and Christ told him that he would appoint Paul to be one of his followers. And when Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, which all scholars agree that he wrote, he reminds them that he backed up his claims by performing miracles among them – something he would never claim to do if he had not done it.

So it wasn't just a change of opinion or a change of view; he had this change of belief that went completely against everything he was raised to believe, he saw the risen Christ, and he performed miracles to back it up.

The next exhibit of evidence that I would submit to you is…

Exhibit Three: Changes to key social structures.

In order to explain this, I need to give you some background into Jewish culture at the time of Christ. By the time of Jesus, the Jews had been persecuted and occupied for 700 years by the Babylonians, Assyrians, Persians, and then by the Greeks and the Romans. Many of them had been scattered and lived as captives in those foreign nations. Today we *still* have Jews, but we don't have Hitites, Perizzites, Ammonites, Assyrians, Persians, Babylonians, and others who were around at those times. Why is that? Because those nations were overthrown, taken captive, intermarried, and eventually lost their national identity. So why didn't that happen to the Jews? Because the things that made the Jews, Jews – the things that gave them their national identity – were unbelievably important to them. They passed these things down to their children, they celebrated them in their synagogues every Sabbath (Saturdays), and they reinforced them in their rituals, because they knew that if they didn't, that would be the end of the Jews. But more than that, they believed these

things were instituted for them by God, so if they gave up those things, they would be damning themselves and their nation, cutting themselves off from God forever. They *strictly* adhered to these things for centuries. Then one day along came this carpenter-rabbi from a lower-class region of people, not schooled by religious leaders. He gathers a group of lower and middle-class followers, gets in trouble with the authorities, and gets himself crucified.

But just five weeks after he is crucified, over ten thousand Jews are following him and claiming that he is the author and creator of the true religion. And in doing so, they are willing to give up (or at least significantly change) all five of the Jewish social institutions that have been so critical to their sociological and theological survival for centuries.

So let me give you what those five things were that were so crucial that they gave up to follow Jesus:

First, remember that they had been taught ever since the time of Abraham and Moses that they needed to offer an animal sacrifice on an annual basis to atone for their sins. That was the only way they could be forgiven. But all of a sudden, after the death of this Nazarene carpenter, these Jewish people no longer offered sacrifices. There is…

- **A sudden stop in sacrificial worship**.

Second, Jews emphasized obeying the laws that God had entrusted to them through Moses. This is what separated them from every other pagan nation. But here again, just a short time after Jesus' death, they are saying that you don't become an upstanding member of their community by keeping the Law. So there is beginning to be an…

- **Abandonment of the Law** (at least as the means of salvation).

Third, all of a sudden there is…

- **No longer worship on the Sabbath – now it's on Sunday** (the first day of their week).

Numerous laws were created around keeping the Sabbath day holy. That was how they earned right standing with God and their community and ensured the salvation of their family. But after the death of this low-income carpenter named Jesus, the 1500-year tradition is suddenly changed and they worship on Sunday. Why? Because that was the day that Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

The fourth key element of their social structure is something called monotheism. That means they believed that there is only one God. This was the hinge pin of all their teaching: called the Shema, it is found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5, and it says:

> "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is One God, and you shall worship him with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength." (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

But suddenly here are all these Jews calling themselves Christians who say there is *one* God, but he relates to us in *three* distinct ways: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For the Jew, that was blasphemy – a violation of the worst kind. But nevertheless here are the Jews suddenly moving from…

- **Monotheism to Trinity**.

And last, these Christians saw their promised Messiah as a suffering servant who died for the sins of the world. But the Jews were people who were taught that their Messiah would be a conquering king who would overthrow their political oppressors and commit worldwide genocide until all that was left were the Jews. It was a *major* paradigm shift for them to see…

- **A different kind of savior.**

Even if you are a Christian, I don't think you can understand how major this shift was. Today, at least in western culture, we are extremely fluid in our beliefs. We can switch from Buddhism to new age teachings to Mormonism to Islam to some potpourri of all of them. We see it as our right to make those choices. But not so the Jews. Think about *your* most cherished belief. Maybe if you have a healthy relationship with your parents or parent, you have a cherished belief that they love you. Or maybe you have a firm belief that murder is wrong. What would it take for you to change that belief? It would have to be something major. Now you are getting *close* to what it was like for them, but they had over 30 centuries of hard held belief, teaching, and practice. The resurrection caused a social earthquake!

The fourth exhibit that I present to you is…

Exhibit Four: communion and baptism.

Every religion creates its own practices and rituals to symbolize its beliefs. So why are communion and baptism a proof of the resurrection of Christ?

Think about this: when Jesus' followers got together, they didn't celebrate his teachings or how wonderful he was. They would come together weekly to share a meal for one reason: to remember that Jesus had been publicly slaughtered in a grotesque and humiliating way.

Think about it this way: if a group of people loved John F. Kennedy, they might meet regularly to celebrate his confrontation with the Russians over Cuba, or his promotion of civil rights, or his charismatic personality and leadership. But I don't think they would ever celebrate that he was assassinated in such a public and profoundly disturbing way – being shot in the head. But *that's what the early Christians did*, and that's what we still do. How do you explain that? It is because they knew that Jesus' death was a necessary step to a greater victory. His murder was not the final word. The final word was that he had conquered death for all of us by rising from the dead. The reason they could celebrate his execution was because they were convinced of his resurrection!

And what about baptism? After all, the Jews had their own baptism for converts. But the difference was that, first, *these* Jews were baptizing people into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – that change from monotheism to the Trinity that we talked about – which elevated Jesus to the position of God. But baptism was also a celebration of the death of Jesus – just like communion. By going under the water you are celebrating Jesus' death, and by being brought out of the water you are celebrating the fact that Jesus was raised to newness of life. These were people who had found the answers to life from a man who had come back from the dead, and they were willing to celebrate that fact.

So we've looked at the fact that the disciples were willing to die for their belief, we've looked at the fact that hardened skeptics were converted after the death of Jesus, we've looked at the evidence that thousands of Jews were willing to make drastic changes to key social structures, and we've looked at the rituals of communion and baptism. The last exhibit I want to submit to you is…

Exhibit five: The emergence of the church.

Whenever a major cultural shift takes place in history, historians always look for events that can explain it. So think about the Christian church. Everyone knows that it began shortly after the death of Jesus, and spread so rapidly that within twenty years it had even reached Caesar's palace in Rome.

Imagine that you were a Martian looking down on the first century. Which would you bet: that Christianity or the Roman empire would survive? I don't think you'd put your money on a ragtag group of poor people whose main message was that a crucified carpenter from an obscure village had come back from the dead. But this movement was so successful that today we name our children Peter and John and Paul and even Jesus, but we name our dogs Caesar and Nero!

I like what CFD Moule said; he was the Cambridge New Testament scholar, and he said, "If the coming into existence of the Nazarenes, a phenomenon undeniably attested by the New Testament, rips a great hole in history, a hole the size and shape of the resurrection, with what does the secular historian propose to fill the hole with?"

So if you take all these pieces of evidence and combine them with what we've shared over these last several Sundays, you really have a large body of proof that leaves you with no other explanation: Jesus rose from the dead and is alive today.

But let's say you take all of this and still reach a verdict that Jesus did not rise from the dead. Okay – fair enough. But if that's the case, then you must offer an *alternative* explanation that will work for all five of these facts that I've just given you. And remember, there's no doubt that the facts are true; what you have to decide is how you will explain them. And there is no better explanation than the resurrection.

When you combine it with the fact that Jesus did live, did die on a cross, his body was missing and then he was undeniably seen alive, then the case is conclusive.

No matter how hard you might try you cannot deny the resurrection. Sooner or later you will find out it is true.

In a cemetery in Hanover, Germany, is a grave on which were placed huge slabs of granite and marble cemented together and fastened with heavy steel clasps. It belongs to a woman who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. Yet strangely, she was very clear in her will that her grave be made so secure that if there *were* a resurrection, it could not reach her. On her marker is inscribed these words: "This burial place must never be opened."

But over time, a seed covered over by the stones began to grow. Slowly it pushed its way through the soil and out from beneath them. As the trunk enlarged, the great slabs were gradually shifted so that the steel clasps were wrenched from their sockets. A tiny seed had become a tree that had pushed aside the stones.

The resurrection might seem to you like a foolish solution, but I guarantee that it will push aside the greatest stones that are all meant to keep you sealed in a grave. You *can* accept the resurrection now! You would join people from all over the world and all throughout history, in every culture, from all kinds of backgrounds and personalities, well-educated or not, rich and poor, thinkers and feelers, men and women, skeptics and sympathizers, who have become part of the ongoing encounter with the resurrected Christ. They all will testify that more than any single thing in their lives, Jesus Christ has changed them. He'll change you, too, to a life that your soul longs for.

So…use your mind. Calmly weigh the evidence. If what this evidence points to is true – that if all these lines of evidence really do point to the resurrection of Jesus – then the evidence begs for…

The experiential test.

This is what the experiential test is: if Jesus is alive, then you can find out by relating to him. Let's say that you were on a jury, and you heard enough evidence to convince you that a person was guilty. It wouldn't make any sense to stop short of the final step of convicting that person. And if you accept the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus and do not take the final step of testing it experientially, then you would miss the whole point of what the evidence is pointing to. It is only rational and logical to follow it into the experiential realm. The evidence screams for a response.

What will you do? What can you do? Pray. Ask Jesus if he will reveal himself to you and forgive you and come into your life and help you. Tell him you want to experience him.

The evidence demands an answer; and your answer demands action. Act on it. Attend church each Sunday. Pray and read the Bible. Serve and give. Tell others about Jesus.

Prayer

Benediction:

> Live each day in the certainty of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, so that the Holy Spirit might give you power and gifts to make a difference in this world for the Kingdom of God.

Life Group Questions
Body of Proof: The Circumstantial Evidence
Week of October 4, 2026

1. In the sermon, Pastor Mike described circumstantial evidence as many smaller pieces that, put together point toward a conclusion. What pieces of evidence for the resurrection of Jesus stood out to you most, and why?
2. The disciples went from being discouraged after Jesus' death to boldly proclaiming His resurrection despite persecution. Why is this dramatic change a piece of circumstantial evidence of the resurrection?
3. Pastor Mike highlighted the transformation of skeptics such as James and Paul. What is the difference between someone who simply changes their mind and someone who goes from skeptic to believer? What does a person's willingness to radically change their beliefs tell us about their experience with the resurrected Jesus?
4. The early Christians made significant changes to long-standing Jewish practices, beliefs and social structures. Why do you think changing deeply rooted beliefs and traditions offers us compelling evidence of the resurrection?
5. Communion and baptism serve as ongoing reminders of Jesus' death and resurrection. Why are these different than other rituals, in that they are evidence of the resurrection? How do these practices help keep the reality of the resurrection central to a Christian's faith?
6. Pastor said that the evidence for the resurrection ultimately calls for a response. What does it look like in everyday life to "live in the certainty of the resurrection"?
7. If someone in your group were honestly investigating Christianity and asked, "Why do you believe Jesus really rose from the dead?", how would you answer based on what you heard in these sermons?
8. Spend time in prayer together to close.