

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Part 16 – Resurrection and Ascension

Key Questions:

- If Jesus was killed by His enemies how did His message survive? What gave His followers such confidence?

The burial of Jesus

The normal practice for a crucified person was for their body to be left on the cross to rot, and finally their remains to be buried in a communal grave. However, Joseph from Arimathea, a member of the Jewish leadership who was a secret follower of Jesus, asked Pilate for permission to take Jesus' body off the cross (Matthew 27:57-60). Pilate agreed after checking with his soldiers that Jesus was really dead (Mark 15:44-45). Joseph, with the help of another secret disciple, Nicodemus (John 19:38-42), buried the body in his own tomb which was cut out of a rock. This fulfilled a prophecy that the Suffering Servant would be buried with the rich (see Isaiah 53:9). The tomb was secured in three ways:

1. **A large stone was rolled over the doorway** (Matthew 27:60) – this stone would have been in a groove that sloped downwards. It could be rolled into place by one man, but needed several men to roll it open again.
2. **A seal was put on the stone** (Matthew 27:66) – breaking this seal would have carried a punishment.
3. **A guard was placed to prevent the body being stolen** (Matthew 27:62-66) – this was probably a guard of Roman soldiers (although it might possibly have been the Jewish Temple guard), who would have been punished very severely (perhaps even executed) if they failed in their mission.

Christ is risen!

Before His death Jesus not only predicted His death, but also told His disciples at least five times that He would rise to life again on the third day (see Matthew 16:21; 17:9; 17:22-23; 20:18-19; 26:32). The disciples did not understand this at the time, perhaps because they were still expecting Jesus to become king when He reached Jerusalem. After Jesus died on the Friday, the remaining disciples hid themselves because they were afraid that they too might be arrested and executed. However, events on the Sunday changed everything, as the disciples claimed that Jesus appeared to them alive in a real body. To get a full account of events after the resurrection we must reconstruct it from the four Gospel accounts:

1. The women went to the tomb

[Matthew 28:1-15; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-11; John 20:1-9]

On the Sunday very early in the morning (around dawn) some (at least six) of Jesus' female followers went to the tomb intending to put spices on the body. However, some time before they arrived at the tomb an angel had rolled back the stone and sat down on it, causing the guards to faint in shock. When the women reached the tomb they found the stone already rolled away, and they went inside where they saw an angel who told them that Jesus had risen from the dead. They felt a mixture of fear and joy, and ran to tell the disciples what had happened without telling anyone else on the way. As they were running Jesus suddenly appeared to them. They recognised Him and worshipped Him. Meanwhile the guards went to the Jewish leaders, who bribed them and told them to false rumour that the disciples had stolen Jesus' body.

2. Peter and John ran to the tomb, Jesus appeared to Mary

[Luke 24:12; John 20:3-18]

When they received the news from the women, Peter and John ran to the tomb. John reached the tomb first but Peter was first to go inside. Peter saw the strips of linen Jesus had been buried in, and went off alone. Although we don't read in the Gospels exactly when, sometime shortly after this Jesus appeared personally to Peter. Mary Magdalene returned to the tomb with Peter and John and stayed there after they left. She saw a man in the garden and, at first (perhaps because her sight was blurred by her tears), did not recognise that it was Jesus. Then Jesus spoke her name, and she recognised Him.

3. Jesus appeared to two disciples on the Road to Emmaus

[Luke 24:13-35]

Luke tells us the story of two disciples who were leaving Jerusalem for the town of Emmaus on the Sunday, when they met a stranger on the road. They spoke to him about Jesus' death and he explained how the Old Testament pointed to the fact that the Messiah had to suffer. They later realised it was Jesus, and ran back to the city to tell the eleven disciples. By this time Jesus had already appeared to Peter (Luke 24:34).

4. Jesus appeared to the apostles

[Luke 24:36-49; John 20:19-31]

After the two disciples arrived back in Jerusalem, Jesus appeared to the eleven remaining disciples, but on this occasion one of them, Thomas, was not there. When the other disciples told Thomas they had seen Jesus he did not believe them at first. However, one week later Jesus again appeared to the disciples, this time with Thomas present. Thomas believed now, and made an amazing statement, calling Jesus "My Lord and my God". Jesus commended Him for realising this, accepting His worship. Jesus appeared to the apostles many times over a forty day period before He ascended to heaven (Acts 1:3).

Evidence for the resurrection

1. Jesus really died

- a) *Medical evidence* (John 19:31-37) – the Roman soldiers were experts in executing people by crucifixion. If they wanted to speed up death they would break the victim's legs, making it impossible for them to breathe. In Jesus' case they didn't have to do this, as He was already dead. However, to be sure of this, the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear. The mixture of blood and clear fluid that flowed out shows that he must have pierced Jesus' heart.
- b) *Pilate's investigation* (Mark 15:44-45) – Pilate ensured that Jesus was really dead before releasing the body to Joseph. Roman soldiers would be very careful to be accurate in this case.

2. The tomb was empty

If it had not been empty, the enemies of Jesus could easily have proved that He had not risen by showing people the body or the sealed tomb. Instead, they came up with an excuse that the disciples had stolen the body (see Matthew 28:11-15). This, of course, was impossible as the tomb was sealed and guarded, and the terrified disciples, who were in hiding, would have been unlikely to risk death to steal a dead body.

3. The Christians claimed the resurrection was true from the very beginning

The resurrection was not a late addition to the message of the Christians. It was something they depended on from the very beginning in their preaching about Jesus. You can see this in Peter's first message about Jesus (Acts 2:24), and it is also clear from I Corinthians 15:3-8, where Paul quotes a very early Christian statement that included the resurrection and sightings of Jesus as a central belief of Christians.

4. There were many witnesses who saw Jesus alive

In I Corinthians 15:6, Paul says that Jesus appeared to over 500 people at one time, many of them still alive at the time when he was writing. This claim could easily have been investigated and disproved if it was not true. These could not have been hallucinations, as it is impossible for over 500 people to have the same hallucination at one time, and Jesus was able to eat a drink and be touched by the disciples, proving that He really did have a physical body. These witnesses really did believe that they had seen Jesus alive. Another fact from the record helps to prove that these stories were not invented, namely the fact that the first witnesses were women. In the culture of that day women could not be witnesses in court, as they were not trusted to give reliable evidence. No one who was making up a story would depend on the witness of women.

5. The transformation of the disciples

After the death of Jesus the disciples were terrified and went into hiding. Only a few weeks later they were on the streets of Jerusalem telling everyone that Jesus had risen from the dead. Within the next 30 years, almost every one of them was arrested and executed for being Christians and telling people about Jesus. Even when faced with torture and death they still held firmly to their claim that Jesus was alive. What caused this amazing change in the disciples? They had nothing to gain from dying for a false message!

6. The transformation of sceptics

Not everyone automatically believed the news about Jesus' resurrection. Thomas (one of the twelve disciples), for example, required personal proof (John 20:24-29). More amazing, however, was the transformation of a man called Saul (or Paul) who was an enemy of Christians. He became one of the greatest leaders of the Christian church because he claimed to have seen the risen Jesus (see *Part 19*).

7. The spread of Christianity

The amazing success of the spread of Christianity despite opposition, initially from the Jewish leaders and later from the Roman Empire, is evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. Even today when a life is transformed by the Christian message it is evidence for the resurrection – that Jesus is alive and working today in the lives of people!

Jesus gives His mission to the apostles and ascends to Heaven

Some time after His resurrection, Jesus appeared to the apostles on a mountain in Galilee. Matthew records this in Matthew 28:16-20. Jesus gave a special command to the apostles – to make followers for Him from every nation on earth by baptising them and teaching them His words. He also made three special claims about Himself:

- **All authority has been given to Him** (verse 18)
- **He is equal with the Father and the Holy Spirit**, so that people are baptised in all three names (verse 19)
- **He will be with His disciples always** – this refers to the presence of the Holy Spirit (verse 20)

Only Luke tells us about the final occasion when Jesus met the apostles. It was near Jerusalem 40 days after He had died (Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:3-11). Jesus told them to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit to come so that they would have power to witness for Him, and then He was lifted up into the sky and disappeared. Angels told the disciples that He would come again one day just as He had left. In *Module 3* of this series we will see how the New Testament records the spread of the message about Jesus and the Kingdom of God under the leadership of the apostles, and how it promises that Jesus will return one day to finally bring in God's Kingdom in its fullness.

The importance of the Resurrection for Christians

The resurrection is central to the Christian faith. In I Corinthians 15:3-19 the Apostle Paul writes about this. The resurrection has implications for past, present and future:

PAST: Everything that Jesus taught was true. He is the Son of God, and we must listen to Him. The resurrection was the ultimate "miraculous sign" proving Jesus' teaching. The fact that God raised Jesus from the dead proves that Jesus really did pay the full price for sins and that the power of death is defeated. Christians can have the eternal life that Jesus promised because He is alive forever.

PRESENT: Jesus is alive today to be trusted and we can have a personal living relationship with God through Him. Christians do not have a dead leader, but One who is alive forever. No other religion can claim this!

FUTURE: All Christians who die will also be raised to life in the future. We have hope for eternal life because Jesus is the "*resurrection and the life*" (John 11:25).

If Jesus is alive, the Kingdom of God really is here now, and we must turn from our sin and trust in Him!

Key Lesson: Jesus rose from the dead and is alive forever to save people who trust in Him

The resurrection of Jesus is a historical fact, and the most amazing event in the history of mankind. It proves that His teaching was true and that His death really paid the full price for sin. Because He rose again Jesus is alive today and is able to save those who trust in Him, to share His eternal life with us and to bring us into a new relationship with God.