March 22/23, 2008 *Life After Death Series*

Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?

Luke 24:1-12

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Today all around the world, millions of people will gather together like this to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. Yet, for many of those people, the resurrection of Jesus will make no real difference Monday morning. Why is that?

That's a little bit like having someone come in this morning and convince us that this floor monitor here is actually a bomb, detonated to go off in the next few minutes. And we all agree that the expert has convinced us it's a bomb, but then we just keep right on going with our service as if nothing has changed. What sense does that make?

Wouldn't you say our response would be totally inconsistent with what we say we believe? If the resurrection of Jesus Christ is true, then it changes everything. It should make all the difference Monday morning. If the resurrection of Jesus is not true, then let's stop playing Church and let's go on with our lives.

I think there's a tendency for a lot of people in our culture today to think of the resurrection as kind of this religious story from the past that may or may not be true. But if you are going to believe it to be true, you just kind of believe that with this leap of faith, and at the end of the day maybe it was true—maybe it wasn't.

But, you know, that's not true at all. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the foundation stone in Christian doctrine, and it is rooted in historical fact. It can be investigated. It can be debated. It can be challenged. It can be believed.

In 1987, a New Testament scholar by the name of Gary Habermas entered into a debate with a British atheist—probably at that time the best known atheist in the world by the name of Antony Flew. The debate was judged by five philosophy professors from five different universities. At the end of the debate, four of the five philosophy professors agreed that Gary Habermas had overwhelmingly won the debate. One called it a draw. Nobody voted in favor of Antony Flew. As a matter of fact, at the end of the debate one of the philosophy professors stated:

> I was surprised (shocked might be a more accurate word) to see how weak Flew's own approach was…. I was left with this conclusion: Since the case against the resurrection was no stronger than that presented by Antony Flew presented, I would think it was time I began to take the resurrection seriously.[1]

In 1993, a New Testament scholar by the name of Bill Craig entered into a debate with an atheist put forth by the American Atheist Organization in the United States. They debated before 8,000 people. The audience was filled with agnostics, atheists and skeptics. Yet when the debate concluded and people were polled, 82% indicated that Bill Craig and the defense for the resurrection had overwhelmingly won—to the extent that in an audience of atheists, agnostics and skeptics, 47 of those people that night converted to Christianity because the evidence was so overwhelmingly true.[2]

My point is this: The resurrection of Jesus Christ is not some mythical thing in the past that cannot be understood or investigated. It's something that when the facts are laid on the table, in my

opinion, to deny the resurrection of Jesus takes far more of a quantum leap of faith than it takes for us Christians to believe in the resurrection, given the historical facts.

If you have a Bible this morning, I invite you to turn with us to Luke, Chapter 24. In the weeks to follow we're going to talk about this subject of life after death. But the whole discussion of life after death really hangs on this core belief: Did Jesus rise from the dead? If Jesus is still in the grave, then the next six weeks of our discussion are really irrelevant. So this is where it all starts. Chapter 24, verse 1:

> **But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men suddenly stood near them in dazzling clothing; and as the women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living One among the dead? He is not here, but He has risen. Remember how He spoke to you while He was still in Galilee, saying that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again." And they remembered His words, and returned from the tomb and reported all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. Now they were Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James; also the other women with them were telling these things to the apostles. But these words appeared to them as nonsense, and they would not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen wrappings only; and he went away to his home, marveling at what had happened.** (Luke 14:1-12; *NASB)

Now what are the claims of Christian doctrine? The claim of Christian doctrine is that Jesus literally, physically, bodily rose from the dead. The claim is that Jesus predicted before the event that on the third day He would do so. And the claim is that Jesus appeared to over 500 eye witnesses in the days following the resurrection. That's the claim we make as Christians.

So let's think about this a little bit this morning. I suppose the first logical question would be: "Okay, that's what the Bible says. But how do we know that's true?" Well, that's a very good question. What you're asking is: "How do we know that the Gospels are reliable historical documents?" Many people want to immediately dismiss the Gospels. "Well, that's just the Bible." But you really can't do that with any credibility. The Gospels are historical records.

If we are to go back and to evaluate these historical records the same way that we would evaluate any document from antiquity, what we find is the gospel records emerge as more reliable than any other historical document we have by an overwhelming margin, both in the quality and quantity of manuscripts. There's no question that the Gospels emerge as highly credible.

To say that another way, if we are going to dismiss the gospels as not reliable records of history, we would have to dismiss every single record of history we have of antiquity. The fact of the matter is they are highly, highly credible.

Over the years there have been a number of theories that have been put forth that try to somehow explain away the resurrection. Maybe Jesus just passed out, he swooned, and in the tomb he revived himself, overpowered the guards and escaped. Or maybe the disciples stole the body and

made up the story. Over and over, these theories have been debated and they have been exposed to be so ridiculously silly that today there are no serious scholars that continue to promote these theories.

One other theory that I'd like to talk about more this morning—not because I think it's more credible, but because I think it's where most people in our culture live—is this idea that it's just some sort of a myth or legend. To believe it, you kind of have to take this blind leap of faith. Well, let's talk about that.

The key, when talking about a myth or a legend, is the passing of time. In other words, you have to get far enough away from the historical events themselves that this story kind of takes on a life of its own and becomes this legend or this myth.

So let's take, for example, Alexander the Great who lived a few years before Jesus was born. Every university across the United States every year teaches the history of Alexander the Great and his great Greek machine. And each one of those professors would consider the information to be historically accurate, and we have every reason to believe that is the case. But we also know that the most recent historical information that's written down concerning Alexander the Great was written down 400 years after the fact, which in an oral culture is not unusual. Typically the oral tradition is passed down and eventually it's written down. So even though the record is 400 years removed from the events themselves, we would consider them to be historically accurate.

It wasn't until after about 500 years that the stories began to be embellished, and these legends and myths concerning Alexander the Great began to emerge. And most historians would tell you that's about right. Four or five hundred years removed from the facts, those stories tend to get a little bit bigger and a little bit more legendary. But historians could sort out that which was closer to the events and that which then evolved over time. So let's compare that with the documents of the resurrection.

Compared to a 400-year gap, if you take the most liberal scholars and date the Gospels somewhere between AD 70 and AD 90, somewhere in there, you're talking about 40 to 60 years removed from the fact compared to 400 years with Alexander the Great. Certainly not nearly enough time for legend or myth to evolve.

But actually, the only reason that liberal scholars date the Gospels that late is because they believe that the gospel records predicted the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, and they do not believe that the gospel writers could predict the future. Therefore, they conclude they had to have been written after the event. But we as believers have no problem believing that they could predict the future because the Bible predicted the future that was fulfilled perfectly over and over and over again in the Old Testament. And we can demonstrate that over and over again.

So believing that, we're drawn to look more at the evidence of the documents themselves. We know that the Book of Acts was written before the fall of Jerusalem. Of the four gospel writers—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John—Luke is by far the most meticulous historian. Luke is very meticulous through the Book of Acts. He is the author of the Book of Acts and gives us many ways that we can date the Book of Acts. For example, we know that the Apostle Paul was executed in AD 62, and we

know at the end of the Book of Acts Paul is very much alive. So there's no question that the Book of Acts was written before the fall of Jerusalem, so that would put it around 60-61.

We also know for sure that the synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke—were written before the Book of Acts. As a matter of fact, Luke even says so when he starts Acts. He says "I've already written one book," so we know that to be factual. Therefore, that would put the writing of the Gospels somewhere between AD 40 and 60. Now we're talking about somewhere between 5 and 25 years removed from the fact. One New Testament scholar in Great Britain, N.T. Wright, actually puts the Gospel of Mark at about AD 37 or 38—really close to the events themselves.

But I can actually do one better than that: I Corinthians 15, the passage that we're going to look at next week, opens with what all scholars believe was a creed for the New Testament church—basically that Jesus was crucified, he was buried, he rose from the dead, and he appeared to witnesses. That was the early church creed that defined the doctrinal beliefs of the church. Paul says that he received it. And it's believed he received it shortly after he became a believer in Damascus. That would put it two years after the fact. So we know with great confidence that two years after the historical events themselves, the church was declaring the death, burial, resurrection, and appearance of Jesus to witnesses—the story of the gospel.

Now you compare two years after with 400 years after for Alexander the Great and you would say by an overwhelming margin we can conclude that there is no possibility that the resurrection of Jesus emerged as some legend or myth. It's just ridiculous.

Okay, then, let's think about another question: What if the apostles just gathered in a back room somewhere and made up the story. And they wrote it down as if it was accurate history, but it was all just something they made up? Okay, that's a good question. Let's think about that. As a matter of fact, I'm going to give you six challenges to that idea.

Number one would be the level of detail in the Gospels. What I mean by that is if you're making up a story, you have to be really careful with the details. Every single gospel writer identifies that Jesus was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, a person we know was a historical figure in the Jewish Council in the first century. If you're going to make up a story, you don't identify the tomb. You leave it kind of mythical and general so no one really knows. The eyewitnesses to the event are named. As a matter of fact, several of those named we know were skeptics before the crucifixion of Jesus and became believers afterwards. If you're going to make up a story, you don't list skeptics as your eyewitnesses to the event. Over and over and over again, through the Gospels there is a very detailed account that could easily be investigated and challenged if it were not true.

A second challenge to the idea that the apostles made this story up would be the differing perspectives. Some critics would say, "You know, the Gospels don't seem to be in agreement on the details; therefore, that proves they probably didn't have the story right." Well, actually I'm very glad you brought that up because that discussion actually works in our favor. Any historian will tell you that if you go back through the records of history and you find multiple witnesses who agree on every single detail of the account, it's pretty strong evidence that they gathered in a back room, made up the story, and everybody got the details straight—because we know right up until today it just doesn't work that way. As a matter of fact, the idea that the writers had different perspectives

and different details gives overwhelming evidence that they were four independent witnesses of the event.

Just to push this a little bit further, Simon Greenleaf, a brilliant law professor at Harvard Law School, was asked to take the record of the four Gospels and to treat them as if they were witnesses on the witness stand, and apply his science and see if the witnesses are credible. So he did. His conclusion was that the four witnesses had enough differences in the secondary details, there's absolutely no question they did not gather in a back room and make up a story. They are highly credible. But they also had complete agreement on the core facts recorded, which would indicate they all four were eyewitnesses to some catastrophic event. His conclusion is they were highly credible as witnesses.

The third challenge to this idea that the story is just kind of made up or manufactured in a back room somewhere is the idea that the primary first witnesses were women. Now ladies, sorry to tell you, but in the first century there was such a low view of women that women were not considered to be credible—to the extent that they were not even allowed to testify in a court of law because they could not be believed. Now of course, we don't agree with that assessment, but that was clearly the understanding in the first century. So if you're going to gather in a back room and make up a story, and you're going to try and promote this story, the last thing you would ever do is make your primary witnesses to the event women. Yet, our text clearly indicates that the first witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus were all women. There's only one reason the Gospel writers would record it that way, and that is because that's the way it actually historically happened.

Number four would be the idea that all of the events recorded in the Gospels happened in the lifetime of those people who were eyewitnesses to the event. Let's go back to the creed we discussed. The creed that Jesus was crucified, buried, rose from the dead and appeared to witnesses was out and being proclaimed two years after the event itself. We know that Jerusalem was filled with antagonists, with skeptics, with people who wanted nothing more than to stop the movement of Jesus. If these facts were indeed untrue, there would have been an overwhelming response from the people who actually witnessed the events. But actually that's not what happened at all. It was the exact opposite of that.

In Jerusalem itself, the place where these events took place, 40 days after the fact, Peter declared that Jesus was crucified, buried, rose again, and then he says, "And you are eyewitnesses to the fact." And the response of the people was that that day over 3,000 of these people converted to Christianity. How do you explain that other than they were eyewitnesses to the empty tomb and knew it had to be true? In the next 30-60 days there were over ten thousand people who chose to believe in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus in Jerusalem alone. How could you possibly explain that other than having investigated the claims, they believed it was true?

The fifth challenge to that idea that this is just a story somebody made up would be the radical change in the Jewish people themselves. For 1500 years their culture had defined them. That's what held them together as a people. But suddenly you have them meeting every day of the week. Suddenly you have them partaking of communion rather than the yearly Passover. Every historian would tell you there was a dramatic change coming out of Jerusalem. The only debate was what was the event that brought about the change. And the only plausible answer to that question has been Jesus really did rise from the dead.

And last would be the fact that the disciples—the eyewitnesses to the resurrected Jesus—were all willing to be persecuted and ultimately die for their belief. All except perhaps one were ultimately executed for their faith. These apostles had nothing to gain by making up a story and everything to lose.

Now, you look at religious people today who are willing to die for their beliefs, and you say, "Well, those people are willing to die for their beliefs." But it's not the same thing. Religious people willing to die for their beliefs today are dying for something they sincerely believe to be true. But they are not claiming to be eyewitnesses to the core doctrines, whereas the apostles were promoting a message that they were claiming to be eyewitnesses to the resurrected Christ. If it was not true, then clearly they were the ones fabricating the story.

Experts will tell us today, yes, people are willing to die for that which they believe to be true, but they simply will not die for that which they know is a lie. Yet, every single one without exception went to their grave holding to the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. No one recanted. No one changed the story, which again is overwhelming evidence they did not gather in a back room and make up a story. They were willing to die for what they knew was true.

There is no question that the Church did not create the resurrection. But rather, the resurrection created the Church. You say, if that is true, then why is there so much disbelief in the world today? And the answer is because the world cannot cope with a risen Savior. As long as I can kind of have this religious thing that I do that makes me feel good and makes no real demands on my life, I'm okay with that. But if it's true that Jesus really did rise from the dead, that demands something of me. I have to acknowledge He's God, I'm not. I have to acknowledge He's King, I'm not. If I truly believe that Jesus rose from the dead, I must surrender my will to His will rather than running my own life. I must acknowledge that the Christian message is true. And there are many people in our world today who are simply unwilling to do this. They hide behind an intellectual smoke screen. But when you put the evidence on the table, it overwhelmingly supports from history that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead.

There may be those of you here this morning who consider yourselves to be skeptics, and I completely respect your right to believe what you believe. But you must understand if with integrity you investigate the historical facts of the resurrection, your choice to deny the resurrection is a far greater leap of faith than the leap we make as Christians to believe it's true.

There are also gathered among us this morning those who would agree with everything I've said, who came this morning fully believing that Jesus rose from the dead. But if you were to be honest, tomorrow morning it makes no real difference. It's like believing that, yes, this is a bomb, but let's just go on with the service as if it's not. What sense does that make? Your response is completely inconsistent with what you say you believe.

If Jesus rose from the dead, everything changes. Those of us who have embraced the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus believe that Jesus was God in the flesh. We believe that Jesus was nailed to a cross in payment for the sins of the world. We believe that Jesus died on that cross because we owed a debt we couldn't pay, so Jesus paid a debt He didn't owe. We believe that Jesus died for us. And we repent of our sins and we erase the debt which Jesus paid on the cross for our sins. We believe that he was buried, and we believe that He rose again on the third day, that He appeared to

witnesses and that He lives today. We believe that when we invite Jesus to be our Savior, He forgives our sins. He restores our relationship with Himself. His power changes us from the inside out. It gives us meaning and purpose to life. It gives us hope even in the midst of the most difficult circumstances of life. And those of us that have embraced the risen Jesus would say as of that moment our lives will never be the same again.

The resurrection of Jesus to us, tomorrow morning, makes all the difference.

> *Father, we are thankful for the resurrected Jesus, the Jesus that died on the cross in payment for our sins, the Jesus that was buried and rose again and lives today. He offers life rather than death, offers hope rather than despair, changes us completely and radically from the inside out. Lord, I pray for those here today who perhaps would say they believe in the resurrection but there's no real evidence in the way that their life is lived, Lord, perhaps this morning that they would rethink what it really means to believe in the resurrected Jesus. And Lord, for those who would consider themselves to be skeptics, I just pray that you would give them an honest mind to pursue the truth, to investigate the facts, and to respond with integrity. Lord, we're thankful for the life-changing power of the resurrected Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.*

[1]from Gary Habermas and Antony Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), as quoted in *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), p. 305.

[2] *The Case for Christ*, p. 277.

Additional resource: William Lane Craig and Frank Zindler, *Atheism vs. Christianity: Where Does the Evidence Point?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), videocassette.
Or on the web: http://tw.youtube.com/watch?v=U5hOza8GTqk&feature=PlayList&p=8230D1DD36193A58&index=0

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Study Questions

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Luke 24:1-12

Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. Were you ever a skeptic regarding the resurrection of Jesus? What changed your mind?

2. Is the doubt and skepticism today concerning the resurrection of Jesus driven by historical and scientific evidence or something else? Explain.

3. What are the necessary ramifications if one concludes that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead?

Bible Study

1. Read Luke 24:1-12. Is Luke claiming a physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus?

2. What do you know about the details of the resurrection that would cause you to believe it really happened? In other words, together as a group make your case for the skeptic. In what way is the reliability of the document strengthened by having women as witnesses to the resurrection? In what way are the historical documents (the Gospels) made more credible by the fact that each records the details of the resurrection from differing viewpoints?

3. I Corinthians 15:3,4 is believed to be the earliest Christian creed dating as early as two years after the resurrection of Jesus. What does this tell us about their belief in the historical facts of Jesus death, burial and resurrection? How does this rule out any thought that the resurrection of Jesus grew out of legend rather than historical fact?

4. Notice Peter's words recorded in Acts 2:23-32. He acknowledges they were all eyewitnesses to the resurrection of Jesus just 40 days after the event. Acts 2:41 says that 3,000 people heard that message and believed. What is the likelihood, given these facts, that Jesus did not physically rise from the dead?

5. How can one explain the birth of the church in such dramatic fashion 40 days after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the radical change in the disciples' behavior, the disciples' willingness to die for what they believed and the radical change in Jerusalem from Judaism to Christianity if Jesus did not rise from the dead?

6. What historical or literary evidence is there that would cause one to doubt or dismiss the reliability of the historical documents (the Gospels) that clearly record the resurrection of Jesus? Is the burden of proof regarding the resurrection of Jesus on Christians or the skeptics, given the body of evidence?

Application

1. Is the rejection of the resurrection of Jesus primarily an intellectual problem or a spiritual problem? How does this inform our response with those who deny the resurrection of Jesus?

2. What does the resurrection mean to you? In what way does the truth of the resurrection give you hope in the circumstances you face today?

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