

Experts say “No!” to Resurrection

Expert opinions—they aren’t always so expert, are they?

Listen to a few examples: Example #1: “I don’t like the way he stands at the plate. He bends his front knee inward and moves his foot just before he takes a swing. I don’t think this kid will ever make the big leagues!” Who said it? Bill Cunningham, Boston sportswriter, referring to Ted Williams, the last man in the Major League Baseball to hit over .400.

Or what about this opinion? “I think there’s a world market for about five computers.” Who said it? Thomas Watson, IBM chairman of the board, 1943.

Then there’s this example: “You ain’t going nowhere son. You ought to go back to drivin’ a truck.” Who said it? Jim Denny, Manager of the Grand Ole Opry, 1954, explaining to Elvis Presley why he was being fired after one performance.

And what about this comment? “With over 50 foreign cars already on sale here, the Japanese auto industry isn’t likely to carve out a big slice of the U.S. market for itself.” Business Week magazine, August 2, 1968.

And finally, one more opinion. This time from Matthew 27, “Order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples go and steal Him away and tell the people, ‘He has risen from the dead,’ and the last fraud be worse than the first.” Who said it? The chief priests and Pharisees speaking to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, just after Jesus’ crucifixion and death.

So what do you think? Were the experts right? No! They were wrong on every count. In Jesus’ case, they pointed to a blood-stained cross and a garden tomb where He was lying and said: “He’s dead! He’s gone! Story over! He’s never coming back!” So for the first 19 years of my life, that’s what I thought. I went to church every Sunday. I read the Bible. I watched all the Jesus films on television—“King of Kings,” “Jesus of Nazareth,” “The Greatest Story Ever Told”—and I called myself a Christian at the time. But in my heart of hearts where no one else can see, the one thing I couldn’t bring myself to believe was the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And Romans 10:9 says that in order to be saved, you have to confess with your mouth ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead. And I couldn’t do that. Why? Because the experts said: “No! It isn’t possible. It didn’t happen. People do not rise from the dead!” And so, for the first 20 years of my life, I chose to believe what the experts said rather than the Lord Himself.

What about you? Do you believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ? And when I say resurrection, I mean more than He lived on in spirit. I mean what the Bible says—that Jesus Christ of Nazareth literally and bodily arose from the dead, and that His wounded

natural body has now become a glorious supernatural body that can never be wounded again. That's the pivotal belief of Christianity and what makes the difference between eternal life and eternal death. Do you believe in a Savior who was literally raised from the dead? If you don't, and I imagine there are several people reading this who are still wrestling with that question, I encourage you to reconsider the evidence. Or if you are a believer, but you haven't been living it or sharing it like you could or should, I remind you: We not only have a faith that's wonderful and worth living; we also have a faith that's credible and worth sharing. That's what I want to do in this study—explain how you can know for sure that Jesus is alive again and present with us today.

I. The Historical Evidence

2 Peter 1:16 puts it like this, “For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty.” Hold onto to that phrase for a moment—“eyewitnesses of His majesty”—because that's the key!

You see, down through the centuries, skeptics have come up with all sorts of cleverly devised tales to explain away the resurrection. The first is found in Matthew 28, where the chief priests and Pharisees bribe the soldiers to say that His disciples came and stole His body. That's why the tomb was empty. But common sense asks: Would eleven terrified disciples hiding behind locked doors for fear of the Jews suddenly have enough courage to sneak past a squad of Roman soldiers to steal a body and concoct a lie? I know people who might be willing to die for the truth but how many of us are willing to die for a lie? Another argument is the wrong tomb theory—the reason the women found the tomb empty was because they got confused and went to the wrong tomb. But then wouldn't you have to say the soldiers and Peter and John and Joseph of Arimathea the owner of the tomb, as well as the angel who sat on top of the stone that sealed it, that they went to the wrong tomb too?

Then there's the hallucination theory—the idea that the disciples of Jesus wanted to see Him again so badly that they simply imagined it. But then I came across 1 Corinthians 15:6 which says that on one occasion Jesus appeared to more than 500 believers at the same time, and I realize one or two of the disciples could have been seeing things, but 500 believers at the same time? Besides, do hallucinations typically include things like the consumption of bread and wine, the smell of frying fish, the touch of a loving hand, and all the other things Jesus did with His disciples? My favorite example is Thomas who not only doubted but was determined not to believe until someone proved it to him. “Not me!” He said. “I'm not

going to be taken in by a few idle tales! Unless I put my finger into the print of the nails and my hand in His side, I will never believe!” So 8 days later, Jesus appears to Him. But instead of putting His fingers into Jesus’ wounds, as He said He would, what does Thomas do? He simply falls to the ground in worship saying, “My Lord and my God!” Or as Augustine put it, “Thomas doubted that we might never doubt!” And finally, there’s the swoon theory—the claim that Jesus didn’t really die on the cross. He merely fainted and then later revived in the coolness of the tomb.

I love John Stott’s response to that. He writes: “Are we to believe that after the rigors of trial, flogging, and crucifixion, Jesus could survive 36 hours in a stone sepulcher with neither warmth nor food nor medical care? That he could rally sufficiently to perform the superhuman feat of rolling the boulder away from the door without disturbing the Roman guard? That he could then live somewhere in hiding for 40 days making surprise appearances and convincing his disciples that he’d conquered death, and finally disappear without any explanation?” He concludes: “Such gullibility is more incredible than Thomas’ unbelief!”

In fact, what’s the fatal flaw in all of these alternative theories that attempt to explain away the resurrection? They set the eyewitness testimony aside for something that has no evidence at all, and doesn’t that strike you as a little bit arrogant and unfair? I mean, who in the world do we think we are, two thousand years later, to say we know better than Peter and Mary and John and all the other eyewitnesses what happened that first Easter morning? That’s why Peter is so adamant on this point. He says, “We did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty!” We have eyewitness testimony to His miraculous birth. We have eyewitness testimony to His sinless life. We have eyewitness testimony to His death for our sins. And we have eyewitness testimony to His glorious resurrection from the dead and His ascension into Heaven where He now rules over creation and prepares to return as earth’s long-awaited, rightful King. That’s the first reason I believe what I could never believe before—because of the historical evidence. And there’s a second line of reasoning Peter offers, and that’s—

II. The Biblical Evidence

He continues in verse 19, “And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.” You may recall that’s the evidence Jesus Himself pointed to in talking to His two disciples on the Emmaus Road. Cleopas and the other disciple, who remains unnamed, were grieving the death of their Savior wondering what could’ve happened to His body. So what did Jesus do for them? He

appeared to them in a concealed manner so they wouldn't recognize Him at first, and then He took them to the Scriptures. Luke 24:25—"O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory? And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself." And my question is: Why? Why would He take them first of all to the Scriptures rather than revealing Himself to them? The answer is because even when we can't trust our own eyes or feelings, we can trust the Word of God. Peter says it's "something more sure to which we do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place."

You see, if I went by feelings alone, I wouldn't know for sure that Jesus is living in my heart this morning, that I'm a new creature in Christ, and that I'm forgiven and on my way to heaven, because the moment I consult my own feelings, the devil comes along masquerading as the Holy Spirit and whispers, "Are you sure that Jesus has saved you and that you're a new creature in Christ? After all, you're not a very holy fellow?" And sometimes I have to agree, "I'm not!" But then that isn't the issue, is it? The issue isn't what I feel about myself; it's what God says about me! And when I read God's Word, it says: "Whoever will may come! Though your sins are like scarlet, they will be as white as snow! And the one who comes to me I will never, no never cast out!" And the same is true of the resurrection. We have reliable eyewitness testimony, but even more reliable than that is the testimony of Scripture—the promise that Jesus would come, that He would die, and that He would rise again from the dead. Speaking of Messiah to come, David wrote: "You will not abandon my soul to the grave nor will you let your holy one see decay. You will make known to me the path of life." So we weigh the historical evidence and we search the Scriptures to learn everything we can about the Lord Jesus Christ, but the final and most important reason to believe is because of—

III. The Personal Evidence

Listen again to what Peter writes in verse 19. He says: "And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts." What do you suppose Peter means by that—"until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts"? Well, if you compare Scripture with Scripture, as we're taught to do, you find that that phrase, "the morning star," refers to Jesus Himself. Jesus is the bright and morning star, and one day soon the great day will dawn when we see Him in the brightness of His glory. But even now that morning star is ready to fill our hearts with His glory. "For God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." And

ultimately, that's the only way to know for sure He's alive and real—by opening our hearts to His Spirit and inviting Him to fill us with His presence and power.

Think about Peter! Friday night he was hopeless, terrified, and dejected having denied his Master three times cursing and swearing, "I do not know the Man!" But then, 3 days later, he was altogether different, so much so that on the Day of Pentecost he took his very life in his hands standing before the same crowd that crucified his Master saying, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus...save yourselves from this crooked generation!" And the question is: Where did he get such courage and conviction, and why such a drastic change in his personality? The only answer that works for me is the power and presence of Jesus Christ. That's the ribbon that ties the whole package together. I still remember sitting in church on Sunday mornings as a child, reading my Bible, weighing the evidence, and wishing that somebody somewhere would tell me if any of this stuff was true. But no one ever did. Not once in my 18 years attending that church did I ever hear anybody say, "I believe that Jesus is risen from the dead!" So if I enjoy saying it today, you'll understand why. I believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I believe that Jesus is risen from the dead not only because of the historical and biblical evidence, but because the Risen, Living Jesus is now living in my heart by faith!

For me, it took place in my 2nd year of college. I was taking a religion course at the University of Puget Sound thinking it might help me find God. It didn't. All it did was confuse me. But in that class I met a friend, a charismatic Catholic believer who began to tell me about Jesus Christ. Only the things he had to say were different than everything I'd heard before. Instead of telling me about a Jesus who lived way back there in history or a God who lived way out there in outer space, he told me about a Jesus who was living in his heart and a God who wanted a personal friendship with me. And the more he talked, the more I wanted what he had until finally one day, we decided to skip class together and went out behind the president's home in the woods where for the first time in my life, I asked Jesus to come into my heart and be my Savior. And guess what? Life hasn't been the same since! For example, I'll never forget my first Easter as a believer. I was so excited! Three months before, I didn't believe in the resurrection or Jesus. But now everything was different. Now I knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that Jesus was not only alive from the dead but I was now sensing His presence in my life all through the day!

And that's what He wants to do in your life too. He wants to come into your life and fellowship with you each and every moment of the day. He says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock, and if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him

and fellowship with him and he with me.” That’s what the disciples experienced on the Emmaus Road. After Jesus finished teaching them the Scriptures, they invited him to eat a meal with them and it says in the breaking of the bread, “their eyes were opened and they recognized him,” and then what did they said to each other? “Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked with us along the way and opened the Scriptures to us?” That can be your experience today. We can’t see Him with our eyes—yet. But if you take Him at His Word and open your heart to His Spirit, your heart will start to burn within you, knowing that He’s alive and living in your heart by faith.

I finish with a short story I came across about a young air force lieutenant by the name of David Steeves, who came walking out of the Sierra Nevada wilderness one spring day to find himself the target of great controversy.

54 days earlier, he and his air force trainer jet vanished from the sky without a trace. Steeves claimed he developed engine trouble forcing him to parachute into the snowy wilderness below where for the next 7 weeks he struggled just to stay alive. But there was no welcoming committee to greet him at his return, nor were the authorities willing to believe him. The air force had already declared him officially dead, and when a search of the area failed to turn up the wreckage of his plane, Steeves was forced to resign under a cloud of suspicion. It wasn’t until 20 years later that his story was confirmed. A Boy Scout troop hiking through the woods came across the wreckage of his jet—more than 20 years after it crashed!

When I read that, I couldn’t help but think of Jesus, the most controversial figure who ever lived and made claims few people were willing to believe. On one occasion they gave him up for dead saying, “He’s dead. He’s gone. He’s never coming back!” And many continue to make that claim today. But every portion of his story has been confirmed by eyewitnesses who saw him live, who watched him die, and who three days later found him gloriously risen, showing himself alive to everyone who loved him.

Why is that good news? First, it means there’s someone with great power and authority to answer your prayers when you’re in need. Even more importantly, because he lives, it means you and I will also live even if we die. So if you’ve been struggling with this issue, struggle no longer! Weigh the evidence, trust the Scriptures, open your heart to His Spirit and share the good news with someone else. For we not only have a faith which is wonderful and worth living; it’s also a faith that is credible and worth sharing.