

The Resurrection of Jesus (John 20)

Expository Lessons from the Gospel of John

I. Background and Recap of Preceding Events from Gospel of John

- a. Jesus has been accused by the Jews and condemned to death by crucifixion by Pilate, the Roman Governor.
- b. He has been crucified between two condemned criminals, in a very public execution. After hanging on the cross all day (about 9 am until 3 pm), He expired on the cross. A Roman soldier pierced His side with a spear to confirm that He was indeed dead.
- c. Joseph of Arimathea asks Pilate for the body of Jesus, takes it down from the cross and interts it in his own tomb, which was a new tomb cut out of rock. After the body is prepared and wrapped, a large stone is rolled over the entrance to the tomb.
- d. The next day, the chief priests and Pharisees ask Pilate to post a guard at the tomb, to make sure that the disciples of Jesus do not steal the body and claim that He was raised on the third day (which He had foretold). Pilate assigns a guard of soldiers. The tomb is sealed with an official seal to confirm that no one has moved the rock door.

II. What Happens Next is the Most Disputed Event in All of Scripture

- a. Read **John 20:1-18**
- b. Read **Matthew 28:1-15**
- c. Note that different details are mentioned in these two gospel accounts. Two early Christian efforts to harmonize the different gospel accounts of the resurrection details can be found in:
 - i. Tatian's *Diatessaron* (written c. 150 AD), a harmony of the four gospels widely used in the early Syriac-speaking part of the church.
 - ii. Eusebius' *Gospel Problems and Solutions* (c. 325 AD)
- d. The resurrection accounts in **Matthew** and **John** could be harmonized by organizing the events in the following chronological order:
 - i. Sunday morning at dawn, Mary Magdalene and another follower named Mary come to the tomb. (**Matthew 28:1**)

1. Recall that the women had prepared spices and fragrant oils, but had rested on the Sabbath, Saturday (**Luke 23:55-56**).
 2. It says in Luke's account that early on Sunday morning the women "came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared". (**Luke 24:1**)
 - ii. The guards are terrified and "become like dead men". (**Matthew 28:4**)
 - iii. The women tell Peter and another disciple that the tomb is empty; they assume someone has relocated the body of Jesus. (**John 20:2-3**)
 - iv. Peter and another apostle go to the tomb and find it empty (no body); but see the linen burial cloths. The (men) disciples depart. (**John 20:3-10**)
 - v. Two angels appear and speak to the women. (**John 20:11-13**)
 - vi. Jesus then appears to the women; they fall down and hold Him by the feet; He tells them to go and tell the brethren. (**Matthew 28:9-10, John 20:14-18**)
 - vii. The guards go into the Jerusalem and tell the elders what happened. The elders bribe the guards and tell them to say that while they were sleeping, the disciples came and stole the body. (**Matthew 28:11-15**)
- e. Here is where accounts of the believers and unbelieving Jews diverge.
- i. Both the Christians and unbelieving Jews *agreed on the following*, as facts:
 1. Jesus was a real person, a controversial teacher among the Jews.
 2. He was publicly crucified in Jerusalem under the Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, and the buried in a tomb that was guarded.
 3. Jesus had *claimed* before His crucifixion that he would rise after three days.
 4. On the morning of the third day, the dead body was *gone from the tomb*; and no one was able to produce it afterward.
 - ii. The Jewish historian Josephus, in *Antiquities of the Jews*, book 18, chapter 3.3, confirmed that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate, during the reign of Tiberias Caesar.

1. Josephus was a Jew from Galilee who personally saw the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70.
 2. He later wrote *Antiquities of the Jews* to provide the Romans with a history of his people, the Jews.
 3. The testimony of Josephus about Jesus is also cited by Eusebius (writing c. 325 AD). Eusebius points to the Jewish historian as independent, impartial evidence that these things *really did happen*. (See Eusebius, *Proof of the Gospel*, book 3, chapter 5.)
- iii. Note that, according to Justin Martyr, historic Roman accounts confirmed the same facts. Therefore, all three (Romans, Christians and Jews) can agree to the above points.
1. In Justin Martyr's *First Apology* (c. 150 AD), addressed to the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius, Justin recounts the details of the crucifixion of Jesus to the emperor and then points the emperor to Roman records on the matter:
 - a. "And that these things did happen, you can ascertain from the *Acts of Pontius Pilate*."
 - b. (Source: Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, chapter 35; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 1, p. 175)
 - c. We no longer have access to the *Acts of Pontius Pilate*, which were still available in the second century. However, note that Justin is presenting this as evidence of the crucifixion of Jesus to an unbelieving Roman audience.
 2. Tertullian, an early Christian writer who lived in Carthage, North Africa, in his work *The Apology* (c. 197 AD) also insisted that the Roman accounts could confirm the story of the crucifixion of Jesus.
 - a. "Pilate... sent word of Him to the reigning Caesar, who was at the time Tiberius."
 - b. (Source: Tertullian, *The Apology*, chapter 21; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 3, p. 35).
- iv. Note that Mohammad's claim 600 years later that Jesus was not really crucified (and therefore did not rise from the dead) *contradicts the accounts of everyone on the scene*; and his assessment is therefore *not credible*.

1. In the Qur'an, Mohammad teaches that Jesus was a true prophet of God, one who performed legitimate miracles.
2. HOWEVER, Mohammad stated that Jesus was NOT crucified.
 - a. "And [for] their saying, 'Indeed, we have killed the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, the messenger of Allah.' And they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him; but [another] was made to resemble him to them. And indeed, those who differ over it are in doubt about it. They have no knowledge of it except the following of assumption. And they did not kill him, for certain."
(Qur'an 4:157, Sahih International Translation)
3. Muslims claim that Mohammad received his revelations during the period 610-632 AD. Therefore, he was making pronouncements about how Jesus died six hundred years after the event, and in flat contradiction to all the eyewitnesses who were "on the ground" in Jerusalem when it actually happened (Christian, non-Christian Jew and Roman).
 - a. This claim by Mohammad, made 600 years after the event, is contradicted by all of the parties that were eyewitnesses to the event, coming from all three perspectives (Christians, antagonistic Jews and Romans).
 - b. How could anyone believe such an unsubstantiated and outrageous claim by Mohammad (that Jesus was not really crucified), when all the evidence points to the opposite conclusion?
 - c. Yet there are over 1.6 billion Muslims in the world!
There is much work before us in this area.
- f. The two accounts (Christians vs. unbelieving Jews) diverge after that. Both claim eyewitness authority.
 - i. In *Dialogue with Trypho* (c. 150-160 AD) Justin Martyr said that the Jews of his day were still spreading the story that the disciples of Jesus had stolen His body from the tomb.
 1. "I said before you have sent chosen and ordained men throughout all the world to proclaim that a godless and lawless heresy had sprung from one Jesus, a Galilean deceiver, whom we crucified, but his disciples stole him by night from the tomb, where he was laid when unfastened from the cross, and now

deceive men by asserting that he has risen from the dead and ascended to heaven.”

2. (Source: Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*, chapter 108; in Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 1, p. 253.)
- g. The entire faith hangs on whether Jesus rose from the dead or not.
- i. In my own reassessment of the Christian faith in my late twenties (coming from the perspective of an agnostic at that time), in the end it came down to one question. *Was Jesus raised from the dead on the third day, or not?*
 1. This is a matter of what happened historically. Truth is not subjective. One CAN'T say “He was raised according to ‘*your truth*’ but not according to ‘*my truth*.’”
 2. I realized that either Jesus rose from the dead on the third day, or He did not.
 3. I also realized that if He *did* rise from the dead, *that would change everything* (including the rest of my life).
 4. Shortly after I came to the conclusion that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead as prophesied, I decided to become a Christian, and was baptized.
 - ii. Before He was crucified, Jesus indicated that His resurrection would be the one definitive sign of His authority.
 1. When skeptical Jews asked to provide some sign of His authority to clear out the temple:
 - a. (Jesus responded) “Destroy this temple, and *in three days I will raise it up.*”
 - b. “Then the Jews said, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?’ But He was speaking of the temple of His body.” (**John 2:19–21**, NKJV)
 2. Similarly, on another occasion:
 - a. “Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, ‘Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.’ But He answered and said to them, ‘An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except *the sign of the prophet Jonah*. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great

fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” (Matthew 12:38–40, NKJV)

- iii. Paul insisted that the entire Christian faith hangs on the resurrection of Jesus (it being *a true historical event*).
 1. “And if Christ is not risen then our preaching is empty, and your faith is also empty. Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up—if in fact the dead do not rise. For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable...
 2. “If, in the matter men I have fought wild beasts at Ephesus, what advantage is it to me? If the dead do not rise, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!’” (1 Corinthians 15:14–19 and 15:32, NKJV)
 3. Paul is saying that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is an historic fact, and one upon which the entire Christian faith rests. He concludes, *IF it is not true*, then...
 - a. His preaching and our faith are *empty and useless*.
 - b. He and the other apostles are *liars*, false witnesses about God.
 - c. We are *still in our sins* (they have not been forgiven).
 - d. There is *no hope* for the Christians who have already died.
 - e. We Christians are, of all men, *to be the most to be pitied*.
 - f. *We should be living for pleasure just like the rest of the world: eating, drinking and enjoying the temporary pleasures of this life as much as possible.*
 4. However, if the resurrection of Jesus really did happen, *it changes everything!*
- iv. Recently a Christian who grew up in Pennsylvania was over at our house, and she recounted that as a young teenager, she once heard from a preacher the claim, “*Even if this is not true* (that Jesus was the

Son of God, raised from the dead, etc.)...the Christian life is still the best way to live.”

1. That preacher was attempting to “sell” the Christian faith by telling his hearers that they would have a great life if they believed in Jesus (promise of a great marriage and family, avoiding a lot of emotional pain from sin, inner peace and comfort, a supportive church community, etc.).
 2. But this is the very opposite of what Paul said in **1 Corinthians 15**! In fact, none of the apostles ever used this “soft prosperity gospel” approach to spreading the faith.
 3. Also, even today, this approach is absolute nonsense in that half of the world where becoming a Christian means introducing *greater trials and persecution into one’s life!*
- v. Paul’s approach to the faith is nothing like the famous logical construct advanced by French mathematician and Christian writer Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), sometimes called “*Pascal’s Wager*”.
1. Pascal held that due to the depravity of man and the incomprehensible nature of God, it was not possible to prove the faith logically. He saw saving faith as a solely a gift from God. He believed that God gave this gift to some, but not to others.
 - a. Reportedly Pascal had some kind of personal religious experience that led to his own conversion to the Christian faith.
 - b. Note that even though Pascal was a devout Roman Catholic, his understanding of grace is closer to some of the Protestant Reformers (like Calvin). Apparently, Pascal was influenced by the writings of Augustine.
 - c. (For more on this, see article on Pascal in online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*)
 2. In his work *The Pensées* (a notebook collection of Pascal’s religious thoughts that was published after his death) we find Pascal presenting his famous “wager” based on the following reasoning:
 - a. **Pascal’s first point:** If there is a God, He must infinitely incomprehensible, since, having neither parts nor limits, He has no affinity to us. We are then incapable of knowing either what He is or if He is.

- b. **Pascal's second point:** "(Either) God is, or He is not." But to which side shall we incline? Reason can decide nothing here. There is an infinite chaos which separated us. A game is being played at the extremity of this infinite distance where heads or tails will turn up. What will you wager? According to reason, you can do neither the one thing nor the other; *according to reason, you can defend neither of the propositions.*
- c. **Pascal's third point:** Do not, then, reprove for error those who have made a choice; for you know nothing about it. "No, but I blame them for having made, not this choice, but a choice; for again both he who chooses heads and he who chooses tails are equally at fault, they are both in the wrong. The true course is not to wager at all."
- d. **Pascal's conclusion:** Yes; but *you must wager*. It is not optional. You are embarked. Which will you choose then? Let us see. Since you must choose, let us see which interests you least. You have two things to lose, the true and the good; and two things to stake, your reason and your will, your knowledge and your happiness; and your nature has two things to shun, error and misery. Your reason is no more shocked in choosing one rather than the other, since you must of necessity choose. This is one point settled. But your happiness? Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. *If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is.*
- e. Summarizing *Pascal's unusual case for belief*: We can't know whether God exists or not. However, in this life we have to essentially "*place a bet*" (one way or the other) on whether He exists. Given this, the *smart money choice* is to bet that there *is* a God.
- i. IF you bet there is a God and there is, in fact a God: YOU WIN; however,
 - ii. IF God doesn't exist, you don't actually LOSE anything!
3. Paul completely disagrees with Pascal's reasoning! Paul insists that *we can prove* the Christian faith. Our faith, based on the

resurrection, is supported by compelling evidence. (Read **1 Corinthians 15:1-4**).

- a. The *evidence* to support our faith is provided in both:
 - i. Prophecies fulfilled.
 1. There are *many* prophecies regarding the resurrection of Christ. We will not go into these in this lesson; they are covered in great detail on other lessons.
 2. For information on prophecies about the resurrection, see on the website www.walking-by-faith.org the following lessons (also by Chuck Pike):
 - a. *Prophecies on the Resurrection*, audio lesson recorded July 17, 2016;
 - b. *Jonah and Other Prophecies about the Resurrection of Jesus*, audio lesson recorded April 21, 2019; and
 - c. *Prove-It (Part 4 of 5): He Would Be Raised on the Third Day*, YouTube video lesson, initially recorded in 2013.
 - ii. Eyewitness testimony of apostles.
 1. This will be a primary focus of the rest of the current lesson.

III. Proof Given to Thomas (Read **John 20:19-29**)

- a. Summary of the events
 - i. Jesus appears to ten apostles. Shows His hands and side (wounds).
 - ii. Later appears to Thomas
 1. Thomas does not believe the account of the other apostles, that they saw the resurrected Jesus.

2. Thomas refuses to believe even if he sees it; demands *to touch body* of Jesus and put his hand into the spear mark in Jesus' side and his fingers into nail prints in His hands and feet.
 3. Thomas is convinced when Jesus appears and challenges him to verify that this is the actual body of Jesus (same flesh and bones that Thomas had seen crucified on the cross).
 4. John wrote this account to convince the rest of us to believe.
- b. Read **Luke 24:36-43**. Jesus provided many proofs to doubters that He was resurrected from the dead.
- i. Jesus insists that *He is in His physical body (which has been transformed); He not a ghost nor a spirit.*
 - ii. He invites the apostles to touch His body and see that He has *flesh and bones.*
 - iii. He even *eats with them!*
- c. Back to the Two Possibilities
- i. Both sides agree that the tomb is empty; but which “eyewitnesses” are telling the truth?
 1. The *apostles* (who claimed that Jesus rose from the dead); OR
 2. The *Roman soldiers* (who claimed that the disciples of Jesus came to the tomb at night and stole the body).
 - ii. More about one of the apostles, Thomas
 1. Thomas is also mentioned in **John 11**. (Read **John 11:14-16**)
 - a. Upon hearing that Lazarus has died, Thomas' reaction is: “Let's all go there and die with him”!
 - b. Thomas shows himself to be passionate and intense in his statements (however, he must later retract those rash pronouncements).
 - c. Note that while Thomas had earlier proposed that they all go and die with Lazarus, he is one of the apostles who scatter when Jesus is captured, accused and crucified.
 - i. Thomas was one of those who fled and abandoned Jesus when put to the test, in fulfillment of the prophecy. “I will strike the

shepherd and the sheep will be scattered”
(prophecy of **Zechariah 13:7**, fulfilled in
Matthew 26:31 and **Mark 14:27**).

2. In Christian history, the apostle Thomas has been associated with evangelization of Asia, going into India and reportedly being martyred there. (Recall that in the previous lesson in this series we mentioned the tradition of Joseph of Arimathea taking the gospel to the far west of Europe, to the British Isles, just a few years after the resurrection. It appears that the apostles and early disciples took the Great Commission of **Matthew 28:18-20**, to take the gospel “to *all nations*”, very seriously).
 - a. Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea and historian, writing c. 325 AD, said that Thomas sent Thaddeus (one of the seventy, mentioned in **Luke 10**) to Edessa (in Upper Mesopotamia, corresponding to modern-day Urfa in SE Turkey). In ancient times, this city was capital of the relatively small border kingdom of Osrhoene.
 - i. (Source: Eusebius Pamphilus, *Ecclesiastical History*, book 1, chapters 12-13).
 - b. Eusebius also said that Thomas was sent to the east, to evangelize Parthia (corresponding to Persia and beyond).
 - i. (Source: Eusebius Pamphilus, *Ecclesiastical History*, book 3, chapter 1).
 - c. Read from article in the book *Martyr’s Mirror* on the apostle Thomas. (This book is a classic Anabaptist work on history of Christian martyrs; first published in 1660).
 - i. “According to history, he sent Thaddeus unto King Abgarus, shortly after Christ’s resurrection.
 - ii. “As Parthia, India, Ethiopia, and many other countries had as his portion been assigned to him, he traveled through them. He dreaded, however, as it appears, to go to the moors and the savage nations of India. Nevertheless, God having strengthened him, he there converted many to God.
 - iii. “Concerning the end of Thomas, the most probable account found by the ancients is this:

namely, that at Calamina, a city in the East Indies, he put a stop to the abominable idolatry of the heathen, who worshiped there an image of the sun; so that through the powers of God he compelled the Evil One to destroy the image. Thereupon the idolatrous priest accused him before their king, who sentenced him, first to be tormented with red hot plates, and then to be cast into a glowing furnace, and burned. But when the idolatrous priests, who stood before the furnace, saw the fire did not hurt him, they pierced his side, as he lay in the furnace, with spears and javelins; thus he conformed in steadfastness unto his Lord Jesus Christ, whom he confessed even unto death. Jerome states that his body, which, it seems, was taken out of the fire, was buried in the same place where he died.”

1. (Source: Van Braght, T., *Martyr's Mirror*, pp. 90-91)
- d. Note that there are many traditional accounts associated with Thomas taking the gospel to India. This tradition is particularly strong among the Indian Christians of the Malabar coast area, sometimes referred to as “St. Thomas Christians”. They trace their spiritual lineage back to the evangelization efforts of Thomas in the first century.
 - e. Some of the historical evidence for Thomas taking the gospel to India is documented in Moffett, S.H., *A History of Christianity in Asia*, chapter 2.
 - i. From an early writing quoted in *A History of Christianity*, p. 26:
 1. “At that time we disciples were all in Jerusalem... and we divided the regions of the world that each one of us might go to the region which fell to his lot... India fell to Judas Thomas, who is also Didymus [Twin]; but he did not wish to go, saying that through weakness of the flesh could not travel, and ‘How can I, who am a

Hebrew go and preach the truth among the Indians?’

2. ... And... the Savior appeared to him by night and said... ‘Fear not, Thomas, go to India and preach the word there, for my grace is with thee.’ But he would not obey and said, ‘Send me where thou wilt – but somewhere else! *I am not going to the Indians.*”
 - a. (Original source: *Acts of Thomas*, 1:1)
 - f. Recently I asked a friend who grew up in the province of Kerala in India, who was from a Syrian Christian background originally, what she knew about the history of Thomas in India. She mentioned that she was taught from childhood that Thomas brought the gospel to India originally, and founded seven churches there.
- iii. Even after considering the historical evidence, I wondered, “*How likely is it that the gospel travelled all the way to India within the first 20 years after the resurrection?*”
 1. Not knowing much about transportation and communication in the ancient world, one might think it could take centuries for the gospel to travel such a long distance.
 - a. After all, how could someone travel from Jerusalem all the way to India in those days?
 2. Strabo was a first century Greek geographer, who came up with a fascinating map of the world as he knew it, that clearly included: Europe (to Spain, and the British Isles), Africa, India and even China.
 - a. Clearly people in the first century knew more about the world than most of us give them credit for!
 - b. Strabo commented that when he was down in Egypt, he noted that there were about 120 boats/year bound in from Egypt (ports on the Red Sea) to the coast of India, in commercial trade.
 3. There is also a first century navigation work, *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*

- a. The work was originally in Koine Greek, where its title is Περίπλους τῆς Ἐρυθρᾶς Θαλάσσης
- b. The title, translated into English, means something like, “Voyages Around the Red Sea”
 - i. At that time (first century), “Red Sea” referred not only to what we today refer to as the Red Sea (the long, narrow sea between Egypt/Sudan/Eritrea on the west and Saudi Arabia/Yemen on the east), but *also included the Indian Ocean*, into which that sea flows. To the writer of that work and his contemporaries, it was *all* “the Red Sea”.
- c. This work was by a navigator who explained the sea route from Egyptian ports on the Red Sea, down through the Indian Ocean, across to the coast of India. The writer discussed things such as:
 - i. Weather patterns (beware the monsoon season)
 - ii. Preferred sea routes and distances (about 3 months by sea from Egyptian ports to the coast of India)
 - iii. Ports of trade, important cities
 - iv. Different people and races encountered
 - v. Different products available for trade at each stop
 - vi. Major rivers (including the Ganges and Indus rivers in India)
 - vii. Even discusses the inland trade route from the Indian coast to China.
- d. Clearly, I had been unaware of the extent of the robust commercial trade going on between the east and the west, in the first century.
- e. It was just a 3-month voyage from an Egyptian port to the coast of India. It is completely believable that the gospel could have made it to India soon after the resurrection of Jesus. The gospel could be spread rapidly across great distances in the first century due to

available transportation and commercial trade routes which included:

- i. Roman network of roads, throughout the west.
 - ii. 'Silk Road' network trade routes from Antioch in Syria, extending eastward overland to India and China.
 - iii. Sea routes to the Mediterranean World, Britain, coast of Africa, India and beyond.
- d. Apostles are taking this message all over the world, to all these different countries.
- i. Eusebius makes the point (in *Proof of the Gospel*, book 3): imagine what the apostles are thinking when they prepare to split up and take this message to the entire world.
 1. The apostles had just seen, close up, what happened to Jesus (who was tortured and killed).
 2. Either they (including Thomas) knew for a fact that Jesus rose from the dead, or they were conspiring together to create and spread a fraudulent story about Jesus rising.
 3. They would now be departing one another and taking this message to all the other nations. They would tell them that the gods that their priests tell them to worship in their pagan temples DON'T EVEN EXIST. They would be hated, persecuted and killed for doing this.
 4. They would be telling people about Jesus, that He performed great miracles, rose from the dead and was the Son of God.
 5. At the same time, following the highest moral teachings of Jesus, they must practice and preach that all must: love your enemies, turn the other cheek, do not resist evil people, and never lie.
 6. **Question:** Why on earth would the apostles ever undertake something like this, in the face of certain torture and death, with no ability to defend themselves and no possibility of reward in this life - *unless they were absolutely convinced that they were telling the truth?*
 - a. Who would ever make something like this up, and why would they do it?

- b. So, who is telling the truth here: *the apostles* (who were willing to endure separation, torture and death all over the world to defend their account); or the *Roman soldiers*?
7. For more documentation of how the apostles suffered and died, and where they went to take the gospel after the resurrection, see *Martyr's Mirror* or other historical accounts.
8. The life (and death) of Thomas and the other apostles, as eyewitnesses to the resurrection, is a powerful testimony to the truth of what they spread, the Christian faith: that Jesus died for our sins and rose from the dead on the third day, in fulfillment of the Scriptures.