

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

The Historicity Of The Resurrection Of Jesus Christ

by

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The text for today is the gospel of John, chapter 11, verses 21-27. I'm reading from the English Standard Version:

Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

In this passage, Jesus is perhaps 2-4 weeks from his appointment with divine destiny in Jerusalem. We do not know the precise timeline because Scripture is silent how far away in time Jesus was from his crucifixion at this moment. Lazarus is dead and buried. It is clear from the account that Jesus orchestrated this event upon hearing of Lazarus' illness by specifically waiting two additional days before leaving for Judea (verses 11:1-6). It is noteworthy that Jesus specifically says to his disciples that Lazarus has "fallen asleep" but that he goes to "awaken him" (verse 11). "Sleep" is the euphemism that the New Testament most often uses to describe the death of believers. The early church called their burial grounds *koimeteria*, a word which means "sleeping places." In fact, the Bible describes death as "sleep" 54 times in both the Old and New Testaments. For example, Paul uses it in 1 Thess 4:13 when he writes *"But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope."* The disciples misunderstand what he is saying and Jesus corrects their misconception in verse John 11:14 by stating plainly that Lazarus is dead.

The key to understanding the cryptic passage in John 11:25-26 would come a few weeks later on the Sunday after Passover. This chapter in John is one of the best-known and loved passages in Scripture because it is here that Jesus demonstrates his absolute power over life and death. It is also somewhat shocking given the prevailing understanding of first-century Jews regarding resurrection. N.T. Wright in his 800-page magnum opus *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, provides extensive analysis on the perspective of first-century Judaism towards physical resurrection. Wright concludes "nobody (in Second-Temple Judaism) imagined that any

individuals had already been raised, or would be raised in advance of the great last day."¹ Joachim Jeremias agrees, affirming that "Judaism did not know of any anticipated resurrection as an event in history. There is nothing comparable to the resurrection of Jesus anywhere in Jewish literature."² In the account recorded in the gospel of John, Martha knows that Lazarus will rise on the "last day" (of judgment). It is then that Jesus makes the extraordinary statement that he is the "resurrection and the life" and that whomever believes in him will live even though he die. But Jesus surpasses this with an even more astounding statement that puzzles many saying, "everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die." What is he talking about? Barring the return of Christ when believers who are still alive will escape death and be immediately translated into immortality, every one of us will eventually experience physical death. (The raising of Lazarus is more accurately characterized as a "resuscitation" rather than resurrection because Lazarus still experienced physical death thereafter.) What then is Jesus talking about when he proclaims that all those who believe in him will "never die"?

The answer is that the resurrection of Jesus Christ changed everything—including specifically—the death of believers. The resurrection fundamentally changed death for the believer. Jesus died a horrible, painful death so that his followers might die peacefully and "sleep." The resurrection of Christ ruptured time and changed the fabric of a fallen universe. The resurrection of Jesus Christ was the most significant and far-reaching event (incredibly decreed from eternity past [1 Pet 1:19-20]) to detonate within the space-time universe. Thomas Torrance writes, *"The resurrection takes place in space and time, in physical and historical existence; yet the teaching of the New Testament indicates that it is not merely a great event upon the plane of history, but an act that breaks into history with the powers of another world. It is akin to the creation in the beginning; and the Gospel is the good news that God is creating a new world."*³ Torrance goes on to characterize the resurrection as "an event of cosmic and unbelievable

¹ Nicholas Thomas Wright, *The Resurrection Of The Son Of God*, London: Fortress Press eBook, 2003, 4867, Kindle

² Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time And Resurrection*, London: T&T Clark, 2019, 106, Kindle

³ Torrance, *Space, Time And Resurrection*, 107, Kindle

magnitude" that is comparable only to initial creation or the incarnation.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ ruptured the very fabric of reality, sending shockwaves to the furthest reaches of the cosmos. The effect of the resurrection transcended the speed of light, immediately affecting every part of a fallen creation, serving notice that everything had changed. But it was not only efficacious within our universe; it also sent powerful blast waves echoing throughout transcendent reality well beyond the universe into the realm of eternity—rippling both forward and backward in time. As N.T. Wright puts it, *"the future has already burst into the present, so that the present time is characterized by a mixture of fulfillment and expectation, of 'now' and 'not yet'."*⁴ The resurrection fractured the present evil age (Gal 1:4) in which we now live with the unstoppable and life-changing invasion of a future era that is the Kingdom of God. Wright concludes that *"though mathematical-style 'proof' is impossible, such an event [the resurrection] provides far and away the best explanation for all the other data we have surveyed."*⁵

The statement by Jesus in John 11:25 that he is the "resurrection and life" is the climactic "I Am" statement uttered by him in the gospel of John. Of his seven "I Am" declarations, this is the one that establishes that Jesus has the "key of death and Hades" (Rev 1:17). We cannot separate resurrection and life from Jesus for they are intrinsic to him. Just as love and moral good are defined by God's nature, resurrection and life are defined by the very nature of Christ. Athanasius characterized Jesus as the "voice of life."⁶ Irenaeus agrees calling Jesus "as himself the resurrection."⁷ Torrance recognizes the unbreakable relationship between John 11:25-26 and the impending resurrection of Jesus a few weeks later writing,

It is with the resurrection that the I am of God is fully actualized among us—the *Ego eimi* of God to man, of God in man, and so of man in Christ to God. As Jesus is reported to have

⁴ Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, 7805, Kindle

⁵ Wright, *Resurrection of the Son of God*, 16157, Kindle

⁶ Athanasius, *Homily On The Resurrection Of Lazarus*, Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture, New Testament IVb (Joel C. Elowsky, editor), Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2007, 13

⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4:5.2, Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture, New Testament IVb (Joel C. Elowsky, editor), Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2007, 13

said in the Fourth Gospel, 'I am the resurrection and the life'. In this I am of the risen Lord the atonement becomes abiding and enduring fact, and reconciliation becomes eternally valid and eternally living reality between God and man.⁸

It is obvious from the account in John that Martha and Mary did not yet grasp the full import and implications of what Jesus said to them. Remember that when the Pharisees demanded a miraculous sign, Jesus replied that the only sign to be given them would be his resurrection (Matt 12:38-42). Jesus is explicitly clear that the crowning, validating sign of his ministry that irrefutably demonstrates his divine identity would be his bodily resurrection. John chapter 11 previews the importance of resurrection and highlights its centrality in what is shortly to happen to Jesus in Jerusalem. The resurrection was central to the message of the early church. The New Testament book of Acts records the first 30 years of the early church after the resurrection and makes specific mention of resurrection some 25 times: Acts 1:3, 21-22; 2:24, 29-32; 3:15, 26; 4:2; 4:10; 4:33; 5:30; 9:40-41; 10:39-40; 13:30-37; 14:19-20; 17:2-3; 17:18; 17:31-32; 20:9-10; 23:6; 24:14-15; 24:20-21; 25:19; 26:7-8; 26:22-23. In addition to these specific explicit occurrences, there are also a considerable number of implicit references (i.e., Acts 8:37 where Jesus "is" [instead of "was"] the Son of God; Acts 9:5-6, 9:27; 22:6-8; etc.) We must ask why the early church placed such overwhelming importance on the message of resurrection? The answer is that it validates everything Jesus said and did.

Josh and Sean McDowell assert that three basic credentials validate the claims of Jesus about himself: (1) the impact of his life through his miracles and teaching, (2) fulfilled prophecy in his life, and (3) his resurrection.⁹ They echo Paul's assertion in 1 Cor 15:14 that "*the resurrection of Jesus and Christianity either stand together or fall together.*"¹⁰ The resurrection is the final and decisive sign of the identity of Jesus. In terms of Al Mohler's concept of "theological triage," the resurrection is of primary importance and a hill that we must be willing to die on.

⁸ Torrance, *Space, Time And Resurrection*, 153, Kindle

⁹ Josh McDowell, Sean McDowell, *Evidence That Demands A Verdict, Life Changing Truth For A Skeptical World*, Nashville: Harper Collins, 2017, 232, Kindle

¹⁰ McDowell, *Evidence That Demands A Verdict*, 233

Everytime he spoke of his impending death in Scripture, Jesus predicted his own resurrection. Despite that and hearing what Jesus said about resurrection life residing in him, and even with seeing what Jesus did with Lazarus and because of the understanding in first-century Judaism, it is clear that the disciples were not expecting a literal resurrection after the execution of Jesus. Jesus was executed on Friday. On Saturday, we find his disciples in hiding from fear of the Jews. There is no expectation of a resurrection. Everything changed on Sunday. Despite the repeated predictions of his resurrection by Jesus, the resurrection was completely unexpected by the church. Torrance reminds us that,

the incarnation and the resurrection forced themselves upon the mind of the Church against the grain of people's convictions, as ultimate events bearing their own intrinsic but shattering claims in the self-evidencing reality and transcendent rationality of God himself, and they took root within the Church only through a seismic restructuring of religious and intellectual belief.¹¹

Athanasius comments on John 11:25, writing that the voice speaking is the "voice of life that wakens the dead."¹² Augustine comments on 11:26 that "if you do not believe even while you are alive, you are dead. Let us prove this also by the fact that if you do not believe, though you live you are dead."¹³ Cyprian comments on 11:26 writing, "But we who live by hope and believe in God and are convinced that Christ suffered for us and that he rose again, who remain with Christ and find our resurrection by him and in him, why should we either show reluctance when we ourselves have to depart or lament and grieve for others who depart?"¹⁴ Augustine forcefully concludes that belief in the Son is tantamount to belief in the Resurrection.¹⁵ Apollinaris of Laodicea concludes from the raising of Lazarus, that Christ will call his friends by

¹¹ Torrance, *Space, Time And Resurrection*, 88, Kindle

¹² Athanasius, *Homily on the Resurrection of Lazarus, Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture, New Testament IVb, John 11-21* (Joel Elowsky, editor), Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2007, 13

¹³ Augustine, *Tractates On The Gospel Of John 49.15, Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture, New Testament IVb, John 11-21* (Joel Elowsky, editor), Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2007, 15

¹⁴ Cyprian, *On Mortality, Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture, New Testament IVb, John 11-21* (Joel Elowsky, editor), Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2007, 15

¹⁵ Augustine, *Tractates On The Gospel Of John 49.15, Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture, New Testament IVb, John 11-21* (Joel Elowsky, editor), Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2007, 17

name at the general resurrection.¹⁶ In line with this thought, Maximinus argues that "For all the dead, most beloved, would have arisen out of their graves (on hearing) that one voice if he had not called out that single name [of Lazarus]."¹⁷ Hippolytus concludes that the voice that called Lazarus out of the grave, is the same voice that spoke at creation.¹⁸ Gregory of Nyssa comments on 11:43 that this is the same voice that will call us at the general resurrection.¹⁹

The Reformers were adamant that Christ's resurrection is the foundation of the gospel. "*To deny this doctrine is to destroy the Christian religion and render Christian discipleship absurd.*"²⁰ Martin Luther wrote that "Paul staked everything" on the resurrection and that "*all Christians must believe and confess that Christ has risen from the dead.*"²¹ John Dunne characterizes the resurrection "*like lightning which affects and leaves some mark on everything it touches.*"²² The reformer Wolfgang Musculus declared that Christ "*is the victor over sin and death, and the restorer of eternal life that was lost through Adam*" and is the potency and cause of our own future resurrection.²³ The great reformer Philip Melanchthon wrote that the resurrection means that Christ is now reigning over everything. The resurrection affirms the absolute supremacy of Christ over all things seen and unseen.

The astounding declaration by Jesus in John 11:25-26 that he is the "resurrection and life" clearly points ahead to his impending bodily resurrection from the dead. But why should we

¹⁶ Apollinaris of Laodicea, *Fragments On John 75, Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture, New Testament IVb, John 11-21* (Joel Elowsky, editor), Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2007, 29

¹⁷ Maximinus, *Sermon 14.3, Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture, New Testament IVb, John 11-21* (Joel Elowsky, editor), Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2007, 29

¹⁸ Hippolytus, *On The Gospel Of John And The Resurrection Of Lazarus, Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture, New Testament IVb, John 11-21* (Joel Elowsky, editor), Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2007, 30

¹⁹ Gregory Of Nyssa, *On The Making Of Man 25.11, Ancient Christian Commentary On Scripture, New Testament IVb, John 11-21* (Joel Elowsky, editor), Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2007, 30

²⁰ Reformation Commentary On Scripture (editor Timothy George), *New Testament IXa, 1 Corinthians*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press. 2017, p. 362

²¹ Martin Luther, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, Reformation Commentary On Scripture (editor Timothy George), *New Testament IXa, 1 Corinthians*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press. 2017, p. 363

²² John Dunne, *Sermon Preached at St. Paul's Church*, Reformation Commentary On Scripture (editor Timothy George), *New Testament IXa, 1 Corinthians*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press. 2017, p. 364

²³ Wolfgang Musculus, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, Reformation Commentary On Scripture (editor

believe that the resurrection of Jesus Christ really happened as an unprecedented event in space-time history? Thomas, the apostle, refused to believe in the truth of the resurrection despite the testimony of his fellow apostles—until and unless—he saw the risen Jesus with his own eyes and felt the risen body with his own hands. After appearing again, Jesus tells Thomas that "those who have not seen and yet have believed" are blessed (John 20:29). When Paul was proclaiming the resurrection, the Roman governor Porcius Festus yells that Paul is out of his mind (Acts 26:24). But how can *we* reasonably be expected to believe that Jesus came back to bodily life from the dead? What hope do we have—who are removed two millennia from an unparalleled event in history—when other disciples who *did* see the risen Christ with their own eyes still doubted (Matt 28:17)? Why have millions of people through 20 centuries from every walk of life, every level of society, from every tribe and every language, believed and embraced the power of the resurrection? Do we take it on blind faith? Or is there . . . in the words of Josh McDowell . . . evidence that demands a verdict?

To begin with, there is no question on the historicity of the person of Jesus Christ. Some skeptics deny that Jesus Christ ever existed and is merely a figment of the imagination. The peer-reviewed journal "Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus" destroys any sense of mythicism regarding Jesus. As one of the editors notes, "*It (the journal) also has people of many different religious affiliations, there are members who identify as Jewish, evangelical Christian, mainline Christian, agnostic, and atheist. We disagree on just about everything when it comes to Jesus and the sources pertaining to him. However, what we all agree on is that (1) Jesus existed and (2) people who deny his existence are cranks or bad-historians.*"²⁴ There is extrabiblical witness in the ancient writings of Josephus, Tacitus, Lucian, Serapion, Eusebius, Julius Africanus, and Phlegon of Tralles. There is no question regarding the historicity of Jesus Christ. Anyone denying his historicity is either a delusional "crank" or very bad historian.

Timothy George), New Testament IXa, 1 Corinthians. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press. 2017, p. 364

²⁴ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/euangelion/2017/12/peer-reviewed-journal-takes-richard-carriers-jesus-mythicism/>

Since almost everything that we know about Jesus, including the passage before us today, originates in the four New Testament gospels, we must ask how reliable are those documents? Predictably, every Easter, skeptics trot out "hidden" gospels about Jesus that they claim the church has historically concealed. Rubbish. Those "gospels" are well-known gnostic gospels that were rejected as forgeries centuries ago by the early church. But what about the four gospels in the New Testament—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John? Are they trustworthy? How can we be confident that Jesus uttered the words in John 11:25-26?

An interesting characteristic of the four gospels is that the author in each does not identify himself. How then do we know that Matthew wrote the first gospel, that Mark wrote the second gospel, that Luke wrote the third gospel and that John wrote the fourth gospel? There is strong evidence that the four gospels were written by eyewitnesses (Matthew and John) or others who had direct access to eyewitnesses (Mark and Luke), and were written when the eyewitnesses were still alive and could refute any falsehood (i.e., 1 Cor 15:6). Even the former self-proclaimed evangelical and now-admitted atheist Bart Ehrman acknowledges that all four gospels were written in the First Century when eyewitnesses were still alive. Bart Ehrman dates the gospel of Mark to 70 AD when eyewitnesses were still alive. John the apostle died during the reign of Trajan who ruled from 98-117 AD. Bauckham informs us that "the period between the "historical" Jesus and the Gospels was actually spanned, not by anonymous community transmission, but by the continuing presence and testimony of the eyewitnesses, who remained the authoritative sources of their traditions until their deaths."²⁵ Timothy Paul Jones agrees, writing that "*The testimonies in the New Testament Gospels can be traced back to eyewitnesses and persons who were closely associated with eyewitnesses.*"²⁶

Quadratus of Athens wrote an Apology to the Emperor Hadrian in the early Second Century. Eusebius quotes Quadratus as claiming that some of those who were raised from the

²⁵ Bauckham, Richard. *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels As Eyewitness Testimony*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017, 412, Kindle

²⁶ Jones, Timothy Paul, *Why Should I Trust the Bible?*, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2020, 33, Kindle

dead by Jesus were still alive in his time. Eusebius relates,

After Trajan had reigned for nineteen and a half years Aelius Adrian became his successor in the empire. To him Quadratus addressed a discourse containing an apology for our religion, because certain wicked men had attempted to trouble the Christians. The work is still in the hands of a great many of the brethren, as also in our own, and furnishes clear proofs of the man's understanding and of his apostolic orthodox. He himself reveals the early date at which he lived in the following words: "But the works of our Saviour were always present, for they were genuine:-those that were healed, and those that were raised from the dead, who were seen not only when they were healed and when they were raised, but were also always present; and not merely while the Saviour was on earth, but also after his death, they were alive for quite a while, so that some of them lived even to our day. Such then was Quadratus.²⁷

But how do we know that the gospel of John was actually written by the apostle John, the close friend and confidant of Jesus? Most professional Biblical scholars accept that the gospels were written during the First Century when eyewitnesses were still alive and could refute any falsehood. Even skeptical scholars acknowledge that the gospels were written well before the end of the First Century. Although the gospel authors do not identify themselves in the gospel accounts, all four gospels are ascribed to Matthew, Mark, Luke or John *in the gospel titles*. There are no anonymous gospel manuscripts. Brant Pitre informs us that *"there are no anonymous manuscripts of the four Gospels. They don't exist . . . there are compelling reasons for concluding that the four Gospels are first-century biographies of Jesus, written within the lifetime of the apostles, and based directly on eyewitness testimony."*²⁸ The earliest gospel manuscripts that we possess, all ascribe specific authorship. From the earliest times, the church identified the authors of each gospel. The four NT gospels are accepted as ancient factual history.

But how can we have assurance that John accurately remembered the sayings and teachings of Jesus? Bart Ehrman argues that the gospel story underwent metamorphosis during oral transmission, comparing it to the "telephone game" that children are often exposed to in elementary school. Ehrman writes that *"oral traditions change as they are told and retold from one person to another. They change every time they are told."*²⁹ In contrast, Bauckham (a scholar

²⁷ Eusebius, *The History Of The Church, From The Life Of Christ To The Conversion Of Constantine* (translated by Arthur Cushman McGiffert), Beginning and End Press 2019, 160, Kindle

²⁸ Pitre, Brant, *The Case for Jesus*, New York: Image, 2016, 9, Kindle

²⁹ Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus Before The Gospels: How The Earliest Christians Remembered, Changed, and*

in theology, historical theology and New Testament studies) asserts that the continuing presence and testimony of the eyewitnesses were the authoritative sources of Christian traditions until their deaths.³⁰ Since the gospel of John was written in the late First Century, decades after the events they purport to represent, why should we believe that they accurately reflect reality? In John 14:28, the night preceding the crucifixion, Jesus promises his disciples that "*the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.*" Jesus promised the disciples divine help in their recollection of his teaching.

On the other hand, adherents of the "form criticism" that arose among 19th century liberal German theologians, take an hermeneutic wrecking ball to Scripture such that virtually all original meaning is obliterated. *"Form criticism (Ger. Formgeschichte, "form history") is a method applied to biblical and nonbiblical literature alike; it has been applied to both Testaments (especially, in the OT, to the Pentateuch and the Psalter), but preeminently to the Gospels. It endeavors to get behind the written Gospels and their literary sources to the oral tradition, classifying the various "forms," or types of story, utterance, and so forth, represented."*³¹ How can we be sure that we correctly understand what John records Jesus as saying? C.S. Lewis addresses this when he writes, *"The idea that any man or writer should be opaque to those who lived in the same culture, spoke the same language, shared the same habitual imagery and unconscious assumptions, and yet be transparent to those who have none of these advantages, is in my opinion preposterous."*³² Lewis brutally concludes, *"The 'assured results of modern scholarship' as to the ways in which an old book was written, are 'assured', we*

Invented Their Stories of the Savior, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2016, 226, Kindle

³⁰ Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 412, Kindle

³¹ *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell, editors), Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2017, ebook edition, 324

³² C.S. Lewis, *Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism / Fern Seed & Elephants*, Public Domain: Samzidat University Press, 2014, 7-8

*may conclude, only because the men who know the facts are dead and can't blow the gaff."*³³

Another objection often raised is that since we don't possess the original autograph manuscripts, but copies of copies of copies, how can we be assured the text in John 11:25-26 that we currently have, is accurate? Hixson and Gurry, in their scholarly work on New Testament textual criticism observe, *"The macrostructure of the New Testament is remarkably stable, especially in comparison to other ancient works. Though textual variation exists, it is usually at the micro rather than macro level."*³⁴ They go on to assert that *"most of the early Christian manuscripts are clearly the products of trained and competent copyists, not zealous amateurs."*³⁵

We know that Jesus historically existed and was executed under Pontius Pilate. Jesus was crucified in probably 30 AD in Jerusalem under the reign of Pontius Pilate. While we may not dogmatically know the exact year, all four gospels testify to it. Extrabiblical witness also exists in the ancient writings of Josephus, Tacitus, Lucian, Serapion, Eusebius, Julius Africanus, and Phlegon of Tralles.

How important is the bodily resurrection of Jesus to his words in John 11:25-26? It is vital. We must grasp that the First-century Jewish understanding of resurrection did not permit a resurrection before the general resurrection at the end of time. As I previously noted, N.T. Wright makes this very clear with a persuasive argument in his book *The Resurrection Of The Son Of God*. It is also clear from the response of Martha in 11:24 when Jesus informs her that Lazarus will rise again. The' bodily resurrection of Jesus represents the divine seal of authenticity on the words encapsulated in John 11:25-26. Without his bodily resurrection, we must ascribe the words of Jesus in John 11:25-26 as mere fantasy. The facticity of the words in John 11:25-26 is at stake here. The affirmation by Jesus that he is the "resurrection and life" stands or falls with what happened on the Sunday morning a few weeks later after his execution. When asked by the skeptical Jewish religious leaders to produce a miraculous sign, Jesus responded that only one

³³ Lewis, *Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism*, 10

³⁴ Hixson, Elijah, and Peter Gurry, *Myths and Mistakes in New Testament Textual Criticism*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2019, 151, Kindle

³⁵ Hixson & Gurry, *Myths and Mistakes in New Testament Textual Criticism*, 137, Kindle

sign would be given to them: the sign of Jonah. *“For just 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”* (Matt 12:38-42). His declaration in John 11:25-26 is the defining statement of the ultimate identity of Jesus. This is why Paul wrote that if Jesus did not rise from the dead, we believe in vain (1 Cor 15:14.) Thus, to affirm John 11:25-26, we must ask how realistic is it to believe that Jesus actually rose bodily from the dead?

According to the gospels, Jesus was executed on Friday. On Saturday, the Jewish Sanhedrin, who were well aware of the predictions of Jesus that he would rise from the dead, requested Pilate to post a guard and seal the tomb to prevent any "monkey business" by the disciples whom they feared might fake a resurrection (Matt 27:62-66). Early Sunday morning, the tomb was found empty. On that point, all involved agree that the tomb of Jesus was empty on Sunday morning: the disciples, the Romans, the Sanhedrin, and the citizens of Jerusalem. The million dollar question was—and remains—why was the tomb empty?

The truth of the words in John 11:25-26 depends upon the facticity of the resurrection of the One who spoke those words. John 11:25-26 and the resurrection of Jesus Christ are rigidly linked together with an unbreakable bond. We can build a cumulative case for the truth of John 11:25-26 and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, using evidence that most skeptics should be able to agree with. Michael Rota describes the "minimal facts approach" used by Michael Licona and Gary Habermas that relies only on historical facts that almost all scholars familiar with the topic of Christ's resurrection should agree on, including atheists and agnostics.³⁶

Skeptics should be able to agree with these three points thus far: (1) Jesus Christ is a historical person; (2) He was executed under Pontius Pilate on a Friday morning in probably 30 AD; and (3) His tomb was found empty early the following Sunday morning after his execution on Friday. We can also consider additional "minimal" facts that, once again, most skeptics should be able to agree with. Of sixteen additional facts I have identified, I will select only four

³⁶ Michael Rota, *Taking Pascal's Wager: Faith, Evidence and the Abundant Life*, Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2016, 197-198, Kindle

for a total of seven facts to consider.

(4) Nobody, including the disciples, was expecting a literal, bodily resurrection. The disciples did not understand that Jesus was speaking of a literal bodily return from the grave. The women went to the tomb Sunday morning expecting to finish preparing the body for burial. After the report of the Resurrection by eyewitnesses, Thomas refused to believe unless he saw the risen Jesus for himself and touched him (John 20:24-28). So unexpected was the Resurrection that some still doubted even after seeing the risen Jesus (Matt 28:17).

(5) Eleven of the apostles would ultimately die a martyr's death, proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus to their dying day.

(6) The proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus was central to the gospel in the early church with many suffering persecution and martyrdom for their message that Jesus was alive. Specific mention of resurrection in the Book of Acts occurs in: Acts 1:3, 21-22; 2:24, 29-32; 3:15, 26; 4:2; 4:10; 4:33; 5:30; 9:40-41; 10:39-40; 13:30-37; 14:19-20; 17:2-3; 17:18; 17:31-32; 20:9-10; 23:6; 24:14-15; 24:20-21; 25:19; 26:7-8; 26:22-23. In addition to these specific explicit occurrences, there are also a considerable number of implicit references (i.e., Acts 8:37 where Jesus "is" [instead of "was"] the Son of God; Acts 9:5-6, 9:27; 22:6-8; etc.)

(7) Saul of Tarsus encountered Jesus Christ alive, changing him overnight from a zealous Pharisee and chief enemy of the embryonic church, into Paul the Apostle who became chief advocate for a risen Jesus (Acts 9). Paul would ultimately write 2/3 of the New Testament.

In summary, here are 7 minimal facts, that even skeptics should agree with:

- (1) Jesus Christ is a historical person.
- (2) Jesus was executed under Pontius Pilate on a Friday morning in probably 30 AD.
- (3) His tomb was found empty early the following Sunday morning after his execution on Friday.
- (4) Nobody, including the disciples, was expecting a literal, bodily resurrection.
- (5) Eleven of the apostles would ultimately die a martyr's death, proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus to their dying day.

- (6) The proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus was central to the gospel in the early church with many suffering persecution and martyrdom for their message that Jesus was alive.
- (7) Saul of Tarsus encountered Jesus Christ alive, changing him overnight from a zealous Pharisee and chief enemy of the embryonic church, into Paul the Apostle who became chief advocate for a risen Jesus (Acts 9).

The New Testament records 15 post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to the disciples:

- Early Sunday morning to Mary Magdalene near the tomb at Jerusalem (Mark 16:9, John 20:11-18)
- To the women returning from the tomb (Matthew 28:9-10)
- To Peter (Cephas) near Jerusalem later that day (Luke 24:34, 1Corinthians 15:5)
- To two disciples going to Emmaus that day (Mark 16:12, Luke 24:13-31)
- That evening at Jerusalem to the apostles except Thomas (Mark 16:14, John 20:19-25)
- Sunday evening, a week later, in Jerusalem to all the apostles especially Thomas (John 20:26-29)
- End of April to seven disciples fishing on Sea of Galilee (John 21:1-13)
- To eleven disciples on a mountain in Galilee (Matthew 28:16-18)
- Over 500 disciples at once --location uncertain (1Corinthians 15:6)
- To James --location uncertain (1Corinthians 15:7)
- To the apostles (and probably others) during forty days prior to his ascension (Acts 1:2-3)
- At the Mount of Olives near Bethany at his ascension (Luke 24:50-51, Acts 1:6-12)
- After his ascension, to Stephen the martyr (Acts 7:55-56)
- To Saul on road to Damascus (Acts 9:3-6, 1Corinthians 15:8-9)
- To John on the island of Patmos (Revelation 1:9-19)

The resurrection gave the disciples new insight into the true meaning of the words they had heard a few weeks earlier in Bethany as recorded in John 11:25-26. In fact, the resurrection was the defining feature of the disciples' faith and the foundation of early church's gospel message. As Timothy Paul Jones argues, *"Reports of the risen Jesus were not fabricated decades after his death among people who never knew him. The reports can be traced instead to firsthand experiences in and around the city where Jesus was crucified."*³⁷ The resurrection is the basis of all gospel truth claims.

But we must ask an obvious question: what kind of a man repeatedly predicts that he is going to come back from the dead? What kind of man repeatedly says that he is coming back from the dead on the third day after his execution? In response, CS Lewis offered his famous trilemma: such a man must either be (1) a liar (2) a lunatic, or (3) the Lord (God in human flesh). To those three options, I add a fourth option: such a man might be merely nothing more than a legend. Let's consider each option and begin with the fourth option.

Was Jesus a legend? Several skeptics assert that the resurrection of Jesus is nothing more than a fairy-tale legend, ascribed to him by later generations of Christians. But legends take generations to develop. Even skeptical scholars admit that the gospels were written in the First Century while eyewitnesses were still alive. There was insufficient time for a legend to develop. The Jesus of the gospels cannot be a legend. As I earlier quoted William Lane Craig, *"One of the major problems with the legend hypothesis...is that the time gap between Jesus' death and the writing of the Gospels is just too short for this to have happened."*

Was Jesus a liar? Did Jesus predict his resurrection from the dead, knowing that it would not happen? Was he a liar? Virtually everyone, including skeptics of the resurrection, affirm that Jesus was a great moral teacher. As such, it is inconceivable that he was a liar. It is contrary to everything that he said and stood for.

Was Jesus a lunatic? Was Jesus stark raving mad? In the gospels, we see someone who frequently released suffering people from demonic lunacy. Some of the world's greatest

³⁷ Timothy Paul Jones, *Did The Resurrection Really Happen?*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 31, Kindle

wisdom is credited to him, even by skeptics of the resurrection. It is inconceivable that he was a lunatic.

Was Jesus the Lord? The words of CS Lewis are particularly and powerfully pertinent here. *“A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”*³⁸

Through the centuries, various theories have been put forth to explain the empty tomb. How are we to judge between the various theories offered for the empty tomb? Which one best fits the facts? There is a philosophical principle well-known to engineers and scientists that is called “Occam’s Razor.” The originator of this idea was the 13th century Franciscan Friar William of Ockham. (Occam’s Razor was one of the driving impetuses for modern science. Johnjoe McFadden is an Anglo-Irish scientist, academic and writer. He is Professor of Molecular Genetics at the University of Surrey, United Kingdom and authored a fascinating book on Occam’s Razor subtitled “How Occam’s Razor Set Science Free and Shapes the Universe.”) In layman’s terms, Occam’s Razor dictates that the explanation with the fewest assumptions (i.e., the simplest one) is the preferred explanation. Popularly, the principle is sometimes paraphrased as “of multiple competing theories, the simpler explanation is to be preferred.” When we apply Occam’s Razor to the competing theories that seek to explain the empty tomb, we are seeking the simplest explanation with the fewest assumptions. All other theories aside from Resurrection have multiple innate assumptions. For example the popular “stolen body” theory necessitates numerous assumptions:

- The entire Roman guard force (a minimum of 3 and perhaps as many as 10-16) fell asleep when the penalty was death.

³⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, London: C. S. Lewis Pte. Ltd, Digital Edition, 52, Kindle

- The disciples were able to quietly move a 1-2 ton stone.
- None of the guards were awakened by a 1-2 ton stone moving in their vicinity.
- Rome never investigated a breached Imperial Seal.
- The disciples became fearless for what they knew was a lie.
- The disciples were willing to die for what they knew was a lie.
- The resurrection appearances were imagined.
- Saul of Tarsus and James (the brother of Jesus) both spontaneously converted for no apparent reason.
- The early Jerusalem church, composed entirely of Jews, inexplicably changed their day of worship from Saturday (observed for more than a thousand years) to Sunday.
- James, the half-brother of Jesus who originally thought Jesus was insane, inexplicably became an avid follower.

In contrast, the Resurrection Theory has only one assumption: that miracles are possible (i.e., the supernatural exists). According to William Lane Craig: “*Once one gives up the prejudice against miracles, it’s hard to deny that the resurrection of Jesus is the best explanation of the facts.*”³⁹ The Resurrection is the only explanation that accommodates all the known facts without underlying assumptions. All the other theories offered to explain the empty tomb have multiple underlying assumptions. The Resurrection Theory is the simplest and most logical explanation by far, and thus the preferred one. If Jesus did indeed rise from the dead, we had better pay close attention to everything he said, including his claims to deity . . . and especially to his staggering claim in John 11:25-26. We also need to heed his claim that everyone will ultimately be resurrected by him back to bodily life when he returns – some to eternal life and some to divine judgment. Ultimately, the resurrection of Jesus Christ validates the truth of John 11:25-26 and the gospel message, a message that proclaims:

- Mankind is created in the image of God.

³⁹ William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed., Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008, 399

- However because of the sin of Adam and Eve, everyone is born with a sin nature and a heart inclined towards evil.
- There is nothing we can do to earn God's favor.
- Jesus who is both fully man and fully God, came to die for our sin and took our place on the receiving end of God's wrath.
- He offers us the free gift of eternal life which we receive through repentance of our sin and placing our faith in Jesus and his atoning sacrifice on the cross. "Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." (Romans 10:9)

Adele Reinhartz remarks concerning the gospel of John, *"Many readers love this Gospel because of its transcendent language that lifts readers out of the historical moments of Jesus' life to the lofty heights of the cosmos."*⁴⁰ John 11:25-26 certainly qualifies as lifting the discerning reader "to the lofty heights of the cosmos." Those two verses and the subsequent bodily resurrection of Jesus are inextricably linked. James Warwick Montgomery speaks of *"the divine claims of Jesus Christ and the Resurrection by which he validated those claims . . . [the] historical Resurrection was the focal point of early Christian witness (and the early Christians were close enough to the events to know what had and what had not happened)."*⁴¹

We cannot grasp the full meaning behind the words in John 11:25-26 without embracing the bodily resurrection of Jesus. If we reject the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, we must also reject his statement in John 11:25-26. But like Thomas and James the Just (the half brother of Jesus) from millennia ago, we are confronted with irrefutable evidence for the truth of the astounding claim in John 11:25-26. The resurrection of Jesus Christ in space-time history is the definitive sign that God entered creation to reverse the Fall and offer us the free gift of eternal life. It ruptured time itself bringing the future into the present and creating an overlap of

⁴⁰ Adele Reinhartz, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, 168, Kindle

⁴¹ James Warwick Montgomery, *The Suicide of Christian Theology*, Irvine, CA: New Reformation Publications, 37-38, Kindle

two ages that are now in conflict. It also portends a fearful coming day of judgment for those who reject its message of unspeakable grace. Timothy Jones correctly asserts, *"The entirety of Christianity stands or falls on the question of whether Jesus really returned from the dead . . . If Jesus is alive, heaven has made an appearance on earth, and that changes everything."*⁴²

⁴² Jones, *Did The Resurrection Really Happen?*, 10-11