

SERIES: Life After Death

By Pastor Bryan Clark

Message Title: Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? Pt. 1

Release Date: Monday 03/02/20

All around the world, millions, millions of people will gather together to celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus. Yet for many of those people, 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's 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 and 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 then at the end of the day, maybe it was true or 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, and 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 Anthony 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 Anthony Flew. As a matter of fact, one of the philosophy professors at the end of the debate 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 cause against the Resurrection was no stronger than what Anthony Flew presented, I think it would be time I began to take the Resurrection seriously."

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.

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 I invite you to turn to Luke Chapter 24; 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 weeks of our discussion are really irrelevant. So this is where it all starts.

Chapter 24, Verse one:

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 11 and to all the rest. Now they were Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary, the mother of James, also 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. (*NASB, Luke 24:1-12)

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. 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. We really can't do that with any credibility. The Gospels are historical records. If we are to go back and to evaluate the historical records the same way that we would evaluate any document from antiquity, what we find is the Gospel records emerge more reliable than any other historical document we have; by an overwhelming margin, both in the quality and quantity of manuscripts, there is no question that the Gospel's 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's been a number of theories that have been put forth to 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 real 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, and that is this idea that it is just some sort of a myth or legend and 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 500 years removed from the facts of stories tend to get a little bit bigger and a little bit more legendary, but historians can 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 Gospel, somewhere between seventies and A.D. 90 somewhere in there, you're talking what about 40 to 60 years removed from the fact compared to 400 with Alexander The Great, certainly not nearly enough time for legend or myth to evolve. But actually the only reason that liberal scholars date those Gospels that late is because they believe that the Gospel records predicted the fall of Jerusalem and A.D. 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 A.D. 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 A.D. 40 and 60. Now we're talking about somewhere between five and 25 years removed from the fact. One New Testament scholar in Great Britain, M.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. First Corinthians 15 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, the 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 to witnesses, the story of the Gospel. Now you compare two years with 400 years of 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.

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, that 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 so. 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.

Arnie: Bryan, thank you so much for that historical detail today, but you know, the Bible isn't usually thought of as a history book, is it?

Bryan: Yeah, that's a great question, Arnie. You know, it's common that people say things like, well, that's just what the Bible says, and I think it's unfortunate that often we as Christians just kind of roll over like that settles the issue. The reality is they are historical documents and if you evaluate them as you would any historical document, they're extremely reliable. They're historical records.

Cara: So if the Bible is a historical document, is there any evidence for Jesus and the Resurrection apart from the Bible?

Bryan: Yeah, that's another great question because a lot of people think the Gospels or the Bible, it's the only record, but actually the answer's yes. Lots of people are familiar with Josephus, the historian in the first century that writes about Jesus, his death and the fact that his disciples believed in a resurrection. But Gary Habermas, who's a biblical scholar who has written a book on the Resurrection, identifies 20 extra biblical sources and puts together between 60 and 65 little snippets and facts about the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. So there's a lot of the story that can be put together apart from the biblical record.

Arnie: So do you think the skepticism about the resurrection of Jesus is driven by historical and scientific evidence, or do you think it's really something else?

Bryan: Yeah, I think it's mostly something else. I think there are truth seekers and they're trying to figure it out and they're very sincere. And I think there's a lot of resources for those people to

investigate the Resurrection for themselves. But my experience has been a lot of people kind of laugh at it. They dismiss it, not because they've studied it and concluded that the Resurrection is kind of a myth or unsustainable. They just don't care. They think of it as irrelevant. They don't really want God poking His nose into their life. And so they basically dismiss the idea of a resurrected Christ without really giving it too much thought. You know, if we go back to the Genesis series, it's reflective of the idea, "I want to be my own god. I don't really want God sticking His nose in my business" and they don't have a lot of interest in whether it's true or not true.

Cara: Well, I know that the Resurrection made all the difference for me. When you aren't a believer, and you're trying to sort out what is true, if you look at the historical evidence of the Resurrection and paired with human behavior, you will find that it's true. And because that's true then no other belief is true. Arnie, I know you probably had a similar experience to that.

Arnie: I mean, it was kind of almost the opposite. For me, it was the Resurrection that actually drove me away because I really felt if Christians believed in the Resurrection, truly believed in it, that they would come after me. I mean, I was a part of that group, and if they really believed that Jesus died for our sins, and if you don't believe in Him, you, you're going to go to hell, they would act completely different than how most Christians in my mind acted. It's like, "Oh yeah, Jesus died on the cross", but they really don't live their lives as if that was true. That's one of the things that drove me away.

Bryan: Yeah. You know, Paul talks in Philippians, it's about conduct worthy of the Gospel. What he means by that is if you're going to say this is what you believe, then it should be evident in our lives. And I think there's good examples and bad examples within the Christian community, but if you want people whose lives have been changed and they're amazing people that shine the light of Jesus, they're there if you, if you want to look for them and find them.

Arnie: Yeah. And I think it's like you said, you get a worldview and then you prove it. And I think that's probably what I did.

Bryan: Yeah, common.