

The Resurrection of the Great King

Mark 16:1-8

Introduction: 1) I have a friend named Mike who is an atheist, or at least an agnostic. Several years ago he came over to our home to have dinner with my family and me. Later when he and I were visiting I asked him, “What is the bottom-line when it comes to Christianity?” He quickly responded and said, “That’s easy. It is the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” He then quickly added, “If the resurrection is true than so are a number of other things: 1) There is a God; 2) Jesus is that God; 3) The Bible is true; 4) Heaven and hell are real; and 5) Jesus makes the difference whether you go to one or the other.”

2) My friend Mike is right on all counts. I have often wished my seminary students and fellow theologians saw the issue as clearly. Christianity stands or falls on the historical, bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead. No resurrection, no Christianity. In 1 Corinthians 15:17. Paul plainly writes, “And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.”

3) In Mark 16:1-8 the resurrection of the Great King is addressed. Mark will note several evidences for the resurrection of Jesus. We will quickly examine them and then, step back and, provide a “birds-eye” view of this most critical issue of the Christian faith. We will note the possible options, examine the different theories that have been set forth, and then conclude with the massive evidence that leads us

to proclaim, “He is risen! He is risen indeed!” We will discover the witnesses to the resurrection are not shaky. They are rock solid!

I. The Witness of Mark’s Gospel

16:1-8

- Two of the women at the cross (15:40) also see where Jesus is buried (15:47). When the Sabbath was over they, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James, along with Salome, “brought spices, so that they might go and anoint” the body of Jesus (16:1). They knew exactly where He was buried, and they wanted to perfume His body in a final act of devotion.
- “Very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb” (16:2). This would be Sunday morning. John 20:1 informs us they left for the tomb while it was still dark. They were concerned about how they would get to His body (v. 3). Verse 4 says of the stone in front of the tomb –“it was very large.”
- When they arrived at the tomb they were met with a surprise: “they saw “that the stone had been rolled back” (v. 4). They entered the tomb to find an even bigger surprise (v. 5), “they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe.” No doubt he was an angel, and not a surprise: “they were alarmed.” Fear, wonder, amazement, astonishment and distress gripped their soul. This word

“alarmed” is the same word used in Mark 14:33 to describe the agony Jesus experienced in the garden of Gethsemane.

- Interestingly Luke (24:3-4) and John (20:12) inform us that there were actually two angels present, the number to establish a valid witness (Deut 17:6; 19:15). Matthew (28:5) and Mark simply focus on the spokesman, the one who conversed with the women.
- Aware of their distress the angel seeks to calm and to assure them by revealing the greatest surprise of all (v. 6), “Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him.” I deeply appreciate the insights of James Edwards at this point, “The Crucified One, says the angel, has been raised! The angel invites the women to see the place where they last saw the body of Jesus (15:47). The references to the place of his burial and to Jesus as the crucified one are of crucial importance. The women are not directed to a mystical or spiritual experience or to a numinous encounter. They are directed specifically to Jesus, who died by a crucifixion they witnessed, was buried in a place they witnessed, and now has been resurrected. The verbs in v. 6 refer to both sides of the Easter event. The announcement of the divine emissary establishes an inseparable continuity between the

historical Jesus and the resurrected Jesus. The one whom the angel invites them to know is the one whom they have known. The announcement of the gospel is literally, the *gospel*, good news, and the place from which the gospel first preached is the empty tomb that both received and gave up the Crucified One. A new order of existence is inaugurated....At this moment and in this place the women are witnessing “the kingdom of God come with power” (9:1). (Edwards, 494).

- The evidence is undeniable. The tomb is empty! Now the women have a new assignment. There is no need to anoint a dead body that is no longer there. It is time to start proclaiming the good news of a risen Lord and Savior who has left the tomb! The angel instructs them to begin with those who had abandoned and denied Him, “But go (pre.imp), tell (imp) his disciples and Peter (unique to Mark!) that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.” (v. 7). What a word of grace! What a word of forgiveness, hope and promise. What a pledge for a new beginning from the very place where they first began to walk with Him. Peter would especially be grateful for this word!

- Stunned beyond measure, the women “went out and fled from the tomb” (v. 8). They were overcome with “trembling and astonishment.” And, “they said nothing to anyone (at least initially), for they were afraid”. Their reaction is not what you would expect is it? I believe Sinclair Ferguson helps us put things in perspective: “Should they not have returned home rejoicing in the news they had heard? Is there not something unexpected about this response? That in itself is a mark of its authenticity (if we were to invent the story we would not end it in this way). But it is more. In Mark’s Gospel, this fear is always man’s response to the breaking in of the power of God. It is the fear the disciples experienced when Jesus stilled the storm; the fear of the Gerasenes when Jesus delivered Legion; the fear of the disciples as they saw Jesus setting his face to Jerusalem to die on the cross. This fear is the response of men and women to Jesus as he shows his power and majesty as the Son of God.” (*Let’s Study Mark*, 271).
- And thus Mark’s gospel comes to an end and an abrupt one at that. Verses 9-20 are not found in the oldest and most reliable manuscripts, though there is nothing in them inconsistent with the Scriptures. Mark’s sudden ending was what he wanted. It makes clear that the

disciples of Jesus were stunned by all of this. They did not expect the resurrection. They did not know how to respond, at least initially.

How would they respond to all of this? How will you?

II. Resurrection Options

When we approach the issue of Jesus' bodily resurrection, we are confronted with three basic options.

Option 1: Jesus' resurrection is false—a great hoax. Jesus did not rise from the dead and certain persons, probably the disciples, fabricated a lie and pulled off one of the best hoaxes, if not the greatest hoax, of all time.

Option 2: Jesus' resurrection is fiction—ancient mythology. The early church made Jesus into someone He really was not by telling stories about Him that they embellished more and more over time. Eventually, believers turned Him into God incarnate who died on a cross for our sins and later rose from the dead. Although none of these events really happened, the stories about Jesus continue to evoke wonder and inspire us to live more noble lives, even today.

Option 3: Jesus' resurrection is fact—the supreme event of history. The New Testament accurately records the historical and supernatural resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from the dead. His resurrection was bodily and permanent.

So here are the viable options. There really are no others.

III. Naturalistic Theories That Reject the Resurrection

Naturalistic theories attempt to explain away the idea that Jesus was bodily resurrected by the supernatural power of God. These theories prefer any naturalistic explanation of the event over a supernatural one. There are 10 that are worth noting, and one I throw in for comic relief (#10)!

1) The swoon theory. This view argues that Jesus did not really die but fainted because of the enormous physical punishment He suffered. Later regaining consciousness in the cool, damp tomb, He unwrapped Himself and got out of His grave clothes. He then managed to move aside the large stone that sealed the entrance to the tomb. Bruised, bleeding, battered, and beaten, Jesus emerged from the tomb and convinced His followers that He had risen from the dead.

For example, in his best-seller, *The Passover Plot*, Hugh Schonfield says Jesus planned the whole thing with help from Joseph of Arimathea. Jesus was drugged while on the cross, making it appear that He had died.

Unfortunately, He was seriously injured and actually died a short time later. An outrageous expression of this view is that of Barbara Thiering, who teaches at University of Sydney, Australia. She says Jesus was given snake poison to fake His death and later recovered. He would go on to

marry Mary Magdalene and later Lydia, and He would father several children!

- 2) **The spirit theory.** Jesus was not raised bodily, but He returned in a spirit form or as a spirit creature. This view is held by the Jehovah's Witnesses cult, which teaches that Jesus was created by God as the archangel Michael and that while on earth He was only a man. Following His death on the cross, God restored Jesus in a spiritual form only. The Watchtower Society asserts, "King Christ Jesus was put to death in the flesh and was resurrected an invisible spirit creature."
- 3) **The hallucination theory.** Ian Wilson, believes that Jesus preprogrammed His disciples to hallucinate by means of hypnosis. He says, "It is possible that he [Jesus] prepared his disciples for his resurrection using the technique that modern hypnotists call post-hypnotic suggestion. By this means he could have effectively conditioned them to hallucinate his appearances in response to certain prearranged cues..."
- 4) **The vision theory.** The disciples had experiences they interpreted or understood to be literal appearances of the risen Jesus. The disciples saw visionary appearances of the risen Christ and He communicated to them a call and mission. Though not identical, this view is similar to the spirit theory.

- 5) The legend/myth theory.** Basically the view of the infamous Jesus Seminar, this theory holds that over time the Jesus stories were embellished and exaggerated. The resurrection is a “wonder story” indicating the significance the mythical Jesus held for His followers.
- 6) The stolen-body theory.** This is the earliest theory that attempts to explain away Jesus’ bodily resurrection. It goes back to Matthew 28:11-15, which records that the soldiers who guarded Jesus’ tomb were bribed by the Jewish leaders to lie and say, “ ‘ “His disciples came during the night and stole Him while we were sleeping”””. Occasionally, it is alleged that the body could also have been stolen by the Jewish leaders, the Romans, or even Joseph of Arimathea.
- 7) The wrong-tomb theory.** Belief in Jesus’ bodily resurrection rests on a simple mistake: first the women and later the man went to the wrong tomb by accident. Finding the wrong tomb empty, they erroneously concluded that Jesus had risen from the dead.
- 8) The lie-for-profit theory.** Jesus’ alleged resurrection was perhaps the greatest religious hoax ever attempted and was perpetrated by His disciples. Jesus’ death by crucifixion was a huge disappointment, but His followers saw a way to turn it for good and financial profit. They

proclaimed that Jesus had risen, built a substantial following, and profited from the monies they fleeced from the people who believed their lie.

9) The mistaken-identity theory. Sometimes related to the wrong-tomb theory, this view says the women mistook someone else for Jesus. They perhaps ran into a gardener or a caretaker in the garden. Because it was early in the morning and still dark, they could not clearly see this man. They wrongly thought he was Jesus.

10) The twin theory. In a 1995 debate with Christian apologist William Lane Craig, philosopher Robert Greg Cavin argued that Jesus had an identical twin brother. Separated at birth, they did not see each other again until the crucifixion. Following Jesus' death, His twin conjured up a messianic identity and mission for Jesus, stole His body, and pretended to be the risen Jesus. All we can say here is “incredible! What an imagination!”

11) The Muslim theory. Islam rejects the biblical witness of Jesus' crucifixion, teaching instead that God provided a substitute for Jesus, perhaps even making the person look like Jesus. *Surah 4:157* in the *Qur'an* says, “They declared: ‘We have put to death the Messiah Jesus the son of Mary, the apostle of Allah.’ They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but they thought they did.” Muslims do not agree on who

took Jesus' place. Candidates include Judas, Pilate, Simon of Cyrene, or even one of the disciples. Muslims do not believe in Jesus' bodily resurrection because they do not believe He died on the cross. Instead, *Surah 4:158* declares, "Allah took him up into Himself."

IV. Evidences for the Bodily Resurrection of Jesus

Virtually all scholars acknowledge a number of historical facts surrounding Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. These include the following:

- 1) Jesus died on a Roman cross by crucifixion.
- 2) Jesus was buried in a tomb not far from the crucifixion site.
- 3) Jesus' death threw the disciples into a state of despair and despondency, believing that their Lord was now dead.
- 4) Jesus' tomb was discovered to be empty shortly after His burial.
- 5) The disciples had real and genuine experiences that convinced them beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus had risen from the dead and that He was alive.
- 6) These experiences with the risen Jesus radically transformed the disciples into bold witnesses of His resurrection from the dead, a witness that led to martyrdom for many of them.

- 7) The message of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection was the heart of the gospel from the beginning of the church's existence.
- 8) This gospel was preached in Jerusalem, the very city where Jesus had been crucified and buried.
- 9) The good news of Christ's death and resurrection was foundational in the birth of the Christian church.
- 10) Sunday, not the Sabbath, became the day of worship for the church in celebration of the Lord's resurrection on that day.
- 11) James, Jesus' half-brother and an unbeliever, was converted following an appearance of his resurrected brother.
- 12) Saul, a persecutor of Christians, was converted to Christianity following an appearance of the risen Christ.

Therefore, and this is critically important, any theory or explanation of the empty tomb must properly account for all of these facts.

Now, it is interesting to note that no one witnessed the actual resurrection of Jesus. In fact, the Gospels make no such claim. The belief and proclamation of Jesus' resurrection are based on the fact that He died, He was buried, the tomb in which He was buried was discovered to be empty and the disciples had experiences that convinced them that Jesus had supernaturally and bodily risen from the dead.

Having established these historical facts, we can build a very strong case for Jesus' bodily resurrection. Fourteen evidences will be set forth.

1) The failure of naturalistic theories to explain the event. Naturalistic arguments did not stand up to careful analysis. Virtually all of them have been abandoned or substantially revised. Proponents were selective in the biblical data they affirmed, accepting whatever helped their theories and rejecting whatever did not.

2) The birth of the disciples' faith and the radical change in their lives.

Something happened that caused Jesus' followers to believe that they had genuine encounters with the risen Lord. Furthermore, these encounters with Jesus changed them from fearful cowards in hiding to bold witnesses of the resurrected Christ. In addition, according to church tradition, each disciple, with the possible exception of John, died as a martyr. Each died alone, and yet each one died still proclaiming Jesus as the risen Lord with their dying breath. The importance of this observation can scarcely be overstated. Although people will die for a lie, thinking it is the truth, they will not die for what they know is a lie.

3) The empty tomb and the discarded grave clothes. The Christian movement could have been quickly crushed by producing Jesus' dead corpse. Evidently, no one was able to do so. Paul's early testimony in 1

Corinthians 15 supports the truth of the empty tomb, and the account itself is simple and lacks legendary development. The disciples could not have preached the resurrection in Jerusalem had the tomb not been empty.

4) The fact that women saw the empty tomb first. In the Jewish culture of the first century, women were not qualified to be witnesses in a legal proceeding. Deemed unreliable, they could not testify in a court of law. Given this fact, it is astonishing that the Bible records that women saw the risen Jesus first. If the early church was trying to persuade people to believe that Jesus rose from the dead, saying that women saw Him first was not a wise strategy. If the account of the empty tomb is fictional, it is also inconceivable that women would be the first witnesses to the event. The only reason to record that women saw Him first is that women saw Him first.

5) The change in the day of worship from the Sabbath to Sunday. For centuries Jewish identity has been connected to the observance of the Sabbath, a day that is honored and kept sacred to the Lord. Yet something extraordinary happened around A.D. 30 that caused a large group of Jews in Jerusalem to change their day of worship from the

Sabbath to Sunday. That event is the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

- 6) The unlikely nature of mass hallucination.** Mass hallucination is not just unlikely, it is actually impossible! Hallucinations are inner, subjective experiences of the mind. They occur personally and individually, not as a group experience.
- 7) Post resurrection appearances.** The New Testament records many occasions when Jesus appeared to his followers following His resurrection. Thirteen distinct appearances are recorded in Scripture (See Matthew 28; Luke 24; John 20-21; Acts 1; I Corinthians 15; Revelation 1).

We can make several important observations about these appearances.

- The disciples claimed that Jesus appeared at different times and to different people.
- Some appearances were to groups, while others were to individuals.
- The differing though complementary nature of the resurrection appearances support their authenticity.

- The appearances lasted for 40 days and then came to a complete and abrupt stop. Acts 1:4-11 tells us why: Jesus' ascension back to heaven. No other compelling alternative explanation exists.

8) The 50-day interval between the resurrection and the bold and public

proclamation of the gospel at Pentecost in Jerusalem. Jesus' disciples did not proclaim the gospel of the risen Lord for 50 days after the event took place. Why? What would explain this delay? Again the biblical witness is clear and compelling. They waited until Jesus had ascended (see Luke 24; Acts 1) and until the Holy Spirit had come to empower them for witness (see Acts 2). Christ had to leave before they would act on their own, and the Spirit had to come to give them boldness for witness.

9) The inability of the Jewish leaders and the Romans to disprove the

message of the empty tomb. It is an undeniable fact of history that those who opposed and crucified Jesus could not disprove His resurrection. All they had to do was produce the body of Jesus to put an end to the Christian movement. Simply put: there was no body to produce.

10) The unexpected nature of Jesus' bodily resurrection. The disciples

did not anticipate that Jesus would rise from the dead, though He had predicted this miracle on several occasions (see Mark 8:31-33; 9:31-32;

10:32-34). In fact, Mark 9:32 tells us they did not understand. Perhaps they thought He was again speaking in parables. When Jesus was crucified, their hopes were dashed. A dying and rising Messiah was not what they expected, in spite of the fact that the Old Testament predicted Him. The fact that the disciples were fearful, despondent, and in despair is especially fatal to any type of hallucination or hypnosis theory. All the evidence strongly affirms that the disciples did not anticipate Jesus' resurrection.

11) The conversion of two skeptics: James and Paul. John 7:5 makes clear that James, the half-brother of Jesus, was an unbeliever in Jesus as Messiah prior to His crucifixion. Yet something happened that transformed James from a doubter to a believer, from a skeptic to a leader in the church at Jerusalem, from one who thought his brother was mad (see Mark 3:21) to one who willingly suffered martyrdom for the gospel. James was killed in A.D. 62 for his faith in his brother Jesus as the risen Christ. Something remarkable occurred that brought about this radical change in James. Saul of Tarsus violently persecuted the church (see Acts 7:58; 8:1-3; 9:1-2). However, something happened in Saul's life that changed him from a persecutor of Christ to a missionary and evangelist for Christ. His own testimony, recorded several times in Scripture,

affirms that he saw the resurrected Christ (see Acts 9:3-6; 22:6-10; 26:12-19; 1 Corinthians 15:8; Galatians 1:15-16). Saul was not open to the gospel. It took the resurrected Lord to convince him that Jesus was indeed the Christ.

12) The moral character of the eyewitness. The New Testament provides the greatest teachings found in any literature on love, truth, honesty, hope, faithfulness, kindness—and the list goes on. These teachings came from the pens of men like Matthew, John, Paul, James, and Peter, all of whom claimed to be eyewitnesses of the risen Jesus. To affirm their teachings and yet reject their witness of Jesus as a lie or mistake is illogical and nonsensical. If we accept their teachings, we must trust their testimony about Jesus.

13) The accepted character and claims of Jesus. On numerous occasions Jesus spoke of His crucifixion and resurrection. He claimed He was God (see John 8:58; 10:30; 14:9), and He said He would come back from the dead (see Matt. 16:21). To claim Jesus as a great religious figure and moral teacher while believing that His prediction of His resurrection was wrong would make Him either a liar or a lunatic. The resurrection is essential to the confession that Jesus is Lord. Everything hinges on it.

14) Reliable eyewitness documents recording the events. The New

Testament is the most well-authenticated document of antiquity, a fact no textual critic of any theological persuasion would deny. More than 5,600 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament exist. These are of an earlier date and of a more reliable nature than any other work of antiquity.

Eyewitness followers of Christ wrote many of them, and the books themselves have the ring of history. No religion has in its sacred writings what Christians have in the New Testament.

These arguments form objective, historically verifiable evidence of Jesus' resurrection. Combined with a believer's personal experience of Jesus as living Lord, they provide ample reason to believe that Jesus was physically raised from the dead by the mighty hand of God.

V. Why the Resurrection is Important

The resurrection is theologically significant for the Christian faith. It verifies the truthfulness of the deity of Jesus Christ (see Acts 2:22-24; Rom. 1:3-4), and hope for the believer's resurrection (see Rom. 6:8-9; 1 Cor. 6:14; 15:20-28; 2 Cor. 4:14; 5:10; Phil. 3:21; 1 Thess. 4:14; 1 John 3:2). The resurrection indicates God's approval of Jesus—who He is and what He said. God's approval includes Jesus' message about the way people can receive eternal life (see John 14:6).

The resurrection is at that core of the Christian gospel and Christian theology. It tells us that the God who raised Jesus from the dead exists. It establishes Jesus' Lordship. The resurrection promises victory over death (see John 14:1-9; 1 Cor. 15:55-57), and it is a pledge of God's final judgment (see Acts 17:31; Heb. 9:26-27).

Jesus said in John 10:18, "No one takes [My life] from Me, but I lay it down on My own. I have the right to lay it down, and I have the right to take it up again." Christ is the firstfruits of the resurrection which all who are in Him will enjoy (1 Cor. 15:22). Romans 4:25 teaches that Christ has been raised for our justification. The Bible teaches a close connection between the penal substitutionary death of Christ on the cross and his resurrection. Both are tied to the miracle of salvation.

The classic and definitive text on the resurrection is 1 Corinthians 15. It is both apologetical and theological in its treatment of this great doctrine. Both the death of Christ and his resurrection are a part of the definition of the gospel. That gospel is that Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures, he was buried, and on the third day, he was raised once again according to the Scriptures.¹

¹ Paul has in view the Old Testament Scriptures and texts like Genesis 22:1-19; Psalms 16:8-11; 22; Isaiah 52:13-53; Jonah 1:17; 2:10; Zachariah 12:10.

The resurrection itself is the crowning moment of the work of atonement provided by our Lord. It is a Trinitarian accomplishment with each person of the Godhead participating (Rom. 1:1-4).

Jesus is indeed the risen Lord. You can reject Him, but you cannot ignore Him. What Jesus did in rising from the dead demands a response. How will you respond to the risen Lord and King of the universe? It is a question that cannot be avoided.²

² Most of the content of this message was taken from *Discovering the Biblical Jesus*.