Jesus, Dead or Alive?

Adam Hellyer 10 March 2026



That Jesus lived is a historical fact. Renowned agnostic atheist Bart Ehrman says, 'Jesus did exist, as virtually every scholar of antiquity, of biblical studies, of classics, and of Christian origins … in the Western world agrees'[1]. That Jesus died on a Roman cross, around 30AD, is also an indisputable historical fact. Historian Paula Fredriksen says, 'The single most solid fact about Jesus' life is his death: he was executed by the Roman prefect Pilate, on or around Passover, in the manner Rome reserved particularly for political insurrectionists, namely, crucifixion'[2].

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But if Jesus only lived and died, that is of no consequence. Jesus in His lifetime claimed to be God and said He would rise from the dead. This is the central theme of the gospel: that Jesus rising again is evidence He has overcome death and that He can give us eternal life with His Father. The apostle Paul wrote, 'if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain' (1 Corinthians 15:14). The resurrection of Jesus, then, is so essential to the gospel that if it is not true, Christianity is not true.

Evidence of The Resurrection of Jesus

In today's Internet age of misinformation, there are many who claim Jesus never existed, did not die, and therefore cannot have been raised. Mercifully, Jesus' resurrection is supported by good, historical evidence. Although the Bible is often regarded as one book, historians recognise it as a collection. Therefore, the gospels represent multiple eyewitnesses. In addition, Paul gives us an ancient statement of faith, called a creed.

'For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles."' – 1 Corinthians 15:3-7, NIV

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This creed has been dated back to less than a decade after Jesus' crucifixion. Biblical historian, James Dunn, says, 'This [creed], we can be entirely confident, was formulated as tradition within months of Jesus' death'[3]. More conservative estimates still place the original within the first two years. This means there wasn't time for it to develop as a legend. The story of Jesus' resurrection did not develop over time but was the testimony of eyewitnesses.

Eye Witnesses

Of course, eyewitnesses are only as useful as they are honest. What if the disciples made up the story to support their new religion? What if they were victims of a mass hallucination? Well, hallucinations don't work that way – people hallucinate individually. Also, if the sightings of Jesus were grief-induced 'bereavement visions', this cannot explain why Paul, then known as Saul of Tarsus, an enemy of the church, had such a vision. There is no psychological explanation that can account for all these appearances.

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Paul's creed states that the witnesses were still alive at the time the message began to be

preached. He expected those who heard him to check his story out. He was confident this gospel would survive under scrutiny. John writes, '...that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you' (1 John 1:3). Luke, in introducing his own gospel, says, '...those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us' (Luke 1:2). There is no appeal to faith; we are not told to simply believe in Jesus. The gospel writers believed themselves to be eyewitnesses and were sure the facts would corroborate their story.

No Motive to Lie

The disciples also had no strong motive to lie about the resurrection. None of those early witnesses got rich from the gospel, nor famous in any usable way. It didn't make them popular with the ladies, it didn't give them political clout, and it did not make them a hit with secular or religious leaders. Paul says, 'If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ' (Galatians 1:10). We know from history that the result of preaching this gospel was persecution and death. It has been said that liars make poor martyrs. 'The disciples' willingness to suffer and die for their beliefs indicates that they certainly regarded those beliefs as true. The case is strong that they did not willfully lie about the appearances of the risen Jesus'[4].

Changed Lives

Many have died for what they believed, but this was the first generation of believers. They were the ones who, if it was a lie, knew it was. Yet we see a remarkable transformation from timid disciples to bold evangelists. The disciples, who fled at Jesus' arrest, proclaimed the gospel boldly once filled with the Holy Spirit.

> These men had been transformed by encounters with the risen Jesus

Peter denied Jesus three times in the lead-up to His death. But following his encounter with the risen Christ, Peter became a leader of the church and was ultimately crucified, like his Lord. James, the brother of Jesus, did not believe His God-claims during His lifetime. But later, after encountering the risen Jesus, he did believe and became a leader in the church. For proclaiming Jesus as the Christ, he was thrown from the temple roof in Jerusalem, stoned and struck with a club until dead. John, another apostle, was boiled alive in oil, survived, and continued to preach the love of Christ. He was the only apostle to die of old age. Paul opposed the church before his encounter with Jesus. Later he preached the gospel boldly, endured terrible hardship and was ultimately executed by Nero in Rome. These men had been transformed by encounters with the risen Jesus and the message they preached. Would that have happened if they knew it was all a lie?

The Empty Tomb

The gospel was first preached in Jerusalem, the very city in which the events of Easter had taken place, within months of Jesus' resurrection. This makes the empty tomb very significant evidence. A tomb which had been shut with a large stone and sealed. A tomb guarded by soldiers against grave robbers. A brand-new tomb that belonged to a well-known Jew who was a member of their supreme court, the Sanhedrin. If the apostles had lied about the empty tomb, that would have been easy to uncover.

Yet we do not find evidence of the story being discredited by Roman or Jewish authorities, even though the primary witnesses were women. In 1st Century Palestine, a woman's testimony did not carry the same weight as that of a man. If the disciples were lying, why put such key evidence in the mouths of women? All indicators suggest they were simply reporting exactly what took place.

Sunday Worship

Finally, the early church was started by God-fearing Jews. These were not men trying to get out of their religious duties. Jesus taught that 'unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 5:20). So why did they worship Jesus as God, and why move their day of worship from the Sabbath to Sunday? The change occurred because the believers were persuaded that Christ had risen bodily from the tomb on that day.

> So why did they…move their day of worship from the Sabbath to Sunday?

Agnostic atheist Bart Ehrman explains, 'We can say with complete certainty that some of his disciples at some later time insisted that (a) women from their group went to anoint Jesus' body for burial and found it missing, and (b) he soon appeared to them, convincing them that he had been raised from the dead. Their conviction on this matter eventually turned the world on its ear. Things have never been the same since"[5].

The Resurrection of Jesus: Fact or Fiction?

When we consider the evidence, a very strong case for the bodily resurrection of Jesus emerges.

1. The resurrection was preached within months of Jesus' crucifixion
2. This preaching was backed up by multiple eyewitnesses, all persuaded they had seen the

risen Christ

3. Many of these witnesses had their lives fully turned around by their new-found faith in Christ
4. The tomb remains empty
5. Devoted monotheists began to worship Jesus as God and changed their day of worship from Sabbath to Sunday

This is certainly evidence that demands our attention. As early-church historian, Paula Fredriksen says, 'I know in their own terms what they saw was the raised Jesus. That's what they say and then all the historic evidence we have afterwards attests to their conviction that that's what they saw… I don't know what they saw, but I do know, as a historian, that they must have seen something.'

There is no doubt the early Christians believed they had seen Jesus risen from the tomb. What will you believe? Will you believe the eyewitness testimony of men and women who, in peril of their lives, spoke boldly of having seen the risen Jesus? Or will you try and explain the evidence another way?

The Bible tells us, 'But to all who did receive him [Jesus], who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God' (John 1:12). For your sake, God made Jesus, who had never sinned, to die for our sin, so that, in Christ, we might be made acceptable to God. Christ is risen. His resurrection is an opportunity for us to experience eternal life. If you receive Jesus for who He said He was, you can begin a relationship with God that will last forever. What will you do?

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