

The Easter Challenge 1 – Evidence
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I'm so happy to celebrate Easter with you today! Today we are beginning a sermon series called The Easter Challenge. And today we are looking at the challenge of the evidence for the resurrection.

I wish I could see you dressed up in your Easter clothes! I know if I did – some of you would be wearing crosses as a special piece of jewelry with a special meaning. But have you ever thought about what the cross really is?

Originally the cross was the tool Rome used to execute its criminals more than two thousand years ago. So, if you had worn a cross around your neck at that time, it would be like you today wearing a necklace with a little electric chair pendant at the end.

But do not stop wearing your cross. The fact that such an ugly instrument of death has become a thing of such elegance and beauty is actually a testimony and clear picture of what this day is all about.

The Resurrection is the day that took things that were broken, cruel, harsh, ugly, and repulsive and made them beautiful again.

The Resurrection doesn't make the cross a little less barbaric, a little smoother, or a little kinder.

The Resurrection is so powerful that it has taken a symbol of death and transformed it into our symbol of life and salvation. Without the Resurrection, the cross is barbaric and meaningless. With the Resurrection, the cross is our hope and life.

The resurrection of Jesus is the heart of Christianity. The resurrection sets Christianity apart from all other religions. So many people mistakenly believe all religions are the same. They obviously haven't studied religions because they are all very different.

Christianity is the only religion that has a Savior.

Christianity is the only religion that has a cross.

Christianity is the only religion that has a resurrection.

Christianity is the only religion that is not based on your own works. Christianity tells us we cannot be good enough on our own. We have all sinned and we all need a Savior. We need forgiveness.

Christianity is the only religion whose God says I love you so much that I will give my own Son to die in your place to pay for your sin.

The resurrection of Jesus is the heart of Christianity. Please understand this – Christianity rises or falls based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Without the resurrection, there is no Christianity,
 Without the resurrection, there is no salvation.
 Without the resurrection, there is no eternal life.

How do I know that? Because the Bible actually says that. 1 Corinthians 15:13-20 says:

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless. And we apostles would all be lying about God—for we have said that God raised Christ from the grave. But that can't be true if there is no resurrection of the dead. And if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins. In that case, all who have died believing in Christ are lost! And if our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world. But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead.

One of the most important questions we will ever have to face is what we believe about the resurrection of Jesus Christ. So today I want to prove to you that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is totally true. There are many proofs of the resurrection. Acts 1:3-4 says:

After His suffering, He showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that He was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.

What are these proofs? Today we'll see Four Proofs of the Resurrection – Why it is TRUE.

T TESTIMONY OF HISTORY AND EYEWITNESSES

The death, burial and resurrection of Jesus are some of the most provable facts in history. There is more historical proof about Jesus than any ancient figure – more than Caesar or Alexander the Great.

Who was the first president of the US? George Washington. How do you know it? How can you prove it? History. History is recorded by eyewitnesses - those who observed it and history proves the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Historical evidence says that over a period of 40 days after His resurrection, Jesus appeared alive a dozen different times to more than 515 people - 515 people! That's a lot of eyewitnesses.

Here's what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, He appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the

same time, most of whom are still living, though some have died. Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles...

Belief in Jesus is not a blind leap in the dark – His life is grounded in the facts of history. He was seen by over 500 people! When Paul wrote this, he said, “many of them are still living.” His point was this, “You don’t have to take my word for it. You can go talk to many people who saw Jesus alive after His crucifixion.”

How many witnesses does it take to prove something? I mean – if you and I have different stories, it’s your word against mine. But if I have another witness, the weight of proof is on my side. But what if I had over 500 witnesses? That would be indisputable evidence!

If we had every person that witnessed the resurrected Lord come up here and talk for 15 minutes giving a testimony to what they saw - we would be here all day, and all night, and Monday and Monday night and Tuesday and Wednesday and Thursday and sometime early Friday morning they would just be wrapping up the testimony. It would take over 128 straight hours just to hear, for 15 minutes each, the testimony of those that saw the Lord after he rose.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is true because over 500 eyewitnesses say so!

R RESURRECTION POWER

Ephesians 1:19-20 says:

I pray that you will begin to understand how incredibly great His power is to help those who believe Him. It is that same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead and seated Him in the place of honor at God’s right hand in heaven.

The power of the resurrection is also the power that changes people.

Changed Lives of the Disciples

Matthew 26:56 reveals that all the disciples deserted Jesus and ran when he was taken by the authorities and crucified. They hid in fear with the doors locked. Yet, they all became bold, fearless men. Most of them died martyrs’ deaths for the lord. What changed them? The only reason for this incredible change was the resurrection of Jesus. They saw Him. They knew He was alive.

One of the most incredible proofs of the resurrection was the changed life of James, the brother of Jesus.

John 7:5 says that Jesus’ brothers did not believe in Him. Yet, after the resurrection, James saw Jesus, became a believer, became the leader of the church in Jerusalem and wrote the book of James. What changed this skeptic into a believer? The resurrection!

Think about your brother or sister for a moment.

“What would your brother have to do to convince you he was the Son of God?”
Wouldn’t the answer be something like “Rise from the dead”?

James was changed from a skeptic to a believer by the resurrection! And that resurrection power is still changing lives today. The best proof of the resurrection is that Jesus is still changing people. I can tell you countless stories of people being drastically changed, dramatically healed and restored.

I believe God can change your life! The resurrection of Jesus Christ is true because belief in it changes lives.

U – UNACCEPTABLE UNBELIEVABLE ALTERNATIVE THEORIES

When faced with the reality of the resurrection, people have come up with totally unbelievable, flimsy explanations of what happened. These theories include:

The Wrong Guy Theory – someone else was crucified in place of Christ and then Jesus showed up afterward.

Impossible – His own disciples and family were there and knew it was Him. He talked to them from the cross.

The Wrong Tomb Theory – the people that buried Christ forgot where they buried Him and went to a different tomb – which was empty.

Impossible – Joseph of Arimathea knew where his own tomb was located. Also - there were soldiers posted in front of the tomb.

The Lying Disciples Theory – the disciples stole his body and said he was resurrected.

Again impossible – there were Roman guards. And the disciples had nothing to gain and everything to lose by stealing the body.

Why would they want to live a life of deprivation and suffering and then be tortured to death for a lie? If this had been a charade, certainly one of them would have broken ranks under torture and told the truth.

The Swoon Theory – Jesus survived the crucifixion and was revived in the cool air of the tomb.

Yeah right – did you see the movie “The Passion of the Christ”? No one survived crucifixion – but you want to tell me that 3 days later He unwraps from His shroud – even though He was covered with 75 lbs. of burial spices – rolled away a stone – which took several people to move – and then walks around on nail pierced feet.

One of the best replies to the swoon theory came from a lady who wrote into a question and answer forum:

Dear Sirs,

Our preacher said on Easter, that Jesus just swooned on the cross and that the disciples nursed Him back to health. What do you think?

Sincerely,
Bewildered.

Here was the answer:

Dear Bewildered,

Beat your preacher to a pulp with a cat-of-nine-tails, put a crown of thorns on his head, nail him to a cross; hang him in the sun for 6 hours; run a spear thru his side; put him in an airless tomb for 3 days and see what happens.

On a more serious note - An article in the Journal of the American Medical Society concluded: "Clearly, the weight of historical and medical evidence indicates that Jesus was dead (even) before the wound to His side was inflicted. . . . Accordingly, interpretations based on the assumption that Jesus did not die on the cross appear to be at odds with modern medical knowledge."

None of the alternate theories is believable. That leaves us with an

E - EMPTY TOMB

You can visit the bones of Buddha, or go where Confucius is buried, or where Mohammed is buried. You can also visit where Jesus was buried. But, if you go there, you'll find an empty tomb. There's a sign there that says: He is not Here; He is risen!

The unanimous testimony of history is that the tomb was empty on Easter Sunday. Even His opponents admitted it was vacant on Easter! There was no motive for the disciples or the Romans or the Jewish authorities to steal the body. The only explanation that fits the facts is that Jesus really did return from the dead.

Here's a powerful fact concerning Jesus' tomb: *nobody ever claimed it was anything but empty!* The point is, when the disciples declared the tomb was empty, Jesus' opponents didn't respond by saying, "No, it's not." Or, "You've got the wrong tomb -- His body is over there." Instead, they admitted it was true -- the tomb was vacant!

Now, the question is, how did it get empty? If you go through a list of possible suspects, you can't come up with a reasonable explanation. For instance, the Romans wouldn't have taken the body. They wanted Jesus dead. The Jewish leaders wouldn't have taken the body. They wanted Him to stay dead. All evidence points to the fact of the resurrection. And everyone who truly examines the evidence comes away changed.

Frank Morison was an English journalist who was influenced by skeptic thinkers. He set out to write a book proving that Christ's resurrection was only a myth. After years of study, he ended up writing a book that proved the resurrection called "Who Moved the Stone." Why? A careful examination of the facts led to faith.

Lee Strobel was an atheist who wrote for the Chicago Tribune. His wife got saved and her life changed so much that Lee started examining the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He ended up becoming a believer and writing books called, *The Case for Christ*, *The Case for Faith* and *The Case for Easter*.

Why did all these skeptics end up believers? Because the resurrection of Christ is true. It's true because of:

T TESTIMONY OF HISTORY AND EYEWITNESSES
R RESURRECTION POWER THAT CHANGES LIVES
U UNACCEPTABLE UNBELIEVABLE ALTERNATIVE THEORIES
E EMPTY TOMB

And I challenge you today to make a decision based on that truth. We can either accept it as true or dismiss it as false – but we cannot just ignore it. The Bible teaches that apart from Christ we are lost. We need to be saved from the penalty of our sin. The hope of salvation and eternal life is found only in Christ. John 14:6 says:

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Notice Jesus said I am THE WAY, not a way or one way among many. Why would God say any way to Me will do – you can reach me through belief in any religion - but one of those ways will be to have my Son beaten, tortured and killed in a long slow agonizing death on a cross? It would be crazy to make that one of an infinite number of ways.

When Jesus prayed the night before He was crucified, He said, "Father, if there is any other way, let this pass from me." But there was no other way because God limits salvation to belief in the finished work of Christ on the cross.

Let me remind you of where we began—the cross that some of us wear around our necks or on our wrists. The cross reminds us that God's heart is to take that which is broken, cruel, harsh and repulsive and to resurrect it into something beautiful.

Some of you feel dead inside – resurrection power can change that!

Some of you are going broke and you've lost your hope - resurrection power can change that!

Some of you feel your marriage is dead and should probably be buried - resurrection power can change that!

Some of you have wounds from the past that you think will never heal – resurrection power can change that!

Some of you are struggling with a sin or an addiction – resurrection power can change that!

Some of you are struggling with unforgiveness, anger, bitterness - resurrection power can change that!

Some of you are so down on yourselves that you don't even want to go on living - resurrection power can change that!

Some of you don't even know if you believe in God anymore - resurrection power can change that!

The Resurrection doesn't just make us a little bit better. It's not one step on the road to self-improvement. It doesn't help us be good.

Being good enough or kind enough isn't what God is looking for. God isn't calling you to try harder to be good! He's calling you to fall in repentance at the foot of the cross and receive brand new life through faith in the resurrection power of Jesus Christ!

Resurrection power takes your sin and makes you righteous! Through resurrection power – every sin and failure of your life is forgiven!

The question then becomes What should we do? Romans 10:9-11 says:

If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.

The resurrection is true and that same power that raised Christ from the dead can give you a brand-new life.

Acknowledge our need for forgiveness and salvation

Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ

Confess Him as Lord

Do this and your life will change for eternity.