

Can We Prove the Resurrection of Jesus?

Well, if the resurrection of Jesus were reachable by rational proof alone, one would not need faith to embrace it. However, the evidence does strongly suggest the resurrection of Jesus, making it a reasonable article of faith. There are four lines of argument that suggest the reality of Jesus' resurrection.

First, the evidence shows that the followers of Jesus believed in the resurrection of Jesus from the very beginning of Christianity, not long after Jesus was crucified. It was not a later myth that developed over time under pagan influence as some maintain. Paul wrote to the Corinthians only about 20 years after Jesus' death about the early message of Christianity, which he received many years earlier when he first became a Christian. Included within that message, as "most important" to it, is Jesus' death for our sins, his burial, and his resurrection from this burial site within three days (1 Corinthians 15:3-5). We know that Paul was converted to Christ very early (within a year or two of Christianity's beginning), that he had experienced the risen Jesus, and had conferred with the original followers of Jesus about the truth of their message, which included the resurrection (Galatians 1-2; 1 Cor. 15:3-4). All of this means that the church had certainly believed in the resurrection of Jesus from the very beginning.

Second, the sudden rise in belief about Jesus' resurrection within days of Jesus' crucifixion is very difficult to explain if Jesus had not actually risen from the dead. This is why: the messiah in ancient Jewish belief was thought to be a conqueror who will overthrow the pagan powers and restore the Kingdom of David to the earth. Any failure to do so was widely considered as proof that the person alleging to be the messiah was not to be believed. Other messianic movements existed prior to the time of Jesus in which alleged messiahs were indeed killed. In every case, the movement fell apart. Why this did not happen in Jesus' case is puzzling if Jesus had not actually risen from the dead. Moreover, those ancient Jews who believed in the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead expected it to occur at the end of time. No one at that time expected Jesus to rise bodily to immortal existence within three days! Even if Jesus' disciples had hallucinations or empty visions of him in the sky (or in a dark room), they would have certainly thought it was his spirit and that he will rise up bodily at the end of time. Widespread belief in Jesus' bodily resurrection required more than "visions." Required was his empty tomb and his tangible presence among them to convince them that he had risen bodily already before the end of time. And if the disciples of Jesus had made up the story of his resurrection to deceive people, why did as many as 500 claim to see him early on (as Paul stated very early in the history of the church, 1 Cor. 15:6)? And why would the early disciples give their lives to defend this belief? And if Jesus had somehow survived the crucifixion and walked out of the tomb alive (quite a feat indeed!), this would not by any stretch of the imagination have been viewed as a resurrection, since resurrection in early Jewish belief was a transformation to an immortal or "spiritual" form of bodily existence (see Paul's teaching on this in 1 Cor. 15:42-44).

Third, there is secular testimony (outside of the Bible) that implies the resurrection of Jesus. Tacitus, a Roman senator and historian who was born not long after Christianity began and who hated Christianity, wrote at the end of the first century:

“Christus, from whom the name [of Christians] had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate, and a deadly superstition, thus checked for the moment, again burst forth, not only in Judea, the first source of the evil, but also in the city [of Rome] where all things hideous and shameful from all parts of the world meet and become popular.” Cornelius Tacitus (Annals 15:44)

Notice: Tacitus says that Christ experienced the “extreme penalty” of crucifixion. The Romans mocked, tortured, and brutally murdered leaders of dissident movements in order to intimidate and to crush such movements. This is why the punishment was so “extreme.” In the case of Jesus’ disciples, the Roman strategy worked. The Gospels tell us that the disciples were hiding out in fear of their lives after Jesus’ crucifixion. Tacitus thus acknowledges that the Christian movement was momentarily “checked” or arrested after Jesus’ crucifixion. But, inexplicably, Tacitus notes that the Jesus movement “burst forth” and spread all the way from Jerusalem to Rome. How and why did this happen? Was it due the spread of an evil plague, as Tacitus believed? The New Testament tells us that it was due to the resurrection of Jesus and his bestowing the Holy Spirit of new life upon the disciples. Tacitus thus confirms the Gospel story: Jesus was crucified, his movement was momentarily arrested, his movement suddenly burst forth with new life after Jesus’ resurrection!

Fourth, as the scholar, N.T. Wright, notes, the followers of Jesus oddly made the resurrection (of Jesus and, later, of his followers) the central belief of their message, even though the Old Testament rarely mentions the resurrection of the dead. In fact, this was not a widespread or dominant Jewish belief at the time of Jesus. Why did it suddenly become the central and dominant teaching of Jesus’ Jewish disciples if Christ had not actually risen from the dead?

These four lines of evidence strongly suggest the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Pray to God to make this truth real to you by asking Jesus to speak to you through his word. Open your mind and your heart by the power of the Spirit to hear, to believe, and to obey.