

# Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the Dead

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The bodily resurrection of Christ is the crowning proof that Jesus was who he claimed to be, God manifested in human flesh. Indeed, the resurrection of Christ in flesh is of such importance to the Christian faith that the New Testament insists that no one can be saved without it (Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 15:1-7).

## Direct Evidence

Some have opted for a spiritual or immaterial resurrection body, but the New Testament is emphatic that Jesus rose in the same physical body of flesh and bones in which he died. The evidence for this consists in the New Testament testimony of numerous appearances of Christ to his disciples for a period of forty days, in the same physical, nail-scarred body in which he died, now immortal.

Of course, the evidence for the resurrection of Christ depends on the fact of his death. For arguments that Jesus actually died physically on the cross, see other articles in *Baker's Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*: CHRIST, DEATH OF; SWOON THEORY. It remains here only to show that the same body that permanently vacated his tomb was seen alive after that time. The evidence for this is found in his twelve appearances, the first eleven of which cover the immediate forty days after his crucifixion.

## Appearances

### ***To Mary Magdalene (John 20:10-18)***

It is an unmistakable sign of the authenticity of the record that, in a male dominated culture, Jesus first appeared to a woman. In the first-century Jewish culture, a writer inventing a resurrection account would never have taken this approach. A woman's testimony was not even accepted in court. Anyone faking the record would have Jesus appear first to one or more of his twelve disciples, probably a prominent one such as Peter. Instead, Jesus' first post-resurrection appearance was to Mary Magdalene. During this appearance there were unmistakable proofs of the visibility, materiality, and identity of the resurrection body.

She saw Christ with her natural eyes. The text says, "she turned around and saw Jesus standing there" (vs. 14). The word "saw" (*theoreo*) is a normal word for seeing with the naked eye. It is used elsewhere in the New Testament for seeing human beings in their physical bodies (Mark 3:11; 5:15; Acts 3:16) and even for seeing Jesus in his pre-resurrec-

tion body (Matt. 27:55; John 6:19).

Mary *heard* Jesus. “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” (vs. 15). Then again, she heard Jesus say “Mary” and she recognized his voice (vs. 16). Of course, hearing alone is not a sufficient evidence of materiality. God is immaterial, and yet his voice was heard in John 12:28. Nevertheless, physical hearing connected with physical seeing is significant supportive evidence of the material nature of what was seen and heard. Mary’s familiarity with Jesus’ voice is evidence of the identity of the resurrected Christ.

Mary *touched* Christ’s resurrection body. Jesus replied, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father” (vs. 17). The word “hold” (*aptomai*) is a normal word for physical touching of a material body. It too is used of physical touching of other human bodies (Matt. 8:3; 9:29) and of Christ’s pre-resurrection body (Mark 6:56; Luke 6:19). The context indicates that Mary was grasping on to him so as not to lose him again. In a parallel experience the women “clasped his feet” (Matt. 28:9).

Mary “went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.” So she ran to Peter and announced that the body was gone (vs. 2).

The parallel account in Matthew informs us that the angels said to her, “Come and see the place where he lay” (Matt. 28:6). Both texts imply that she saw that the tomb was empty. Later, Peter and John also went into the tomb. John “bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there” and Peter “went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the *burial cloth* that had been around Jesus’ head” (vss. 5-7). But seeing the same physical body that once laid there is proof of the numerical identity of the pre- and post-resurrection body.

In this one account Jesus was seen, heard, and touched. In addition, Mary witnessed both the empty tomb and Jesus’ grave clothes. All the evidence for an unmistakable identity of the same visible, physical body that was raised immortal are present in this first appearance.

### ***To the Women (Matt. 28:1-10)***

Jesus not only appeared to Mary Magdalene but also to the other women with her (Matt. 28:1-10), including Mary the mother of James and Salome (Mark 16:1). During this appearance there were four evidences presented that Jesus rose in the same tangible, physical body in which he was crucified.

First, the women *saw* Jesus. They were told by the angel at the empty tomb, “He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.” And as they hurried away from the tomb, “suddenly Jesus met them. ‘Greetings,’ he said” (vs. 9). So they received visual confirmation of his physical resurrection.

Second, the women *clasped his feet* and worshiped him. That is, they not only saw his physical body but they felt it as well. Since spiritual entities cannot be sensed with any of the five senses, the fact that the women actually handled Jesus’ physical body is a convincing proof of the tangible, physical nature of the resurrection body.

Third, the women also *heard* Jesus speak. After giving greetings (vs. 9), Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me” (vs. 10). Thus the women saw, touched, and heard Jesus with their physical senses, a three-fold confirmation of the physical nature of his body.

Fourth, the women *saw the empty tomb* where that body had lain. The angel said to

them at the tomb, “He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay” (vs. 6). The “he” who had been dead is now alive, demonstrated by the fact that the same body that once lay there is now alive forevermore. So in both the case of Mary Magdalene and the other women, all four evidences of the visible, physical resurrection of the numerically identical body were present. They saw the empty tomb where his physical body once lay and they saw, heard and touched that same body after it came out of the tomb.

#### ***To Peter (1 Cor. 15:5; cf. John 20:3-9)***

First Corinthians 15:5 declares that Jesus “was seen of Cephas (Peter).” There is no narration of this event, but the text says he was *seen* (Gk. *ophthe*) and implies that he was *heard* as well. Certainly Peter was not speechless. Jesus definitely spoke with Peter in a later appearance when he asked Peter to feed his sheep (John 21:15, 16, 17). Mark confirms that Peter (and the disciples) would “see him, just as he told you” (Mark 16:7). Peter, of course saw the *empty tomb* and the *grave clothes* just before this appearance (John 20:6-7). So Peter experienced at least three evidences of the physical resurrection; he saw and heard Jesus, and he observed the empty tomb and grave clothes. These are definite pieces of evidence that the body that rose is the same, visible, tangible, material body he had before the resurrection.

#### ***On the Emmaus Road (Mark 16:12; Luke 24:13-35)***

During this appearance three evidences of the physical resurrection were presented. They not only saw and heard Jesus but they also ate with Jesus. Combined they provide clear proof of the tangible, physical nature of the resurrection body.

There were two disciples, one of which was named Cleopas (vs. 18). As they were walking toward Emmaus, “Jesus himself came up and walked along with them” (vs. 16). At first they did not recognize who he was; they nevertheless clearly saw him. When they finally realized who it was, the text says “he disappeared out of their *sight*” (vs. 31). Jesus’ resurrection body was as visible as any other material object.

They *heard* Jesus with their physical ears (vss. 17, 19, 25-26). In fact, Jesus carried on a lengthy conversation with them. For “beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (vs. 27). Of course, they were not the only ones Jesus taught after the resurrection. Luke informs us elsewhere that “he appeared to them [the apostles] over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). During these times he “gave many convincing proofs that he was alive” (vs. 3).

They *ate* with him. Luke says, “when he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them” (vs. 30).

Although the text does not say specifically that Jesus also ate, it is implied by being “at table with them.” And later in the chapter it is explicitly stated that he ate with the ten apostles (vs. 43). In two other places Luke states that Jesus did eat with the disciples (Acts 1:4; 10:41). So on this appearance of Christ the eyewitnesses saw him, heard him, and ate with him over a considerable period of time one evening. It is difficult to image how Jesus could have done anything more to demonstrate the physical nature of the resurrection body.

#### ***To the Ten (Luke 24:36-49; John 20:19-23)***

When Jesus appeared to ten disciples, Thomas being absent, he was seen, heard,

touched, and they saw him eat fish. Thus four major evidences of the visible, physical nature of the resurrection body were present on this occasion.

“While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’” In fact, Jesus carried on a conversation with them also about how “everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (vs. 44). So Jesus was obviously *heard* by the disciples.

The disciples also *saw* Jesus on this occasion. In fact, they thought at first that he was a “spirit” (vs. 37). But Jesus “*showed* them his hands and his feet.” So they clearly saw him as well as heard him. In the parallel account, John records that “the disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord” (John 20:20; cf. vs. 25).

It may be inferred from the fact that they were at first unconvinced of his tangible materiality when Jesus presented his wounds to them that they *touched* him as well. In fact, Jesus clearly said to them, “Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have” (vs. 39). Jesus’ use of “I” and “me” in connection with his physical resurrection body expresses his claim that he is numerically identical with his pre-resurrection body. Jesus also “*showed them his hands and feet,*” confirming to his disciples that his resurrection body was the very same nail-scarred body of flesh and bones that was crucified.

On this occasion Jesus *ate* physical food to convince the disciples that he was resurrected in a literal, physical body. “They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence” (vs. 43). What makes this passage such a powerful proof is that Jesus offered his ability to eat physical food as a proof of the material nature of his body of flesh and bones. Jesus literally exhausted the ways in which he could prove the corporeal, material nature of his resurrection body. Thus, if Jesus’ resurrection body was not the same material body of flesh and bones in which he died, he was being deceptive.

### ***To the Eleven (John 20:24-31)***

Thomas was not present when Jesus appeared to his disciples (John 20:24). Even after his fellow apostles reported who they had seen, Jesus, Thomas refused to believe unless he could see and touch Christ for himself. A week later his wish was granted: “A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’” (John 20:26). When Jesus appeared to Thomas he saw, heard, and touched the resurrected Lord.

Thomas *saw* the Lord. Jesus was clearly visible to Thomas who later said to him, “you have seen me” (vs. 29).

Thomas also *heard* the Lord say, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe” (vs. 27). To this unquestionably convincing display of physical evidence Thomas replied, “My Lord and my God!” (vs. 28).

It can be inferred that Thomas also *touched* the Lord. Certainly this is what Thomas said he wanted to do (vs. 25). And Jesus told him to (vs. 27). Although the text only says Thomas saw and believed (vs. 29), it is natural to infer that he also touched Jesus. Jesus was touched on at least two other occasions (John 20:9, 17). So it may very well be that Thomas also touched him on this occasion also. At any rate, Thomas certainly encountered a visible, physical resurrection body with his natural senses. Whether Thomas touched Christ, he certainly *saw his crucifixion wounds* (John 20:27-29). The fact that Jesus still had these physical wounds from his crucifixion is an unmistakable proof that he was resur-

rected in the material body in which he was crucified. This was the second time that Jesus exhibited his wounds. It is difficult to imagine that he could have offered greater proof that the resurrection body is the same body of flesh that was crucified and now glorified.

### ***To the Seven Disciples (John 21)***

John records Jesus' appearance to the seven disciples who went fishing in Galilee. During this appearance the disciples saw Jesus, heard him, and ate breakfast with him.

The Bible says that "Jesus *appeared* again to his disciples, by the Sea of Tiberias" (John 21:1). Early in the morning they saw him standing on the shore (vs. 4). After he talked and ate with them, the text says, "this is now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead" (vs. 14).

The disciples also *heard* Jesus speak (vss. 5, 6, 10, 12). Jesus carried on an extended conversation with Peter in which he was asked three times whether he loved Jesus (vss. 15, 16, 17). Since Peter had denied Jesus three times, not only did Peter hear Jesus speak but Jesus' words no doubt rang in his ears. Jesus also told Peter how he would die (vss. 18, 19).

Jesus apparently also *ate* with the disciples during this appearance. He asked them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" (vs. 5). After telling them where to catch some (vs. 6), Jesus told them to "Bring some of the fish you have just caught" (vs. 10). Then he said to the disciples, "Come and have breakfast" (vs. 12). As they did, "Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish" (vs. 13). Although the text does not explicitly state that Jesus ate, nevertheless, as host of the meal it would have been noteworthy had he not. It is safe to say that, in addition to seeing and hearing Jesus, the disciples shared a physical meal with him.

### ***To Commission Apostles (Matt. 28:16-20; Mark 16:14-18)***

The next appearance of Christ was at the Great Commission (Matt. 28:16-20). As Jesus commissioned them to disciple all nations, he was both seen and clearly heard by all the apostles.

The text says that the disciples went to Galilee where Jesus had told them to go (vs. 16). And "when they saw him, they worshiped him" (vs. 17). Mark adds that they were eating (Mark 16:14), although this version is in the questionably authentic final section of Mark. However, it was not simply what they saw but what they heard that left a lasting impression.

Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:18-19). The fact that this small band shortly became the world's greatest missionary society is ample testimony for how powerfully what the apostles *heard* Jesus speak impressed them.

### ***To Five Hundred (1 Cor. 15:6)***

There is no narration of this appearance. It is simply noted by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:6 where he says: "After that, he *appeared* to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still alive."

Since Jesus was *seen* on this occasion and since he left such a lasting impression on them, it can be assumed that they *heard* him speak. Why else would Paul imply their readiness to testify on behalf of the resurrection, saying in essence, "If you do not believe me,

just go and ask them?”

Despite its brevity this one verse is a powerful testimony to the bodily resurrection of Christ. It has the ring of truth about it. Paul is writing in 55 or 56, only twenty-two or twenty-three years after the resurrection (33). Most of these eye witnesses were still alive. And Paul challenges his reader to check out what he is saying with this multitude of witness who saw and probably heard Christ after his resurrection.

#### ***To James (1 Cor. 15:7)***

Jesus' brothers were unbelievers before his resurrection. The Gospel of John informs us that “even his own brothers did not believe in him” (John 7:5). But after his resurrection at least James and Jude, the half-brothers of Jesus, became believers (cf. Mark 6:3). However, the Scriptures say explicitly that Jesus “*appeared to James*” (1 Cor. 15:7). No doubt Jesus also *spoke* to James. At least as a result of his experience James became a pillar of the early church and played a prominent part in the first church council (Acts 15:13).

James also wrote one of the books of the New Testament in which he spoke of “the crown of life” (James 1:12) and of the “Lord’s coming” (5:8) which was made possible only through the resurrection of Christ (2 Tim 1:10). So whatever James saw or heard during this resurrection appearance of Christ not only converted him but made him into a prominent figure in the apostolic church.

#### ***At the Ascension (Acts 1:4-8)***

Jesus' last appearance before his ascension was again to all the apostles. During this time they saw him, heard him, and ate with him. These three lines of evidence are the final confirmation of the literal, material nature of his resurrection body.

Jesus was *seen* by his apostles on this occasion. Luke says, “after his suffering, he *showed* himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive” (Acts 1:3). He adds, Jesus “appeared to them over a period of forty days.”

They also *heard* Jesus, since on this occasion he “*spoke* about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). And during this specific appearance Jesus commanded them: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have *heard* me speak about” (vs. 4). So it was not only a familiar voice but a familiar teaching that confirmed that this was the Jesus who had taught them before the crucifixion.

Luke also says in this passage that Jesus *ate* with the disciples, as he had done on many occasions. For this last appearance before the ascension was “on one occasion, while he was eating with them” (Acts 1:4). This is the fourth recorded instance of Jesus eating after the resurrection. It was apparently something he did rather often, since even the short summary of his ministry by Peter in Acts 10 declares that the apostles “ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead” (vs. 41). Surely, both the intimate fellowship and the physical ability to eat food was more than sufficient proof that Jesus was appearing in the same tangible, physical body he possessed before his resurrection.

#### ***To Paul (Acts 9:1-9; 1 Cor. 15:8)***

Jesus' last appearance was to Paul (see 1 Cor. 15:8). It is important to note that this appearance was no vision that occurred only within the mind of Paul. Rather, it was an objective, external event observable to all who were within visual distance.

- Paul called this an “appearance” (Gk. *ophthe*), the same word used of Christ's literal

appearances to the other apostles (1 Cor. 15:5-7). Indeed, Paul calls it the “last” appearance of Christ to the apostles.

- Seeing the resurrected Christ was a condition for being an apostle (Acts 1:22). Yet Paul claimed to be an apostle, saying, “Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” (1 Cor. 9:1).
- Visions are not accompanied by physical manifestations, such as light and a voice.

The resurrection experiences, including Paul’s, are never called “visions” (*optasia*) anywhere in the Gospels or Epistles. During the appearance to Paul, Jesus was both seen and heard. The Gospels do speak of a “vision” of angels (Luke 24:23), and Acts refers to Paul’s “heavenly vision” (Acts 26:19) which may be a reference to the vision(s) he and Ananias received later (Acts 9:11-12; cf. 22:8; 26:19). As for the actual appearance to Paul, Christ was both seen and heard with the physical senses of those present. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul said Jesus “*appeared to me also*” (vs. 8). In the detailed account of it in Acts 26, Paul said “*I saw a light from heaven*” (vs. 13). That Paul is referring to a physical light is clear from the fact that it was so bright that it blinded the physical eyes (Acts 22:6, 8). Paul not only saw the light but he saw Jesus.

Paul also *heard* the voice of Jesus speaking distinctly to him “in Aramaic” (Acts 26:14). The physical voice Paul heard said, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4). Paul carried on a conversation with Jesus (vss. 5-6) and was obedient to the command to go into the city of Damascus (9:6). Paul’s miraculous conversion, his tireless efforts for Christ, and his strong emphasis on the physical resurrection of Christ (Rom. 4:25; 10:9; 1 Corinthians 15) all show what an indelible impression the physical resurrection made upon him.

Not only did Paul see the light and hear the voice but those who were with him did as well (Acts 22:9). This shows that the experience was not private to Paul. It was not purely subjective but had an objective referent. It happened “out there” in the real physical world, not merely in the world of his private spiritual experience. Anyone who had been there could also have seen and heard the physical manifestation.

## **A Summary of the Direct Evidence**

The witness evidence for the physical resurrection of Christ is massive. Compared to the evidence for other events from the ancient world, it is overwhelming.

During the first eleven appearances alone Jesus appeared to more than 500 people over a forty-day period of time (Acts 1:3). On all twelve occasions Jesus was seen and probably heard. Four times he offered himself to be touched. He was definitely touched twice. Jesus revealed his crucifixion scars on two occasions. In four testimonies the empty tomb was seen, and twice the empty grave clothes were viewed. On another four occasions almost certainly Jesus ate food. The sum total of this evidence is overwhelming confirmation that Jesus arose and lived in the same visible, tangible, physical body of flesh and bones he had possessed before his resurrection body.

## **Indirect Evidence**

In addition to all the direct evidence for the bodily resurrection of Christ, there are lines of corroboration. These include the immediate transformation of the men who became the apostles, the reaction of those who rejected Christ, the existence of the early church, and

the immediate, amazingly rapid spread of Christianity.

### ***The Transformed Disciples***

After Jesus' death his apostles were scared, scattered, and skeptical. Only one, John, was at the crucifixion (John 19:26-27). The rest fled (Matt. 26:56). They also were skeptical. Mary, the first one to whom Jesus appeared, doubted, thinking she had seen a gardener (John 20:15). The disciples doubted the reports of the women (Luke 24:11). Some doubted until they saw Christ for themselves (John 20:25). One would not even believe when all the other apostles told them Christ had appeared to them. Two disciples on the road to Emmaus even doubted as they talked with Jesus, thinking he was a stranger (Luke 24:18).

A few weeks [later] these very same men and women who had huddled in secret (John 20:19) were fearlessly and openly proclaiming the resurrection of Christ—even before the Sanhedrin that was responsible for Christ's death (Acts 4-5). The only thing that can account for this immediate and miraculous change is that they were absolutely convinced they had encountered the bodily resurrected Christ.

### ***The Theme of Apostolic Preaching***

Of all the wonderful things Jesus taught the disciples about love (Matt. 22:36-37), non-retaliation (Matthew 5), and the kingdom of God (cf. Matthew 13), the dominant theme of apostolic preaching was none of these themes. Above all else, they proclaimed the resurrection of Christ. It was the subject of Peter's first sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:22-40) and his next sermon at the temple (Acts 3:14, 26). It was the content of his message before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:10). Indeed, everywhere and "with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 4:33; cf. 4:2). Being a witness to the resurrection was a condition for being an apostle (Acts 1:22; cf. 1 Cor. 9:1). The best explanation of why this theme was their immediate preoccupation within weeks of his death was that they had, as the Gospels tell us, repeatedly encountered him alive in the days after his crucifixion.

### ***The Reaction of Those who Rejected Christ***

The reaction of the Jewish authorities is also testimony to the fact of Christ's resurrection. They did not produce the body, nor even organize a search. Instead, they bribed the soldiers who had guarded the tomb to lie (Matt. 28:11-15), and they *fought* the disciples who testified they had seen the body alive. The fact that they *resisted*, rather than *refuted*, the disciples' claims speaks for the reality of the resurrection.

### ***The Existence of the Early Church***

Another indirect proof of the resurrection is the very existence of the early church. There are good reasons why the church should not have been born:

The first church consisted largely of Jews who believed there was only one God (Deut. 6:4), and yet they proclaimed that Jesus was God. They prayed to Jesus (Acts 7:59), baptized in his name (Acts 2:38), claimed he was exalted to God's right hand (Acts 2:33; 7:55), and called him Lord and Christ (2:34-36), the very title which earned Jesus the charge of blasphemy from the Jewish High Priest at his trial (Matt. 26:63-65).

The first Christians had insufficient time to establish themselves before they were persecuted, beaten, threatened with death, and even martyred (Acts 7:57-60). Yet they not only maintained their belief but quickly grew in number. If what they testified to was not real, they had every reason and opportunity to give it up. But they did not. Only a real

encounter with the resurrected Christ can adequately account for their existence as a Jewish sect that came to be known as Christians (Acts 11:26).

### ***The Growth of Christianity***

By contrast to other religions, like Islam which grew slowly at first, Christianity experienced an immediate and rapid growth. Three thousand were saved the very first day (Acts 2:41). Many others were added to their ranks daily (Acts 2:47). Within days 2000 more became believers (Acts 4:4). The “number of the disciples was multiplying” so rapidly that deacons had to be appointed to care for the widows (Acts 6:1). Surely nothing other than the bodily resurrection of Christ and his sending of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8) can sufficiently account for this immediate and amazing growth.

### **Summary of the Evidence**

Evidence for the resurrection of Christ is compelling. There are more documents, more eyewitnesses, and more corroborative evidence than for any other historical event of ancient history. The secondary, supplementary evidence is convincing; when combined with the direct evidence, it presents a towering case for the physical resurrection of Christ. In legal terminology, it is “beyond all reasonable doubt.”

### **Objections to the Resurrection**

Many objections have been leveled against the physical resurrection of Christ. Some claim that this would qualify as a miracle, and miracles are not believable. Others claim that the documents and witnesses recording these events were not reliable. Still others have devised alternative theories opposing the resurrection. But those who try to get around the resurrection walk against the gale-force winds of the full evidence. The facts are that Jesus of Nazareth really died and actually came back from the dead in the same physical body.

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