

## **“It’s So Empty, We Don’t Even Know For Sure Where It Was!”**

**By Pastor Jim Ayars**

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**1 Corinthians 15:1-9**

<sup>15:1</sup> Now I would remind you, brothers, of the Gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, <sup>2</sup> and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

<sup>3</sup> For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup> and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. <sup>6</sup> Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. <sup>7</sup> Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. <sup>8</sup> Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. <sup>9</sup> For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. [ESV]

### **“Two Triumphant Entries”**

Today is the traditional Easter for Western Christianity. For many of the Eastern Orthodox churches, Easter is next week. For all Christians, no matter what date, it celebrates the single, most significant event in all of human history. And it is also the most well-attested event in ancient history.

It is also the foundational teaching of the Christian faith. Paul described its importance.

“And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is pointless and your faith is in a fable. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.” [1 Corinthians 15:14-15.]

And so the discussion goes! Especially in the past several centuries, with the rise of the Enlightenment and the scientific method in the human quest for knowledge, has the validity of this event been questioned, even denied.

One of the quests engaging Christian scholarship has been called “The Quest for the Historical Jesus.” This quest is now in its third permutation — “The Third Quest for the Historical Jesus.” During the first two quests, the basic assumption was that there were no such things as miracles. There is nothing which operates outside the realm of scientific law. This led to a conscious separation of what is called “The Jesus of History” and “The Christ of Faith.”

“The Jesus of History” was an unfortunate Galilean itinerant rabbi who ran afoul of the governmental authorities in Jerusalem, and paid for it with his life — he was crucified. End of story.

“The Christ of Faith,” on the other hand, is the product of the myth-building, fable-forming imaginations of superstitious believers as they interacted with the pagan mythologies around them.

“The Jesus of History” was real; “The Christ of Faith” is a figment of fertile imaginations. “The Jesus of History” is a mystery with very little evidence for His existence; “The Christ of Faith” is nothing more than the invention of the early Church.

Such groups as *The Jesus Seminar* have dissected the Gospels, trying to ascertain what were the *genuine* sayings of Jesus, as opposed to the *mythic accretions* of the myth-builders. The

methods they used, aside from being totally subjective — based upon prior unproven presuppositions — left us with a short list of sayings, with no miracles, and, most importantly — no resurrection.

Another quest involved resolving the relationships of the first three Gospels — called *the Synoptic Gospels*, because they are obviously related to each other in some way, and give a common “synopsis” of the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. In the course of the quest, scholars devised a conjectural a source — called “Q,” from the German word “Quelle” which means, simply “source.” This mysterious “Q” contained only the sayings of Jesus, without any miracles or historical information. Matthew, Mark, and Luke quoted each other in some way, and drew other materials from “Q.” However, most “Q” scholars have never been able to agree on what those original sayings were.

Of course, secularists, atheists and agnostics have had a heyday over this conflict. So what is our evidence? Did Jesus REALLY rise from the dead? If He did, then we must take Him seriously; if He didn’t, all we have are some wonderful maxims and aphorisms on a par with Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha. He, too, left us with wonderful maxims and aphorisms — in fact, the Buddha and the Christ made many similar such statements. So also did the ancient rabbis of Judaism.

Enters now the great debate. Yes, this debate actually happened. An evangelical scholar from Liberty University, and a world-famous apologist for atheism, met on stage for a public debate — The Subject: “Did the Resurrection Really Happen?”

Antony Flew, the atheist, presented the case for the impossibility of the resurrection. His key question was “CAN the resurrection have really happened?” Gary Habermas, the evangelical scholar, asked HIS key question — “DID the resurrection actually happen?”

Of course, to answer Flew’s question, one must examine philosophy and science. From the scientific point of view, of course the resurrection cannot have happened, or it must be explained away as a deception, or Jesus really didn’t die, or someone else was accidently crucified instead of Jesus.

The answer to Habermas’ question, however, requires an examination of actual evidence. If the resurrection of Jesus actually happened, what evidence remains for us to verify that it did?

It is here that historians and theologians face the same problem. Historical events, for the historians, are singular, non-repeatable events verified only by writings and memories of eye-witnesses. For theologians, miracles are also singular, non-repeatable events verified only by records and memories of eye-witnesses.

For Antony Flew, his presuppositions denying the possibility of miracles predetermined his conclusions — he engaged in circular reasoning — like this:

- A. Assumption: miracles are impossible.
- B. Counter: We have evidence that a miracle occurred.
- C. Denial: There must be some other, natural explanation.
- D. Why? Because miracles are impossible.

Notice how the conclusion is predetermined by the assumption. The assumption, however, is untested, unproven. All it takes is a single, historically verified *miracle* to disprove the whole argument.

This is what Dr. Habermas provided. The result? Antony Flew became a Christian. Yes, he entered the debate confident he would win. Jesus won instead! Flew’s argument futilely flew away.

What was the basis for Habermas’ argument? It was the content of the New Testament,

especially Paul's first epistles to the Corinthians. We can date Paul's letter! In fact, Paul's ministry in Corinth is one of the few dates in the Book of Acts that can be firmly dated from secular sources.

First, we know that Paul was in Corinth in 49 A.D. This is because Luke recorded that Paul met two fellow believers who had been expelled from Rome by the Emperor Claudius, who was fed up with constant rioting over someone named "Chrestus" — known to be a Latin misspelling of the Greek word "Christos." This expulsion of the Jews is confirmed both by Luke, and by the Roman historian, Tacitus. Because of this, we know that Paul was in Corinth, preaching his Gospel, in 49 A.D.

There is another piece to this puzzle — his name was Gallio, proconsul of Achaea. We know, from Roman sources, that Gallio was Proconsul in Achaea for only two years — A.D. 51-52. Paul was dragged before Gallio by the Jews of Corinth during the period. According to Luke, Paul was in Corinth for total of 18 months.

A few years later, Paul wrote two letters to the Corinthian church. The first was written in 56 A.D. In this letter, Paul reminds the Corinthians of two things he "delivered" to them — the Lord's Supper [1 Corinthians 11:23-26], and the reality of the resurrection [1 Corinthians 15:1-58].

We are able to extrapolate backwards from this date. This mission to Corinth happened in A.D. 49-51. This was in the middle of his *second* missionary journey with Silas. Prior to this, he had his *first* journey with Joseph Bar Nabas. Through all of this missionary activity, Paul repeatedly preached the physical resurrection of Jesus. This was his core belief, which was also affirmed by Peter and the other apostles. They were all proclaiming this within days of the event!

"For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then He appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me." [1 Corinthians 15:3-8]

How many eye-witnesses does it take to verify the event and convict people of its reality? Here we have over 500!

One of the classic answers from unbelievers is this: "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence." This is false. Evidence is evidence. All historical events, and all miracles, require the same kind evidence. The evidence of the resurrection comes from two sources — believers in Christ, and from unbelievers — the Jews in particular. Even Rabbis in the Talmud affirm it, claiming that it was act of sorcery. One rabbi even condemned Christ for having done it!

But what does this mean to us today? Paul states its importance in simple terms:

"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 with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved." [Romans 10:9-10.]

So—believe, and be saved.