

For centuries many of the world's distinguished philosophers have assaulted Christianity as being irrational, superstitious and absurd. Many have chosen simply to ignore the central issue of the resurrection. Others have tried to explain it away through various theories. But the historical evidence just can't be discounted.

A student at the University of Uruguay said to me. «Professor McDowell, why can't you refute Christianity?»

«For a very simple reason,» I answered. «I am not able to explain away an event in history — the resurrection of Jesus Christ.»

How can we explain the empty tomb? Can it possibly be accounted for by any natural cause?

A QUESTION OF HISTORY

After more than 700 hours of studying this subject, I have come to the conclusion that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the most remarkable fact of history.

Here are some of the facts relevant to the resurrection: Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish prophet who claimed to be the Christ prophesied in the Jewish Scriptures, was arrested, was judged a political criminal, and was crucified. Three days after His death and burial, some women who went to His tomb found the body gone. In subsequent weeks, His disciples claimed that God had raised Him from the dead and that He appeared to them various times before ascending into heaven.

From that foundation, Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire and has continued to exert great influence down through the centuries.

LIVING WITNESSES

The New Testament accounts of the resurrection were being circulated within the lifetimes of men and women alive at the time of the resurrection. Those people could certainly have confirmed or denied the accuracy of such accounts.

The writers of the four Gospels either had themselves been witnesses or else were relating the accounts of eyewitnesses of the actual events. In advocating their case for the gospel, a word that means «good news,» the apostles appealed (even when confronting their most severe opponents) to common knowledge concerning the facts of the resurrection.

F. F. Bruce, Rylands professor of biblical criticism and exegesis at the University of Manchester, says concerning the value of the New Testament records as primary sources: «Had there been any tendency to depart from the facts in any material respect, the possible presence of hostile witnesses in the audience would have served as a further corrective.»

IS THE NEW TESTAMENT RELIABLE?

Because the New Testament provides the primary historical source for information on the resurrection, many critics during the 19th century attacked the reliability of these biblical documents.

By the end of the 19th century, however, archaeological discoveries had confirmed the accuracy of the New Testament manuscripts. Discoveries of early papyri bridged the gap between the time of Christ and existing manuscripts from a later date.

Those findings increased scholarly confidence in the reliability of the Bible. William F. Albright, who in his day was the world's foremost biblical archaeologist, said: «We can already say emphatically that there is no longer any solid basis for dating any book of the New Testament after about A.D. 80, two full generations before the date between 130 and 150 given by the more radical New Testament critics of today.»

Coinciding with the papyri discoveries, an abundance of other manuscripts came to light (over 24,000 copies of early New Testament manuscripts are known to be in existence today). The historian Luke wrote of «authentic evidence» concerning the resurrection. Sir William Ramsay, who spent 15 years attempting to undermine Luke credentials as a historian, and to refute the reliability of the New Testament, finally concluded: «Luke is a historian of the first rank... This author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians.»

I claim to be an historian. My approach to Classics is historical. And I tell you that the evidence for the life, the death, and the resurrection of Christ is bet-

ter authenticated than most of the facts of ancient history...

The New Testament witnesses were fully aware of the background against which the resurrection took place. The body of Jesus, in accordance with Jewish burial custom, was wrapped in a linen cloth. About 100 pounds of aromatic spices, mixed together to form a gummy substance, were applied to the wrappings of cloth about the body. After the body was placed in a solid rock tomb, an extremely large stone was rolled against the entrance of the tomb. Large stones weighing approximately two tons were normally rolled (by means of levers) against a tomb entrance.

A Roman guard of strictly disciplined fighting men was stationed to guard the tomb. This guard affixed on the tomb the Roman seal, which was meant to

disciples of Christ did not go off to Athens or Rome to preach that Christ was raised from the dead. Rather, they went right back to the city of Jerusalem, where, if what they were teaching was false, the falsity would be evident. The empty tomb was «too notorious to be denied.» Paul Althaus states that the resurrection «could have not been maintained in Jerusalem for a single day, for a single hour, if the emptiness of the tomb had not been established as a fact for all concerned.»

Both Jewish and Roman sources and traditions admit an empty tomb. Those resources range from Josephus to a compilation of fifth-century Jewish writings called the «Toledoth Jeshu.» Dr. Paul Maier calls this «positive evidence from a hostile source, which is the strongest kind of historical evidence. In essence, this means that if a source admits a fact decidedly not in its favor, then that fact is genuine.»

Gamaliel, who was a member of the Jewish high court, the Sanhedrin, put forth the suggestion that the rise of the Christian movement was God's doing; he could not have done that if the tomb were still occupied, or if the Sanhedrin knew the whereabouts of Christ's body.

Paul Maier observes that «... if all the evidence is weighed carefully and fairly, it is indeed justifiable, according to the canons of historical research, to conclude that the sepulcher of Joseph of Arimathea, in which Jesus was buried, was actually empty on the morning of the first Easter. And no shred of evidence has yet been discovered in literary sources, epigraphy, or archaeology that would disprove this statement.»

FACT #3: LARGE STONE MOVED

On that Sunday morning the first thing that impressed the people who approached the tomb was the unusual position of the one and a half to two ton stone that had been lodged in front of the doorway. All the Gospel writers mention it.

There exists no document from the ancient world, witnessed by so excellent a set of textual and historical testimonies... Skepticism regarding the historical credentials of Christianity is based upon an irrational bias.

Those who observed the stone after the resurrection describe its position as having been rolled up a slope away not just from the entrance of the tomb, but from the entire massive sepulcher. It was in such a position that it looked as if it had been picked up and carried away. Now, I ask you, if the disciples had wanted to come in, tiptoe around the sleeping guards, and then roll the stone over and steal Jesus' body, how could they have done that without the guards' awareness?

FACT #4: ROMAN GUARD GOES AWOL

AWOL

The Roman guards fled. They left their place of responsibility. How can their attrition be explained, when Roman military discipline was so exceptional? Justin, in Digest #49, mentions all the offenses that required the death penalty. The fear of their superiors' wrath and the possibility of death meant that they paid close attention to the minutest details of their jobs. One way a guard was put to death was by being stripped of his clothes and then burned alive in a fire started with his garments. If it was not apparent which soldier had failed in his duty, then lots were drawn to see which one would be punished with death for the guard unit's failure. Certainly the entire unit would not have fallen asleep with that kind of threat over their heads. Dr. George Currie, a student of Roman military discipline, wrote that fear of punishment «produced flawless attention to duty, especially in the night watches.»

FACT #5: GRAVECLOTHES TELL A STORY

In a literal sense, against all statements to the contrary, the tomb was not totally empty — because of an amazing phenomenon. John, a disciple of Jesus, looked over to the place where the body of Jesus had lain, and there were the grave clothes, in the form of the body, slightly caved in and empty — like the empty chrysalis of a caterpillar's cocoon. That's enough to make a believer out of anybody. John never did get over it. The first thing that stuck in the minds of the disciples was not the empty tomb, but rather the empty grave clothes — undisturbed in form and position.



The Altar of the Crucifixion. There, according to the tradition, Jesus was crucified.

EVIDENCE FOR THE RESURRECTION



The Stone of the Anointing

«prevent any attempt at vandalizing the sepulcher. Anyone trying to move the stone from the tomb's entrance would have broken the seal and thus incurred the wrath of Roman law.

But three days later the tomb was empty. The followers of Jesus said He had risen from the dead. They reported that He appeared to them during a period of 40 days, showing Himself to them by many «infallible proofs.» Paul the apostle recounted that Jesus appeared to more than 500 of His followers at one time, the majority of whom were still alive and who could confirm what Paul wrote. So many security precautions were taken with the trial, crucifixion, burial, entombment, sealing, and guarding of Christ's tomb that it becomes very difficult for critics to defend their position that Christ did not rise from the dead. Consider these facts:

FACT #1: BROKEN ROMAN SEAL

As we have said, the first obvious fact was the breaking of the seal that stood for the power and authority of the Roman Empire. The consequences of breaking the seal were extremely severe. The FBI and CIA of the Roman Empire were called into action to find the man or men who were responsible. If they were apprehended, it meant automatic execution by crucifixion upside down. People feared the breaking of the seal. Jesus' disciples displayed signs of cowardice when they hid themselves. Peter, one of these disciples, went out and denied Christ three times.

FACT #2: EMPTY TOMB

As we have already discussed, another obvious fact after the resurrection was the empty tomb. The

