

Did the resurrection of Jesus really happen?

This past Sunday, Christians celebrated the resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We accept it as an article of faith, but did Jesus' resurrection really happen? How can we know for sure that he even existed?

Brilliant scholars, believers and skeptics alike, have grappled with questions about the fundamentals of our faith for centuries. Yet you don't have to be a theologian to take comfort in the basic facts of Jesus' story. Or even rely on the Bible for all the evidence.

Did Jesus really live?

A number of non-Christians, including Jewish historian Josephus and Roman historians Pliny the Younger and Tacitus, wrote in the first and second centuries about Jesus and the early church.

"Spiritual claims and beliefs aside, the existence of Jesus as a historic figure and a spiritual teacher are as clear as the existence of any other ancient figure," John S. Dickerson wrote in his book *Jesus Skeptic*. "Indeed, if a person will not admit the existence of Jesus based on this evidence then the same person would need to refute the existence of Socrates, Genghis Khan, Mohammed and most other historic figures."

Historians use the amount of time separating an account of an event from the event itself as a gauge of its reliability. Eyewitness accounts, generally the most reliable, can become less reliable as time passes, memories fade, and legends grow.

The Gospels, all written within one hundred years of Jesus' death, score well on this test. In contrast, Plutarch wrote *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, considered the most reliable early source of information about Alexander the Great, almost four centuries after his death.

Even Bart Ehrman, an expert on early Christianity at the University of North Carolina who considers himself an "agnostic atheist," believes Jesus was a historical figure. "There is no scholar in any college or university in the Western world who teaches classics, ancient history, New Testament, early Christianity, any related field who doubts that Jesus existed," he said.

How did Paul learn about Jesus?

Eyewitnesses passed on details of Jesus' life and teachings to the next generation of believers. Unlike the other apostles, Paul wasn't a follower of Jesus during his earthly ministry. But he did know people who were.

"As evidenced throughout his letters, Paul learned many historical facts and traditions about Jesus from Peter, James, and others who knew the historical Jesus," Justin W. Bass wrote in his book *The Bedrock of Christianity*.

In Galatians 1:18–19, Paul described visiting Jerusalem, staying for fifteen days with Peter, also known as Cephas, and seeing James, Jesus' brother. Bass wrote that this likely occurred within five years of Jesus' death, between AD 33 and 38.

We don't know what they discussed, but Bass believes that it's "very likely" that Paul received one of the earliest statements of Christian beliefs, which he cited 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 Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles"* (NIV).

Lee Strobel, who interviewed many biblical experts for his classic book, *The Case for Christ*, concluded that this creed originated within months of the crucifixion, and Bass believes that is likely as well.

Some scholars think Paul received these fundamentals of the faith in Damascus, not Jerusalem, after his conversion. But there is little dispute about their significance. Theologian N. T. Wright called these beliefs "unalterable Christian bedrock." Paul himself said they were "of first importance."

Was Jesus really crucified?

Although 1 Corinthians 15:3–7 does not specifically mention Jesus' crucifixion, several early non-Christian sources, including Josephus, confirmed it, leaving little room for debate.

The late German New Testament scholar Gerd Lüdemann, an atheist, admitted, "Jesus' death as a consequence of crucifixion is indisputable."

But scholars disagree, as you might imagine, about the most important fact of all: the resurrection. Nothing could be more fundamental to the Christian faith, or more significant to every person on the planet.

The late theologian James Dunn compared the resurrection in importance to the creation of the universe: "The resurrection of Jesus is not so much a historical fact as a foundational fact or meta-fact, the interpretative insight into reality which enables discernment of the relative importance and unimportance of all other facts."

No one witnessed Jesus emerging from his tomb in the Bible, unlike the resurrection of Lazarus in John 11:44. But the Bible says Jesus' tomb was empty when "Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome" came to embalm him (Mark 16:1–6).

"We can be pretty certain that Jesus' body was nowhere to be found when his followers began proclaiming he had risen from the dead," Bass wrote. "If the location of Jesus' corpse was known to the authorities or anyone else in Jerusalem, it seems incredible

that this movement would have even lasted a day.”

Skeptics have suggested that the body could have been stolen from the tomb. Ehrman, the “agnostic atheist,” dismissed biblical accounts of sightings of the resurrected Jesus as hallucinations or visions.

But Ehrman also acknowledged in *How Jesus Became God* that “there can be no doubt, historically, that some of Jesus’ followers came to believe he was raised from the dead—no doubt whatsoever.”

They not only believed in a risen savior; they were willing to die for him, beginning a movement that has changed the course of history.

Theologian J. P. Moreland called it “the final evidence” in *The Case for Christ*: “It’s the ongoing encounter with the resurrected Christ that happens all over the world, in every culture, to people from all kinds of backgrounds and personalities—well educated and not, rich and poor, thinkers and feelers, men and women. They all will testify that more than any single thing in their lives, Jesus Christ has changed them.”

To borrow a line from an old hymn that puts it in more personal terms, “You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart.”