

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

A REVOLUTIONARY REBORN

Acts 26:4-18, 22-25

By

Steven J. Cole

Easter Sunday

April 15, 2001

© Steven J. Cole, 2001

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture
Quotations are from the New American
Standard Bible, © The Lockman Foundation

April 15, 2001
Easter Sunday Message

A Revolutionary Reborn
Acts 26:4-18, 22-25

The Macedonian world-conqueror, Alexander the Great, approached a strongly fortified walled city with a small company of his soldiers. Alexander insisted that the king of the city surrender the city and its contents to this small band of fighting men.

The king laughed, "Why should I surrender to you? You can't do us any harm."

Alexander offered to give the king a demonstration. He ordered his men to line up single file and start marching. He marched them straight toward a sheer cliff. The townspeople gathered on the wall and watched in shocked silence as, one by one, Alexander's soldiers marched without hesitation right off the cliff to their deaths! After ten soldiers had died, Alexander ordered the rest of his men to return to his side.

The townspeople and the king immediately surrendered to Alexander the Great without a battle. They realized that if his men were actually willing to commit suicide at the command of this dynamic leader, then nothing could stop his eventual victory.

If I had lived in that day, I think I would have volunteered to be one of Alexander's fighting men. Total commitment to a cause worth dying for is in my blood. I was committed whatever the cost to preserve my fatherland and its traditions against those whom I thought were undermining it. I pursued that commitment with the zeal and tactics of a revolutionary.

As I saw it, the followers of the new sect called "The Way" had to be eliminated. There was no room for compromise. I searched out their names and addresses and entered their homes with my guards. We bound with chains both men and women who refused to recant their views and dragged them off to prison. Seeing their children crying as their parents were hauled out the door only made me think, "It serves them right, the dirty traitors!" We commanded many of them to be whipped with the 39 lashes, which left their backs torn into ribbons of bleeding flesh. Others

were put to death with my approval. Many tried to escape, but I tracked them down with a vengeance, even to foreign cities.

It was while I was engaged in such activities that I had an unforgettable experience that radically changed the direction of my life. In fact, because of that experience, I went down in history not as a Pharisaic Jew named Saul of Tarsus, but as a committed Christian known as the apostle Paul. The event that changed the course of my life was when I saw the risen Lord Jesus Christ, whose resurrection you celebrate on this day.

It was the irrefutable fact of the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah that convinced me that I must surrender my life to Him. In fact, I would be so bold as to say that if Jesus is not risen from the dead, then the Christian faith is a worthless waste of time and you would do better to be a hedonist, living for the pleasures of this world (1 Cor. 15:17, 19, 32). If Jesus is not risen, then He is only a dead Jewish teacher and not the Messiah at all. He would only be a mere man, not the Savior of men, if He were not risen. But He is risen! There is solid evidence to prove that He is risen. I am here today to communicate a simple but life-changing message to you:

Because there is solid evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, you should respond with trust and surrender to His claims.

1. There is solid evidence for the resurrection of Jesus.

I want to share with you four lines of evidence that lend solid support to the fact that Jesus is risen:

- A. The prophetic Scriptures show that Jesus is risen.

The Jewish Scriptures prophesied that the Messiah would be killed and then raised from the dead. I had studied those Scriptures for years under Gamaliel in Jerusalem, but I had missed what they were saying. I admit that I was caught up with the notion of a political Messiah, which was prevalent in my day. The thought of a suffering Messiah was repugnant to me. But the prophets clearly taught that Messiah would suffer and die for the sins of His people. For example, Isaiah wrote (53:4-12)

Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgres-

sions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.

He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth. By oppression and judgment He was taken away; and as for His generation, who considered that He was cut off out of the land of the living, for the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due? His grave was assigned with wicked men, yet He was with a rich man in His death, because He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth.

But the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render Himself as a guilt offering, He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, and the good pleasure of the Lord will prosper in His hand. As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; by His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities. Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, and He will divide the booty with the strong; because He poured out Himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet He Himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors.

The death of Messiah is so clear there, I don't see how I previously missed it. And, obviously He would be raised from the dead, or He would never see the "result of the anguish of His soul" and "be satisfied," as the prophet states.

In his sermon on the Day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter had cited Psalm 16, where David says, "Because You will not abandon my soul to Hades, nor allow Your Holy One to undergo decay" (Acts 2:27). Peter insisted that David was writing about His descendant, the Messiah, whom God would not allow to undergo decay. He claimed that Jesus was the Messiah, and that he and the other apostles were witnesses of the fact that God had raised Him from the dead.

Being a devout Jew, I was there in Jerusalem for that Feast. I heard Peter's words, but I thought, "He's wrong! It can't be! That uneducated Galilean doesn't know what he's talking about!" It was so opposed to all that I was living for at that time!

But as I later came to see, the simple message of the gospel, that Christ died for our sins and was buried and raised the third day was all "according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3-4). And so to this day, I testify to all "nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place; that the Christ was to suffer, and that by reason of His resurrection from the dead He would be the first to proclaim light both to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles" (Acts 26:22-23). That Jesus fulfilled all these prophecies that were written about His death and resurrection hundreds of years before His birth is an impressive evidence of the truth of His resurrection.

B. The empty tomb shows that Jesus is risen.

There was no question on either side about the stubborn fact that the tomb was empty. If Jesus' body had still been in the tomb, when Peter and the others began proclaiming that He was risen, we could have silenced them very easily by producing the body. But, the Jewish leaders did not have Jesus' body.

Instead, they argued that the disciples had stolen Jesus' body from the tomb while the Roman guards were asleep (Matt. 28:11-15). I bought that line of reasoning for a while. But if you think about it, it doesn't make sense. There are several reasons why the disciples could not have moved Jesus' body:

- Much precaution was taken to secure the tomb against theft. The Roman guard and the Roman seal on the tomb would have prevented any grave robbing.
- The disciples were too depressed and confused to try anything as bold as grave robbery from a guarded tomb.
- If the soldiers were sleeping, how could they know that the disciples stole the body?
- The soldiers would not have fallen asleep on watch. The penalty for that was instant death.

- The stone at the tomb was large and heavy. Even if the soldiers had been sleeping, the noise of a group of men moving the stone would have awakened them.
- If the disciples somehow, perhaps through bribery, had removed the body, they would not later have gone about preaching the resurrection.

Thus the empty tomb, as I later came to think about it, is a powerful evidence of Jesus' bodily resurrection.

- C. The changed lives of the witnesses show that Jesus is risen.

If the Jews or the soldiers or the disciples had stolen Jesus' body, then there is no way to explain the dramatic change in the lives of those who claimed that He arose from the dead. None of them were expecting a resurrection. They were confused and frightened. They all doubted the earliest reports that He was risen. And yet after this they all were transformed into the bold witnesses that you read about in the Book of Acts, many of whom gave their lives for their faith.

I personally saw many of them refuse to renounce their faith in the risen Jesus under threat of physical harm and imprisonment. But none made such an impression on me as Stephen did. A number of us debated him publicly over these matters, but we were not able to cope with his wisdom and power. It was as if God's Spirit was speaking through him! We had some men bring false witness against him and then put him on trial, thinking that he would soften his message (Acts 6:9-14). But instead, he accused us of crucifying God's Messiah!

That was too much! The council pounced on that blasphemer, dragged him out of the city, and stoned him to death. I held their coats and watched with approval as the rocks smashed him to death. But there were two things about that incident that I couldn't get out of my mind. First, while we were still in the council chambers, just before the elders rushed upon Stephen to drag him outside, he looked up into heaven with his face looking like the face of an angel (I saw it!) and said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56). Then, second, as he was being stoned, Stephen's last words just

before his death were, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" Then he said, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" That disturbed me! It was as if Stephen was talking directly to the risen Jesus!

From that day on, I was furious in my persecution of the Christians (Acts 8:3; 26:11). I felt that it was my duty to prove that this sect was wrong. I was breathing threats and murder against all the followers of Jesus (9:1). But deep down inside, Stephen's witness haunted me. I thought, "What if it might be true? No, it couldn't be! But, what if it is?" Then I received personally the fourth line of evidence, which was for me at the time the first and most convincing proof that Jesus is risen.

D. Eyewitness testimony shows that Jesus is risen.

Some of the Christians whom I imprisoned claimed to have seen the risen Jesus. Stephen also made that claim, as I mentioned. The apostles did, too. But I didn't believe them.

Then, as I was going to Damascus with orders from the high priest to extradite any runaway Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial, a blinding light from heaven knocked me down. Just before I went blind, I saw the risen Lord Jesus and heard Him speak to me (9:3-9, 17, 27). I could no longer deny it. Jesus really was risen from the dead!

Later I had occasion to talk with Peter and James, the half-brother of Jesus, about their contact with Him after His resurrection. I also learned that He had appeared to over 500 of His followers at one time, and I have spoken with many of them (1 Cor. 15:5-7). The eyewitness accounts were too varied and too many to explain away. And there was certainly no way that I could explain away my encounter with the risen Lord Jesus. Add it up and you will conclude that the eyewitness testimony is strong evidence that Jesus is risen!

If we had time, I could mention more reasons to persuade you. But these four lines of evidence—the prophetic Scriptures, the empty tomb, the changed lives of the witnesses, and the eyewitness testimony—are overwhelmingly convincing that Jesus is risen. He was crucified, but the grave could not contain Him. He rose again on the third day, just as He said that He would. Because there is such solid evidence to support the resurrection, ...

2. You should respond with trust and surrender to the claims of the resurrected Christ.

Jesus made amazing claims during His earthly ministry. He said, "He who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life" (John 5:24). He said, "For this is the will of My Father, that every one who beholds the Son, and believes in Him, may have eternal life; and I Myself will raise him up in the last day" (John 6:40). I could go on and on quoting such amazing claims. These claims demand a response.

- A. You should respond with trust to Christ's claims.

What does it mean to believe in or trust Jesus Christ? It means that you count His promises as true. You depend on Him and what He did when He died on the cross as your only means for eternal life. You do not trust in your own efforts or good works to save you, as I once did when I was a proud Pharisee. You depend only on Jesus' death as your substitute for your sin.

You trust Him as you would trust a surgeon when you allow him to operate on you. You trust Him as you would trust a lawyer to defend you in court. You trust Him as you would trust a bridge to hold you up as you go across a deep chasm. You do not rely on yourself at all. You rely totally on Him as your only hope for forgiveness of sins and eternal life. But also, ...

- B. You should respond with surrender to His claims.

When Jesus appeared to me on that Damascus road, I asked, "What shall I do, Lord?" He said, "Go into Damascus; and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do" (22:10). I did what He said then, and I have been doing what He says from that time on. What else can you do when you've been struck blind? At that point, you know who is Lord, and it isn't you!

But it was not only my fear of the risen Jesus who struck me blind for those three days that caused me to surrender my life to Him. It was also His abundant love and grace. He rightly could have struck me dead for the crimes that I had done to His people. But He showed me love and mercy instead. How could I walk away from such abundant love?

But it is possible! Some to whom I've proclaimed the good news of the risen Savior have not responded with trust and surrender. Some reject the offer of forgiveness of their sins with various excuses. For example, Festus, the Roman governor, said that I was crazy (26:2-25). I think that he was convicted of his sin and had to say something to escape the compelling evidence of my argument. King Agrippa tried to use humor to shrug off the truth, saying, "In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian" (26:28). I think that he was embarrassed in front of Festus, even though he sensed the truth of my testimony. Being a man of wealth and power, he probably felt that to surrender his life to Jesus would have been too costly. And so he walked away from the truth.

In my experience, those who do not respond with trust and surrender to the risen Savior are not lacking in evidence that He is the truth. Rather, they don't want to turn from their sins and live under the Lordship of Jesus. But that's irrational. When you see who Jesus really is, the risen Lord of all, bowing before Him as Lord is the only reasonable option.

Conclusion

In the nineteenth century, two young lawyers in England thought that they had good reasons for rejecting Christianity. They thought that only two things supported the foundation of the Christian faith: the alleged resurrection of Jesus and the alleged conversion of the apostle Paul. One of the men, Gilbert West, decided to write a book showing that Jesus never could have risen from the dead. The other man, Lord Lyttleton, said that he would write on the alleged appearance of Jesus to the apostle Paul. He would show that Paul could never have been converted as the Bible reports.

Some time later they met again, and one said to the other, "I am afraid I have a confession to make. I have been looking into the evidence for this story, and I have begun to think that maybe there is something to it." The other said, "The same thing has happened to me."

In the end, after they had done their investigations and written their books, each had come out on exactly the opposite side of when he began. Gilbert West wrote a book, *The Resurrection of Jesus*,

arguing that it is a fact of history. Lyttleton had written a defense entitled *Conversion of St. Paul*. Both men had come to believe in the truth of the biblical accounts (James Boice, *Tabletalk* [4/92], p. 30).

How about you? Have you seriously considered the evidence? There are solid reasons to support the fact that Jesus is risen bodily from the dead. Have you shrugged off the evidence because you don't want to face the implications for your own life? Yes, it would radically alter the direction of your life! You would have to give up your pursuit of sinful pleasure. You would have to follow Jesus wherever He directs you to go. You would have to do what He tells you to do. But He would replace your futile pursuit of happiness with solid joy and lasting pleasure that only those who follow Him know, both for time and for eternity.

Each of you is trusting in something for your eternal destiny. To trust in yourself or your good deeds is completely inadequate. The risen Lord Jesus asks you to trust Him to forgive your sins and to give you eternal life and to surrender to Him as the Lord of your life. He could rightly judge you on the spot for your sins, but in His grace, He offers you a full pardon and eternal life at His expense, because of His great love. The risen Lord who transformed the revolutionary Saul of Tarsus into the apostle Paul can transform your life as well.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it essential to base our faith on the fact of the resurrection rather than on subjective feelings?
2. What is the strongest evidence for the resurrection in your mind? What are some other evidences not mentioned in the message?
3. Some say that you can accept Christ as Savior without following Him as Lord. Why is this not a biblical option?
4. Is the main reason that people reject Christ a lack of evidence or the love of their own sin? Discuss?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2001, All Rights Reserved.