

4. Resurrection! - you're kidding, surely?

I was interested to read the words of British journalist Mark Tully. He had been revisiting the scene of Jesus' life to interview people for a BBC TV series on Jesus. He ended with his own view in which he said Jesus 'taught in strange riddles. He didn't convince his fellow Jews. And he didn't overthrow Rome. From that failure I have come to what, for me, is the most important conclusion of all. That the hardest ... article of Christian faith, the resurrection, must have happened. If there had been no miracle after Jesus' death, there would've been no grounds for faith... No resurrection ... no church.'

But since you may still be wondering if it really can be true, let's try to imagine what all the other possibilities are. Perhaps the first idea that occurs to you is that, hey, perhaps Jesus never actually died in the first place. Could it be that in the cool of the tomb He revived? Well that would mean that the execution crew of Roman soldiers that day, with the centurion in charge of them, somehow got it wrong. But they wouldn't have dared to leave anything to chance, not in this politically-charged case. They were experienced professionals, they knew their job well, grim though it was. Although they didn't feel the need to break Jesus' legs - they were so sure that He was already well and truly dead - they did certify Him dead by thrusting a spear into His side and drawing blood and water in a separated mass: the evidence of death.

Next, Joseph of Arimathea took charge of the burial in typical Jewish fashion. After the body was washed, it was wrapped foot to head in linen grave clothes. Then, because it was the custom, what they did was apply aloe and myrrh - a really gooey tree resin. In this way the grave-clothes were in a very real sense glued on the body. With the spices these grave-clothes weighed as much as a hundred pounds (John 19:39)! And then, of course, there was the small matter of a two-ton stone rolled against the mouth of the rock-hewn tomb, which the authorities had had sealed and guarded with soldiers. With so many people that day wanting Him dead and buried, and with all the precautions that were taken, first to establish death, and then to secure the tomb itself, it's simply beyond belief that Jesus somehow revived and escaped.

Okay then, someone might say: 'But isn't it possible that the followers of Jesus who reported the empty tomb on the third day, the women folk, actually went to the wrong tomb - after all, they were in a state of shock? They went to a different tomb by mistake and it so happened that that tomb was empty. Think about it - how could anyone mistake the tomb of someone who was really important to them, especially when that tomb had been sealed and further identified by having an armed guard posted at it! In any case, they recognised the grave-clothes lying just as they'd left them in the now empty tomb.

Suppose the body was stolen then. If the culprits were supposed to be Jesus' disciples, then they'd first have needed to overpower the guards. The authorities had taken effective measures against exactly this kind of thing being attempted. But even if you were to persist in thinking this might still have happened, what we would then have to believe is that the disciples would later be martyred for something that they knew full well was a lie, a hoax. Someone might die for something false if they sincerely believe it to be true. But that's not the situation here. What we're having to suppose in this theory is that the very people who fabricated the evidence gave their lives for their own made-up lie - not very realistic.

And if either the Jews or the Romans had contrived the disappearance of the body of Jesus, then at anytime afterwards, they could've killed off this annoying new upstart religion by simply producing the body and parading it down the main street of Jerusalem. But what possible motive would they have for stealing the body in the first place?

There again you might say it was all in the mind of these early disciples. It was mere wish-fulfilment, or perhaps it was an illusion - you know those alleged appearances of Jesus in resurrection. After all, there are some weird enough stories around today that someone somewhere knows someone who thinks they saw Elvis on some porch in Hawaii.

Doesn't fit the evidence either. The disciples don't seem to have had the remotest thought of any such thing as resurrection, despite the fact Jesus had given them clues earlier. After the shock of Jesus' being taken and crucified, they were in disarray and depression. Without any prospect of anything beyond, they went through with performing the full Jewish burial ritual. Yes, they really expected then that Jesus was going to stay dead. When the news of His resurrection broke and He began to appear to them, they were slow to leave their state of disbelief. Nor were Jesus' resurrection appearances fleeting, isolated visions claimed only to have been seen by a few. No, within a few weeks hundreds of people had seen Him alive. But you know what the most significant thing of all for me is? It's the transformation that then took place in the lives of these previously demoralized followers.

At first they thought Jesus had been defeated. It reminds me of how Wellington's victory over Napoleon at Waterloo was announced in England on the 18th June, 1815. It was by a system of flag signals from the tower of Winchester Cathedral. The message was spelt out letter by letter. Onlookers read WELLINGTON DEFEATED... before a dense fog rolled in and they lost sight of the flags. The incomplete message spread gloom and despair all the way to London. When the fog finally lifted all the flags were now visible and the full message read: WELLINGTON DEFEATED THE ENEMY. The good news spread like wildfire and lifted the people from gloom to gladness. That story closely parallels the story of the great battle that took place on the cross 2000 years ago when Jesus Christ endured 3 hours of suffering and then death, while bearing the punishment for our sins. From Friday evening gloom descended over Jesus followers. As they dealt with His body the message really seemed to them to be reading: JESUS DEFEATED. But come Sunday morning the gloom had lifted - there was the empty tomb: the full message was JESUS DEFEATED THE ENEMY. That wasn't only good news then - it is for us now! - for He was dying to pay for our sins. 'The wages of sin is death' but Jesus Christ has defeated death. God invites us to share the victory of His Son. How? He 'commands all ... to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.' God gives fair warning then, and the opportunity to escape if we turn to Him and 'Confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, [and] you will be saved.'

Lawyers who're in the business of studying evidence declare themselves satisfied with it. A Professor of Modern History says: '...I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better and fuller evidence of every sort, to the understanding of a fair enquirer, than that Christ died and rose again from the dead.' This evidence is demanding a verdict from you.