

# How do we Know it Happened?

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 17 April 2022

Preacher: Joe Hall

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Oh man. Well, today we are celebrating. And what are we celebrating? Well, on Sunday and on Easter Sunday, in particular, Christians around the world remember and celebrate that 2,000 years ago, a man who said he would rise again from the dead did rise again from the dead, Jesus Christ. And we believe that resurrection confirms for us all that he said about who he was and what he'd come to do, that he was God's son come to save us. But for us to celebrate that, Jesus' resurrection, there's something we need to know at first, isn't there?

Is it really true? Did it really happen? Did he rise from the dead? Perhaps you're visiting this morning, I don't know what you think about church, about religion, but I think we're often told that religion is all about just having nice ideas to kind of get us through a messy and complicated world. There's good in the world. We human beings have value, that God is in control, that he's guiding everything that happens. And those things are true. But Christianity at heart isn't about nice ideas.

Christianity at heart is a claim that things have happened in our world and our world has never been the same since. Because everything we believe, it stands or falls on whether or not 2,000 years ago, Jesus rose from the dead. And either that happened or it didn't happen. And if he didn't, well, it doesn't matter what we think, does it? Our faith is worse than useless. The Bible itself says that.

But if Jesus did rise again, then our faith is true. It has changed our world. It does change our lives. And we have every reason to celebrate today in the presence of God. And so, if you're not a Christian, if you wouldn't call yourself a Christian here today, we're so glad that you're here with us to think through the resurrection, maybe even for the first time. And we do hope and pray that you would find it life-changing. And if we are Christians today as we are here, it's a great opportunity for us to revisit this wonderful event, the facts that surround it, and to renew our confidence in who Jesus is, in where we stand with God. Because Christianity all comes down to this one question, did God raise Jesus from the dead? That's our hypothesis. It's what Jesus said he would do.

And now we need to know if he did. And so, this morning, I'm going to invite us to put our dear stalker hats on, get our pipes out, and become detectives investigating this claim. And to do that, we're going to turn to one of the best sources of evidence out there, which is Matthew's gospel.

[ 3 : 29 ] Now, Matthew was one of Jesus' first followers. He was there when these things happened, and he wrote an eyewitness report of what he saw, the life of Jesus. There are four accounts like this in the Bible, each written by someone different, and yet we find they confirm the same things about Jesus' life and death and resurrection. And as strange, perhaps, as this sounds, and as it does sound strange to many, many people in the world today, when we look at the evidence, we find that every other answer ends up being less believable, less reasonable than the real answer, which is that Jesus really did rise again from the dead. And so, Matthew, in the section we read together, gives us seven pieces of evidence that we'll look at briefly together to help us see that for ourselves this morning. And the first evidence he gives us is the burial, the burial. Now, Matthew tells us, doesn't he, after Jesus had died, a man named Joseph went to the governor, Pontius Pilate, asked for Jesus' body to be taken down from the cross. The governor says, yes, takes the body down, gives it to Joseph, and Joseph wraps the body and buries it in the tomb. Now, back then, bodies were not buried in a grave, dug out of the soil. They were buried in tombs carved out of stone. And Matthew tells us there that Joseph put Jesus' body in his own brand new tomb that he had carved out of the rock. Now, that might not sound like an important clue, but it tells us two important things. Firstly, it tells us that Jesus was really dead.

Okay, Joseph didn't steal the body. He didn't try to hide it. He went through this proper process. And the governor would have had to be convinced that Jesus was well and truly dead before taking him down from the cross. Okay, the soldiers themselves would have had to handle the body of Jesus as they took him down. And Joseph personally wrapped his body. And so, we know there's no way Jesus could have still been alive when he came down from the cross and when he was laid in the tomb. They would have known straight away, wouldn't they, if he had still been living. And that's important because some people say, well, that's the obvious answer, isn't it? Jesus didn't really rise from the dead because, of course, he was never really dead in the first place. His resurrection was nothing but a magic trick. But the way he was buried, it rules out that option straight away.

And what's more, it's unlikely that Matthew would have invented these details around the burial because Joseph was hardly the most likely undertaker for Jesus. Here, another gospel tells us that this guy Joseph was actually part of the very council who had decided to put Jesus to death in the first place. So, if Matthew just wanted to invent a good story to convince people, well, surely he would have chosen one of Jesus' friends to do the burial, not this guy Joseph. But the second thing the burial tells us is exactly which tomb the body of Jesus was laid in. Hey, Joseph would have been in no doubt which tomb he'd put Jesus in because he'd carved it freshly out of the rock. You imagine how much work would have gone into that, how much it would have cost. You don't get a new house built, do you, and then wander up and down the street wondering which house it was that you had built. So, Joseph could hardly have forgotten, could he, where he'd put Jesus' body, which tomb it was, or confused it for a different tomb a few days later. And so, the burial hopefully rules out another option that people have put forward, that in fact, the empty tomb they came back to wasn't the same tomb that they'd put Jesus in in the first place.

But again, the burial rules that out, doesn't it? There was no sleight of hand, okay, no body switching, tomb swapping. And on top of that, two people were there to see all of it happen. Okay, we're not just asked to take Matthew's word for it. So, this is our second piece of evidence, the witnesses.

I wonder if you noticed as we read, there were two women there the whole time. Okay, the two Marys, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, were sitting opposite the tomb when he was buried.

[ 8 : 30 ] And then at the start of chapter 28, the same women go to look at the tomb, don't they? They look into the empty tomb, and then, verse 8, the same women hurried away from the tomb, and they run into Jesus himself. Now, these witnesses are important because at the time, in Jewish law, no evidence would be accepted in court unless there were two witnesses to back it up.

And our system works in basically the same way, doesn't it, today? Witnesses are called to give their evidence. If the evidence lines up, then it stands. The witnesses agree. And Matthew wants us to know there were two people who saw all this happen, okay, all the way from Jesus' death, all the way through his resurrection. Now, sometimes people kind of write off the Gospels, thinking that it's kind of myth or fiction, or maybe based on hearsay, stories passed on that just got blown up and exaggerated over time. But Matthew's evidence isn't like that. It's based on eyewitness testimony of people who were actually there to see it. And again, there's no way that Matthew would have made that up because of who these witnesses are. I said earlier, there's back in the Jewish law in court, nothing could stand without two witnesses. But at the time, only if those witnesses were men. At the time, women were not allowed to give evidence because people considered them untrustworthy witnesses. And now, thankfully, now we know better than that. But back then, if Matthew was inventing a story to try to convince people that this was true, well, naturally, he would have chosen two men, not two women.

So there's no good reason for these two Marys to be part of the story unless, unless they were really the ones who were there, unless they had really seen it for themselves firsthand. So these witnesses give us good reason to think Matthew is a trustworthy writer, recording what really happened on those three days. But our third piece of evidence is not only that Jesus' friends saw this, but also Jesus' enemies, they wanted to be sure of the truth too. Yes, this is the third piece of evidence, the guard.

Now, the authorities were trying their very hardest to stop people from following Jesus. But in the process, they actually help us because in their concern to stop Jesus' body being stolen, well, they rule out that possibility for us altogether. They remembered Jesus had repeatedly said three days after he had died, he would rise again. And even though the rulers didn't believe he would rise, they were worried that his followers would come and steal the body from the tomb and then spread the rumor that he had risen, in fact. Notice as we go through, by the way, that these people, they were not kind of stupid, were they? Sometimes we can imagine that just because we live in the year 2022, that we are less easily taken in than people were 2,000 years ago. But these guys know the difference, don't they, between truth and lies. And they wanted to stop lies spreading. They were cynical about Jesus rising again, and they were ready to prove that they knew better. And so they go to the governor, and the governor says, make the tomb as secure as you know how. Lock it down. So they put a seal on the stone, and they set a guard outside of the tomb. Now I had to look this up to be sure, but the seal they put on the stone, it isn't sealant. Okay, they didn't make it watertight or put some kind of cement around it to stop it being opened. No, it's saying they stamped an official mark on it. Okay, like a king might put his seal on a royal letter. And while that might not sound that much more secure, well, it said to everyone, whoever messes with this tomb is messing with the wrong people. In that day, no one wanted to cross this religious mafia. They had all kinds of money and power at their disposal. And so you would think twice before going and messing with that tomb, wouldn't you? No one's going to fight armed guards and move that stone. At least of all, Jesus terrified followers who haven't been seen for three days because they ran away at the first sign of trouble. So now picture the scene of this tomb where Jesus is. His body is in a hollowed out rock with a great big stone in front of it, the royal seal on it, and a guard standing outside it. And today we would say, you know, it's been padlocked, bolted, triple locked with barbed wire, security guards, and CCTV. No one's getting in there, and no one is getting out. The two Marys are certainly not going to pull this off.

And so while the authorities are trying to frustrate Jesus' plans, they really actually help us by ruling out yet another option in this investigation that Jesus' body was stolen to deceive everyone.

[ 14 : 27 ] That just was not going to happen. Which brings us to our fourth and perhaps most important piece of evidence, which is the empty tomb. Now, even if you've come this far, perhaps this is the bit where the investigation begins to fall apart for you. An angel comes, we read, from God to roll the stone away from the tomb. Now, maybe you're thinking, if angels were involved, okay, there's no way it can be true.

I'm out. But hold that thought a minute and remember what it is we're investigating, whether a man came back from the dead. Okay, if we were investigating a speeding ticket, then I would agree, seeing an angel would be a pretty bad excuse. But if we're asking whether Jesus rose from the dead, and the answer is, yes, he did, well then things like this are not that crazy, are they? God, angels, the supernatural become perfectly possible and real. If you presuppose that angels are not real, then you are already assuming that Jesus didn't rise from the dead. But if he did rise from the dead, then the angel really doesn't pose a problem. And so, if the angel is a problem for you, let me suggest that you just press pause on that, set it to one side, and wait to see first whether the resurrection happened, and then make your mind up about the angel. Okay, in any case, the point is simply to show that what happened to Jesus' body was the work of God and not people. The angel stunned the guards into shock, rolled away the tomb in front, the stone in front of the tomb, and sat down on it. And notice that the reason the angel does that, it's not so that Jesus could come out, it's so that the two Marys could go in and see that the tomb was already empty. The angel says to them, don't be afraid, I know that you're looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, he is risen, just as he said, come and see the place where he lay.

So, the two women have seen it with their own eyes. Jesus' body is no longer dead in his tomb. The tomb was empty. And however anyone tries to explain that, this is the bit that no one can deny, that there was no body in the tomb when they opened it. Because if the body had been in the tomb, well, Christianity would have been over before it had even started. Okay, if there had been a body to show, nobody could have said that there was any resurrection. But when the stone was rolled back, the tomb that Jesus had been laid in was found totally empty. And no body was ever found.

And now we find out why that was. Fifthly, then, the encounter. The encounter. Understandably, the two Marys are afraid. They've seen an angel, they've seen an empty tomb. They run to tell the others, but they're stopped in their tracks by none other than Jesus himself. Greetings, says the Lord.

Women come to him, they take hold of his feet, and they worship him. These witnesses, they saw not only an empty tomb, but they saw and they heard and they touched with their own hands the resurrected body of the Lord Jesus. Now, in a sense, this should be case closed, shouldn't it? But if you're wondering, how do we know that encounter really happened? Well, we know it happened because of what changed as a result. Because of that word we see at the end of verse 9, Matthew says, they worshipped Jesus. They worshipped him. For these Jewish women, Jewish people, including Matthew, who's writing this, only God is rightly to be worshipped. But here, Matthew was happy to write that the women worshipped Jesus. And that is an unimaginable change in the way that these people thought of God and worshipped him. Something has so obviously shifted. And the only reasonable reason for that massive and unthinkable change would have been that they had seen Jesus back from the dead.

[ 19 : 23 ] Only the resurrection is big enough to have changed the way that these people came to God, worshipped him, and even who they worshipped, not only God the Father, but now also Jesus Christ, the Son of God. You're worshipping God. It's too big a thing for these people to have messed around with or lied about. But they changed it. And the only obvious explanation is that they saw this man back from the dead and understood this meant that his claim to be God on earth was true. They worshipped him for it. Now that changes how we know that they really encountered him, because they would not have worshipped him otherwise. But the sixth piece of evidence comes from the way his enemies reacted to this, the cover-up, the cover-up. So as the women run from the tomb, they run from their encounter with Jesus, Jesus' opponents try to stop Jesus being followed and worshipped. And as we saw before, they only give us more reason, don't they, to follow and worship him. Because as the women run into the city to tell the good news, the guards wake up, they shake themselves down, and they go and tell the leaders everything that happened. And in return, they get a big chunk of money to keep quiet about it. So the twist in the end is that the guards who were sent to stop the body of Jesus from being stolen so that lies couldn't be spread, now spread that lie that the body had been stolen. And we saw how impossible that would have been, such strong security around the tomb.

So why would the rulers wanted to have spread that lie? About something so implausible, something so embarrassing for them? Well, because for them, the lie was still better than the truth. If Jesus really rose from the dead, these people would lose everything. Their power, their wealth, their status were built on a religious system that would have been torn apart if someone had been resurrected. Okay, so they have everything to lose from the resurrection, and so they deny it even in the face of all the evidence. Now, you might think, well, Jesus' disciples, didn't they have everything to gain from the resurrection? So why believe them either? But if we flip the question around and ask, well, why would the disciples have wanted to lie about Jesus' resurrection? Well, the answer isn't really that obvious. Jesus' first followers didn't gain power, wealth, status by becoming Christians and following a risen Lord. In fact, they lost everything.

I've got a picture up, I think, to show you. This is a piece of graffiti that was found in a classroom in Rome. There's nothing new under the sun, is there? And people think this comes from about 150 years after Matthew wrote his gospel. And I don't know if you can see, it shows a person standing on the left with his hand raised, and on the right is what looks like a man who's been crucified with the head of a donkey, and the words say, Alexia Menos worships his God. And it's thought that this is an everyday example of what people at the time thought of Christians, that their God is a pathetic and weak crucified man, less than human. His followers are fools to worship him. In worldly terms, ridicule and bullying and persecution is what these women and Jesus' followers gained by believing in his resurrection. Most of his first followers, Matthew himself, has said were killed in horrific ways for telling people that Jesus was alive again. So why would they have wanted to lie about the resurrection? What would they have gained from that lie? Well, surely nothing worth lying for.

The only reason these people had to believe Jesus was back from the dead is that they were convinced it had really happened. And so, friends, if we had to ask ourselves, who are we going to trust? The powerful rulers who had everything to lose, or these poor women who had nothing to gain? Well, surely it's the women and not the rulers. In fact, the lie that the rulers spread only confirms what we've seen, that they couldn't produce a body. Even to this day, says Matthew, some 40 years later, they couldn't show us a body.

Meaning that there is still no hard evidence whatsoever, and never has been, for the claim that Jesus' followers might have stolen the body from the tomb. And so, to sum up the situation, a dead man is buried in a secure tomb. Three days later, the tomb is opened and the body is gone.

[ 24 : 59 ] People see Jesus alive again and begin to worship him. Okay, these are the facts, and no other explanation fits these facts better than Jesus' own promise that he would rise again from the dead. Okay, there is only one obvious and reasonable explanation for these things. But before we get there, I want us to see the final piece of evidence, the commission, the commission. Finally, Jesus showed himself to his followers on a mountain, and he gave them a mission. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me, he said.

Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I've commanded you.

And surely I'm with you always to the very end of the age. So not only do we now have more people who have seen Jesus back from the dead, but he's also told them to go and give that evidence wherever they go in the world, so that others will hear the news and join them in following Jesus. And that's exactly what they did.

How else would we, in Scotland, 2,000 years later, be sitting here and hearing about it, unless the people who had seen him went and told everyone what they had seen?

And if Jesus hadn't come back from the dead, well, where would that mission have come from? Why would these people have given their lives to go and spread the sneeze?

[ 26 : 45 ] But the fact that they did it, and that today, this Sunday, Jesus is worshipped, not just by a tiny Jewish sect in the Middle East, not by no one, he's not just in the history books, but he is worshipped and celebrated by 2 billion people around the world.

That is the final piece of evidence that it really happened. The resurrection of Jesus has changed the world and countless lives since he was seen by the two women 2,000 years ago.

And Jesus still changes lives today. Each church that loves him, each person that follows him, is living proof that he is alive, that he gives us new life and new relationship with God, a new way to live through him forever.

And the fact that you are hearing about him today, this is proof that he lives. I said at the start of our talk that today is a celebration, and I hope that if you didn't know why we were celebrating when you came in, that now you do.

Jesus' resurrection is true. It happened. It happened. It happened. And it confirms for us everything that we believe, that he really is God's son, God's chosen rescuer for us, and that through him we have eternal life with God, our sins forgiven.

[ 28 : 15 ] It proves everything that he said is true. It gives us a real solid basis to stand upon. Our beliefs are not way up here in the sky.

They are rooted in history, in the resurrection of Christ. And I hope and pray that today, if you've seen this evidence, that you would consider it.

Let it give you the confidence to do this, put your trust in God, to begin to follow Jesus, the risen living Lord for yourself, that you would celebrate him with us, that you would worship him with us, even for the very first time.

Anyone can do that today. Anyone. If you believe he rose again, and believe that he rose again for ye, to put you right with God.

So let me invite you to trust and to worship the risen and living King and Lord Jesus Christ with us now. Let's join in prayer together. Let's pray.

[ 29 : 25 ] God, our Father, how we thank you for the things that you have told us about in your word. We thank you that Jesus is alive.

We thank you that he was seen. We thank you that he was touched and heard by those first followers of his. We thank you, Father, for the evidence that you give us so freely.

Not that we deserve, but Lord, you lay these things before us that we might come to know and to trust that you have given us Jesus to save us from our sins.

Dear Father, we pray that you would give us faith to believe that, that you would give us confidence in the evidence that you've set before us to trust him and follow him. And Father, we pray, even if we have followed him many years, that you would grow our confidence.

Lord, that you wouldn't let us believe that our faith is anything less than true and worthwhile. We thank you, Father, that you have changed our lives and changed our world through the resurrection of Jesus.

[ 30 : 39 ] And we praise you, too, that you will change it once again and for good when he returns. We pray for that day. Come, Lord Jesus.

And pray that you would help us to follow him every day until then. We pray in his wonderful name. Amen.