

Death . . . *Defeated!*

Bodies of Evidence, Part II

Matthew 27:50-54

Fact or Fiction?

A university student was somewhat bored with college life. He was searching for happiness and meaning but didn't really know where to look. He even went to church a few times but found religion to be unsatisfying. He ran for student leadership positions but was disappointed by how quickly the glamour wore off. He tried the party circuit but woke up on Mondays even more empty than before.

One day the young man noticed a group of students reading the Bible. He became intrigued by the obvious joy on their faces and, especially, the radiance of one of the young ladies. He went over and asked what made her so happy. She looked him straight in the eye, smiled, and said, "Jesus Christ."

"Oh, for heaven's sake," he groaned, "don't give me that stuff about religion."

She replied, "I didn't say anything about religion; I said, 'Jesus Christ.'"

The students invited him to join their study and later, challenged him to intellectually examine the claims of Jesus Christ and the evidence supporting Christianity. He took up the gauntlet and, after months of personally attempting to discredit Christianity, he placed his faith in this One whom he had come to realize was indeed the Messiah.

His research became the foundation for a book he would later write, entitled *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*.

Josh McDowell would later testify, "I was not able to explain away an event in history—the resurrection of Jesus Christ."¹

What do a myriad of authors and eyewitnesses say about this event in history? Even though these biblical authors were separated by geography and thousands of years, their prophecies and eyewitness accounts point to Christ's power over the grave. He is not dead, but alive!

As we began to put the facts together in the previous chapter of *Bodies of Evidence*, we witnessed several funerals and uncovered the evidence of Christ's authority over death. We watched the raising of Jairus' daughter from the dead; we slipped into the funeral procession of a young man, mourned and missed by his mother, now a destitute widow. Through Christ's resurrection power and a simple command to "arise," these individuals came back to life—they became literal *bodies of evidence*.

Obviously, the chief exhibit—the primary "body of evidence"—is the resurrected Christ. The record of His resurrection is declared by the four Gospel writers.

Matthew's gospel preceded by many years the recently discovered Gospel of Judas. This "gospel" is a typical second-century Gnostic writing that denies the deity of Christ and focuses instead on some of the people surrounding Jesus, namely Mary Magdalene and Judas.

In this particular writing, Judas was supposedly the closest friend of Jesus. This spurious gospel account relates that Judas secretly planned [along with Jesus] the betrayal of Jesus in the garden. It seems that Jesus needed Judas' help! In this "gospel," Judas ends up being the hero, not the villain, and Christ becomes a conniving man intent on recruiting even more followers.

I was asked by the *Raleigh News and Observer* to give a quote on the discovery of the Gospel of Judas. My response was simply that those who believe the Gnostic Gospel of Judas over the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John have that privilege, but with the privilege comes eternal risk.

I further remarked that if I were wrong and the gospel of Judas were correct, I'd have *nothing* to lose—my eternal destiny wasn't going to be any different from whatever it would have been. But if those who believed in the Gospel of Judas were wrong, they'd have *everything* to lose.

Why? Because the biblical record indicates that Judas was not the hero; he was a demonically inspired traitor who ended up in hell, where his followers will also be . . . forever. [The editors decided not to include my quote in the newspaper!]

Original eyewitness accounts have survived the centuries and have been preserved for us, written over the course of several years by different authors, all agreeing on these truths: Christ's deity, His prophetic fulfillments, His sinless life, His authenticating miracles, His claim to be the only way to Heaven, His crucifixion, His burial, His resurrection, and His ascension.

And the core truth that made these eyewitnesses dare to come forward with their testimony was this: Christ's power over death and His own personal resurrection.

But that's not all they reported. In fact, beyond what we've already observed in numerous funeral processions interrupted by Christ's resurrection power [including His own empty grave], there are actually *more* bodies of evidence!

Let's back up and take a closer look at one particularly stunning event that most Christians have never given much thought.

The Resurrection of the Bodies of the Saints

It is recorded:

And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom . . . (Matthew 27:50-51).

Here's a minor, yet significant, miracle—if you can call any miracle *minor*!

This was the temple that Herod built, which was later destroyed in AD 70. As of today, the temple has never been rebuilt.

The temple of Herod was the centerpiece of Jerusalem during the life and ministry of Christ.

At the time of Christ's death, indicated by Matthew, the priests would have been busy in the outer court and in the holy place where the showbread, the candelabra, and other items were kept—all signifying spiritual truths. The most impressive sight would have been the veil.

The heavy veil hung between the Holy of Holies [a room where the ark with its lid of gold was kept] and the Holy Place.

Once a year, the high priest went behind the veil and sprinkled the blood of an innocent animal on top of the ark [the mercy seat], signifying the sacrifice for the nation's sins. The people were fearful that the high priest would not come out alive, so they tied a rope to his ankle to pull his body out, should God become angry and not accept the offering.

The veil signified that God was not accessible to everyone. It illustrated that no one except the high priest [who, with great trembling, went behind it once a year] could approach the mercy seat.

As Christ yielded up His spirit, the veil began to rip, as if to lay this restricted place open to all because the final Lamb had been sacrificed—the Lamb of God!

Imagine the sound as the curtain was ripped in two!

According to Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, we know the veil hung sixty feet from top to bottom and was as thick as the palm of a hand.

The veil ripped from the *top*—where only the hand of God could reach without scaffolding. And no ordinary hand would have been as strong as the Unseen Hand which ripped that curtain from top to bottom!

This very act symbolized that Judaism was effectively replaced—the priesthood, effectively nullified. Our only Mediator and High Priest would now give everyone the privilege of entering within the veil, coming boldly before the throne of God (*Hebrews 10:19-25*).

There was no more sacrifice, no more separation, no more fear, and no more rope around the ankle of some terrified high priest.

And how did the Jewish leaders react? What did the temple priests do about their veil, now torn in

two? Evidently they sewed it up and continued as if nothing had happened.

Still, the priests would have to wonder at this repaired veil—the two sides not completely matched—the hurried attempt to sew their religious system back together, ready for business as usual.

No wonder the book of Acts records that many priests left the now defunct temple system and entered the church of Jesus Christ: a company of royal priests now speaking directly to God, confessing their sins directly to God, and communing and worshipping directly with God. *There was no more veil!*

And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split (Matthew 27:51).

Something else was taking place—outside. In yet another display of God’s power related to Christ’s death, an earthquake split rocks into pieces.

When God visited Elijah, the Bible says,

. . . a great and strong wind was rending the mountains and breaking in pieces the rocks before the Lord (I Kings 19:11).

In Psalms 18 and 77, David sang of the earth’s shaking and trembling when the Lord became angry with mankind.

Jeremiah spoke of the righteous anger of God revealed by thunder and earthquakes.

God the Father was actually giving the world a foretaste of what He will do one day when He will shake the earth in judgment at the coming of the King of Kings, as described in the book of Revelation.ⁱⁱ

You’d think this would be enough to get everybody’s attention!

Yet three days later there would be another even more stunning display of vindication for the Person of Jesus Christ. This would be the most startling exhibit of all. Matthew recorded what happened:

*The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and **coming out of the tombs** after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many (Matthew 27:52-53).*

Can you believe it?!

Not just one person, or two. This was a *company*—many bodies having already been buried—now rising out of their tombs and appearing, evidently in their glorified state, to the citizens of Jerusalem.

Matthew’s account can be interpreted to mean that these Old Testament believers came out of their tombs as Christ died and then three days later, on Sunday, entered the city of Jerusalem.

This was not a mystical, spiritual resurrection of ghosts.

Who were these people? They were the *hagioi*, Matthew says, or *the holy ones*. This word was used of Old and New Testament believers.

Daniel wrote,

. . . the saints [holy ones] . . . will receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever . . . (Daniel 7:18).

Matthew said that their tombs were opened, and after the resurrection of Christ, they also rose from the dead and entered the city of Jerusalem.

Apparently, a select few among the deceased Old Testament believers who were awaiting the Messiah were resurrected with Christ.

These Old Testament believers were given their glorified bodies, reunited with their spirits and, according to Matthew’s account, resurrected from their graves as Christ gave up His Spirit. They then physically entered Jerusalem after Christ rose from the dead.

We’re not specifically told, but most evangelical scholars believe they also ascended with Christ a few days later.

So what were they doing for three days while Christ lay in the tomb?

I think many of them were traveling to Jerusalem from all over Israel and other parts of the Middle East, so they would be there to testify on Sunday that Christ was indeed the Messiah, the resurrected Son of God.

Matthew also implies in his choice of words that these resurrected saints did not stay around very long. In the last part of Matthew 27:53, he simply says they

. . . appeared to many.

They appeared to many. This statement is in the language written of the risen Christ, who made several appearances after His resurrection. He also “appeared to many.”

Matthew’s words also intimate that these saints would have been known—perhaps even recognized.

We can safely suggest that these *bodies of evidence* would have been significant because they would have been known to have died having faith in

God. The resurrected saints would have been some of the heroes of ancient Israel who had believed in the coming Messiah.

Perhaps some of them had been dead for centuries, yet some had died as recently as the month before. But suddenly, they were in Jerusalem . . . alive! What an impact!

Can you imagine a mother and father burying a son or daughter: an accident, a tragedy, a coffin, a funeral—the flowers still fresh at the graveside. Then, one morning the son or daughter appears at the doorway!

“Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad. I’m here to tell you that the crucified Carpenter really is the Son of God. I’m alive because He is alive. Make sure you place your faith in Him, but you should tell everyone that you’ve seen me, too. Tell the world that Jesus Christ truly is the Resurrection and the Life . . . tell them that you’ve seen *living proof!*”

Whoa . . . what an amazing testimony! What an indisputable *body of evidence*.

By the way, the biblical record of the saints’ resurrection bears evidence that the resurrection of Jesus Christ guarantees *our* glorious resurrection one day, too.

Death is not the end . . . it is only the beginning!

The Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ

After our Lord rose from the dead, He made a number of appearances. His own body was the chief exhibit of His power over the grave. Sixteen times in Scripture our Lord made an appearance; they included:

1. Mary Magdalene, as she remained by the tomb and was ordered to go and tell the disciples (*John 20:11-17*);
2. The other women, who were also returning to the tomb (*Matthew 28:9-10*);
3. Peter, in the afternoon on the Sunday of His resurrection (*Luke 24:34*);
4. The two disciples, who were walking in utter despondency and defeat toward Emmaus (*Mark 16:12*);
5. Ten disciples, while Thomas, in unbelief, was absent (*Luke 24:36-43*);
6. The eleven disciples, one week after His resurrection, with Thomas present and

delivering the statement of worship, “My Lord and my God!” (*John 20:26-29*);

7. Seven of His disciples, on the seashore, where He reinstated Peter to the ministry (*John 21:1-23*);
 8. 500 people—an appearance that the Apostle Paul recounted as significant (*1 Corinthians 15:6*);
 9. James, His own half-brother, the son of Mary and Joseph. James had not believed the claims of Christ, but after the events of the crucifixion and resurrection, not to mention a personal visit from Christ, he believed and became the leading elder in the church at Jerusalem. He also authored the New Testament book of James (*John 7:3-5; 1 Corinthians 15:7; Acts 1:14; Galatians 1:19*);
 10. The eleven disciples, on the mountain in Galilee, where He gave them the Great Commission to preach the gospel (*Matthew 28:16-20*);
 11. His ascension from the Mount of Olives (*Luke 24:44-53*).
- Additional appearances followed His ascension:
12. At Stephen’s death (*Acts 7:55-56*);
 13. To Paul, on the Damascus road (*Acts 9:36*);
 14. To Paul again, in Arabia (*Acts 26:17*);
 15. To Paul, in the temple (*Acts 22:17-21*);
 16. To Paul yet again, while he was in prison in Caesarea (*Acts 23:11*).

It’s no wonder that one author called the resurrection appearances of Jesus Christ the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Declaration of Independence of our Christian faith.ⁱⁱⁱ

What wonderful, undeniable, indisputable *bodies of evidence* we have for our faith in Jesus Christ!

Presenting the Evidence

Return with me to the scene in Jerusalem on that first Resurrection Sunday. Imagine what the Old Testament saints would have said when they appeared in their beloved city—the introductions to great, great, great grandsons and granddaughters, the reunions, the astonishment, the joy, the wonder, the tears . . .

But just who were these chosen *bodies of evidence*? Who were these heroes of the faith—

handpicked by the Savior—who were to announce His victory over death?

We are not told, but I can imagine a few choice witnesses:

- *Abraham* was promised a coming lamb and had already climbed Mount Moriah with his son Isaac. He would be a perfect candidate to return to Jerusalem, next to Moriah's hill, and announce to all who would hear him, "The Lamb of God *has* come. God kept His promise—He did indeed provide the Lamb!"
- *Joseph* would be an excellent candidate to testify, "I was the favored son of my father and was rejected by my brethren, but I rose from the pit to save my people from famine and certain death. Jesus Christ is the favored, unique son of God and was rejected by His brethren, but He is the only one who can save you from everlasting death!"
- *Boaz*, the kinsman redeemer of Ruth, could powerfully attest, "I rescued my bride and saved her for myself. I was but an illustration of the great Kinsman Redeemer who has now come to gather His own Bride!"
- *David* could recite as he returned to Jerusalem, "This is the Christ of whom I sang. He will one day sit upon my throne in His kingdom, and there will one day be a new city called Jerusalem . . . and it will never pass away!"
- *Nehemiah*, the great builder and reformer of old Jerusalem, could warn everyone, "The crucial object of your faith is not your temple or your city walls. Build your life on Jesus Christ—He is the everlasting cornerstone!"
- *Isaiah* could quote his prophecy once again, with even greater clarity: "Jesus Christ is indeed the suffering Savior; the Man of sorrows whom I said would be pierced through for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. Follow Him . . . He is the Prince of Peace!"
- *John the Baptist*, so recently put to death and now alive again, would cry, "I told you so! Jesus *is* the Lamb of God who came to take away the sin of the world!"

These *bodies of evidence* would gain a hearing, for they had testified of the promised One with their words and deeds before He was born.

But wait—there are two more from the pages of the Old Testament who would have made powerful bodies of evidence: a husband and wife who knew the One who created them, the One who walked and talked with them . . . Who forgave them.

"My name is *Adam*, and this is my wife, *Eve*. It was because of us that sin entered the world; our rebellion against our Creator brought suffering and death, the toil of work, the corruption of human hearts, the pain of childbirth—it all started because of us. But we were forgiven and received this promise: a second Adam is coming—a new race will begin by faith in the Messiah. We are here to tell you that He came. He was temporarily bruised on the cross, but He crushed the power of sin and death forever. We're here to tell you that He is alive today!"

Can you imagine the power of their combined testimony?

Rendering the Verdict

There remains to this day another body of evidence: *you!* The risen Savior resides in your body; we, the followers of Christ, are the temple of the Holy Spirit. We are on our way to heaven and we bear witness that it is all true: Jesus Christ is alive!

We also bear testimony of another resurrection that will occur in the future. This final resurrection will impact every human being who has ever lived. Some will be raised to eternal heaven and others to judgment and eternal hell.

May I remind you again—if I am wrong about all of this, my eternal destiny will remain unchanged. But if you have refused to give your life to Jesus Christ and you are wrong, you are headed for an everlasting hell. The issue is not "*Will* you live forever?" but "*Where* will you live forever?"

I strongly urge you to settle that question today. Place your faith in the resurrected, living Savior whose cross was your punishment . . . whose life was your ransom . . . whose sacrifice was your pardon.

Then you can say with the saints of all the ages, "He is risen! He is risen indeed!"

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 4/16/2006 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 2006 Stephen Davey

All rights reserved.

ⁱ Robert J. Morgan, *Nelson's Complete Book of Illustrations* (Thomas Nelson, 2000), p. 250.

ⁱⁱ John MacArthur, *Matthew: Volume 3* (Moody Press, 1999), p. 274.

ⁱⁱⁱ H. L. Wilmington, *Wilmington's Guide to the Bible* (Tyndale House, 1988), p. 628.