

“What’s Easter all about anyway?”

John 20

Introduction

1. **A student at the University of Minnesota was invited by some friends to a campus Bible study.** She quickly declined without giving much of a reason. Her friends invited her several more times during their freshman year but she always had an excuse or just said no. There were a few more invitations over the following school years but she never came until her senior year at the U.

One of her friends asked her directly why she always declined. She finally explained that she was actually interested but that she knew almost nothing about the Bible and she didn’t want to be embarrassed when others used technical terms she didn’t understand, like “Easter.”

2. **She isn’t the only one who couldn’t define Easter.** While many of us know that Easter celebrates the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, few of us have any idea what the word means or where it came from.
3. **The word Easter never appears once in the Bible and doesn’t exist in almost any other languages of the world.** Somehow “Easter” crept into our English language but into none other.
4. **So, here’s what happened.** Jesus was a Jewish Rabbi who claimed to come directly from God to save humanity from sin and death. He never went to college, served in the military or ran for political office. He never wrote a book. He never married nor had children. He never traveled more than 100 miles from home. Yet, he is the most famous person who has ever lived. He has shaped the history of the world and today there are about two billion people around the globe who call themselves Christians as his followers.

When Jesus died he promised to take the sins of us all on himself so that all who believe in him can have sins forgiven and receive eternal life from God. He died a horrific death by crucifixion in the early 1st century. What happened three days later was the most spectacular supernatural miracle ever performed—on Sunday morning Jesus came back to life again.

The resurrection of Jesus happened at the time of the ancient Jewish festival of Passover. Passover celebrates the escape of more than a million Jews from slavery in Egypt around 1500 BC. Death swept across the Egyptian empire but God promised he would “pass-over” the homes of Jews who smeared sheep blood on their doorposts. Jews have celebrated what happened every year since.

The Bible refers to the resurrection of Jesus by when it happened—Πάσχα is the Greek word and it means Passover. Latin, French, Spanish, Hebrew, Italian, Arabic—they all use their word for Passover. Only English uses “Easter.” We’re not exactly sure why but the best guess is that Passover usually comes in April and the ancient Anglo-Saxon word for April was similar to Easter and that’s how we got the word.

Around the world today there are more and more languages where neither Passover nor Easter are used—it’s simply called Resurrection Day. What we name the day isn’t really important but what happened that day is all important.

5. **Let’s hear what happened from an eyewitness.** John was there. He wrote what happened and his report became part of the Bible.

Easter story

1. John 20:1-20

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!”

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus’ head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)

Then the disciples went back to their homes, but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

They asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?”

“They have taken my Lord away,” she said, “and I don’t know where they have put him.” At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

“Woman,” he said, “why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?”

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.”

Jesus said to her, “Mary.”

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher).

Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her.

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

- 2. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is a miracle beyond the research and imagination of modern science and medicine.** Those dead for three days stay dead unless God himself brings them back to life. Yet, some people have their doubts that resurrection really happened.

Easter evidence

- 1. Wolfhart Pannenberg is a German intellectual and professor at the University of Munich.** He undertook an extensive study of philosophy, science and religion that led him to become a Christian. He said that *“the evidence for Jesus’ resurrection is so strong that nobody would question it except for two things: First, it is a very unusual event. And second, if you believe it happened, you have to change the way you live.”*¹

Quite a statement, but true—“if you believe it happened, you have to change the way you live.”

- 2. Skeptics and critics have questioned the reality of Jesus’ resurrection.** In many ways that has been a very good thing because the record has stood up to the questions.

Some have said that Jesus’ followers made it up. The truth is the first Christians were once skeptics themselves. They were the lead doubters. Then they saw and heard and touched the alive Jesus. There were hundreds of them. Their stories coincide. They were convinced beyond further doubt. When called to recant or die they chose to die. Many of the eyewitnesses were executed when they insisted that Jesus came back to life. It’s highly unlikely that so many would stick with a fabricated deception under threat of death.

Some have offered alternative explanations.

They say Jesus wasn’t really dead but unconscious. But it makes little sense that experienced Roman executioners would mistake death or that any man could lose blood, be unconscious, buried for days and suddenly wake up healthy and strong.

Others say it was a conspiracy or mass hallucination. Except all the records and evidence point the other way. Hundreds of people don’t keep conspiracies secret and hundreds of people sharing the same hallucination is pretty farfetched.

- 3. Many of the brightest minds in the world have exhaustively researched the resurrection and decided that it really happened as the Bible tells us.**

Richard Swinburne is the Oxford University professor who used probability theory with a Yale University gathering of leading philosophy professors. As reported in the *New York Times*, “For someone dead for 36 hours to come to life again is, according to the laws of nature, extremely improbable. But if there is a God of the traditional kind, natural laws only operate because he makes them operate.”

Using Bayes Theorem of probability he assigned values to the existence of God, Jesus’ behavior during his lifetime and eyewitnesses after Jesus’ death. Using complex mathematical formulas he came to a 97% probability that the resurrection actually happened.²

4. **I am convinced that there is ample evidence for the skeptic who honestly seeks the truth to conclude that Jesus supernaturally rose from the dead.** I am also convinced that this is not the evidence that persuades most seekers to believe in Jesus as their Savior and Lord.

5. **Andrew Norman Wilson** is a famous English writer and well known atheist. Whether in his books or his newspaper columns he has argued his views to millions of readers. However, one year ago this week he published a most amazing column in the London newspaper, *The Daily Mail*, in which he announced his new faith in Jesus and his resurrection.
A.N. Wilson wrote, “My belief has come about in large measure because of the lives and examples of people I have known—not the famous, not the saints, but friends and relations who have lived, and faced death, in the light of the Resurrection story, or in the quiet acceptance that they have a future after they die....”
He talks about all the arguments and evidence and writes, “An even stronger argument is the way that Christian faith transforms individual lives—the lives of the men and women with whom you mingle on a daily basis, the man, woman or child next to you in church [on Easter Sunday morning].”³

Easter faith

1. **This atheist-turned-Christian got it right.** The greatest evidence of the resurrection of Jesus is in the lives of everyday people all around us. I’ve seen it in thousands of people. The patient with hope when diagnosed with cancer. The parent with peace when a child dies. The student with purpose on a campus where many seem lost. The athlete who loves God more than winning. The lovers who base their relationship and marriage on a united faith in God. The new parents who dedicate their child to Jesus Christ. These are those who prove the reality and power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

2. **Believing in Jesus transforms lives.** The person and power of Jesus is the basis for our second chance. The path to forgiveness for our sins and mistakes is through Jesus who loved us enough to die for us.
It is true that personal faith in Jesus gets us forgiveness of our sins and the promise of eternal life in heaven. But, never think the benefits of faith in Jesus have to wait until after we die. Those who choose to believe in Jesus and follow him now are transformed starting today. Jesus Christ gives purpose, help, hope, love, healing, power and more. Just look and listen to those whose lives have been transformed by Jesus and we all want their Jesus for ourselves.

Conclusion

1. **What is Easter all about? The Easter story is about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.** But it is also about the joy and new life experienced by those who believe in him.

2. **Are you a believer?** If yes, then you already know the fabulous difference the risen Jesus makes in your life. If you are not a believer in Jesus, would you like to become one today? He will forgive your sins. He will give you a second chance. He will give you a fresh start. He will give you joy, purpose and hope. He who was raised from the dead will give you the life of heaven starting right here on earth.

3. **Believe in Jesus.** Make a deliberate choice to affirm that his death and resurrection are real and for you. Tell God that you are a true believer and will follow Jesus for the rest of your life. Make this Easter your day of resurrection faith.

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¹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, in a conversation with Ron Sider, *Prism* magazine, March/April 1997.

² *Group* magazine, July 2002.

³ A.N. Wilson, “Religion of hatred: Why we should no loner be cowed by the chattering classes ruling Britain who sneer at Christianity,” *U.N. Daily Mail*, April 11, 2009.