

Theme: Making Sense of the Unlikely Easter Story by Ben Witherington III

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, the story of your son's death and resurrection is so bizarre that for people to be converted the story must be true; may the risen Christ be ever present in our lives on this Easter night and forever, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



New Testament scholar Ben Witherington III offers an outstanding argument as to why Jesus' resurrection must have taken place:

“Without a doubt, Christianity was an evangelistic religion from the outset. [Matthew 28](#) tells us that the risen Jesus commissioned his followers to go and make disciples of all nations ([Matthew 28:19–20](#)).

“When you know the context of the New Testament texts—the world and cultures in and to which these stories were written—you quickly realize that sometimes the incongruities and unusual aspects in the story testify to their historical veracity and authenticity.

“Evangelism in the Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds required apologetics of various sorts to explain what made a certain group's claims unique and superior to others. This was especially necessary if you were claiming that a Jewish manual laborer who had been crucified by a Roman governor named Pilate had nonetheless risen from the dead, appeared to various persons, and was starting a new community of followers because his previous ones had all but abandoned hope.

“The real sticking point for Jesus' followers is that the culture of the Middle East at that time (and still today) was an honor and shame culture, and crucifixion was the most shameful way to die in that world. It was not seen as a noble martyrdom of any sort. People in that world believed that the manner of your death most revealed your character. On that basis, Jesus was a scoundrel, a man who committed treason against the state, a man who deserved the punishment used for slave revolts. The Romans called it ‘the extreme punishment,’ and no Roman citizen would be subjected to it.

“It wouldn’t make sense to create a story about a crucified and risen man being the savior of the world—unless you really believe it is historically true—because the instinctive reaction to such a message is exactly what Paul, the earliest New Testament writer, said it would be: It was a stumbling block or scandal to the Jews, and sheer nonsense to Gentiles ([1 Corinthians 1:23](#)).

“If you have seen the famous graffito from the pagan catacombs in Rome, the drawing of a donkey hanging on a cross, with a Roman kneeling below it with a sarcastic remark about ‘a man worshiping his god,’ you realize how such a message must have come across, at least initially, to those being evangelized in the Roman world.

“There are also some seemingly odd features of the stories about the death and Resurrection themselves. If you want to start a world religion in a highly patriarchal world, you don’t make up stories about all the male disciples abandoning Jesus (save one, the Beloved Disciple) and the women being the chief witnesses. Women are last at the cross, first at the empty tomb, first to hear the angelic message ‘he is risen,’ first to see the risen Jesus, and first to go and testify to the male disciples hunkered down behind locked doors in Jerusalem for fear of the Jewish authorities. The witness of women was considered suspect by most in that first-century world, and indeed, [Luke 24:11](#) says that the male disciples thought it was an old wives’ tale when the women came and breathlessly claimed the tomb was empty and Jesus was risen.

“Consider the post-Resurrection appearance narratives. The lengthiest ones are to Mary Magdalene and to the heretofore-unheard-of disciples on the road to Emmaus. Not to any members of the Twelve. An individual appearance to Peter is mentioned in passing but never otherwise related in Matthew, Mark or Luke, our earliest Gospels ([Luke 24:34](#)). And there is no story in any canonical Gospel about an appearance to James, Jesus’ brother, although Paul is emphatic that it happened, and Paul had talked with James in Jerusalem on several occasions (see [1 Corinthians 15:7](#)).

“If you are interested in myth making, or creating a saga that could be received and believed in those first-century cultures for the sake of

evangelism, the early Christian approach is certainly not the way to go about it.

“How is it that a band of defeated and depressed disciples, who had abandoned hope after the crucifixion of Jesus (see the telling remark in [Luke 24:21](#) as they are leaving town: “We had hoped he would be the one to redeem Israel”), became galvanized and inspired enough to carry the good news of Jesus from Jerusalem to Rome and beyond?

“Martin Dibelius, the famous old German father of form criticism of the gospel, once admitted that you have to posit a historical “X” big enough to explain the rise of Christianity after the ignominious death of Jesus on a Roman cross. He was right. What happened that caused the deserters to become the martyrs, the deniers to become the confessors, and women to take a chance at being laughed out of court by telling the men that ‘he is risen and has appeared to us’?”

“For Jesus’ followers, the X that marked the spot between a crucified Jesus and a world-evangelizing group was the appearance of the risen Jesus they saw. They believed that God’s yes to life in the case of Jesus was louder than death’s no.”

Text: **Matthew 28:1–10** (NRSV)

28 After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ² And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵ But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he^a lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead,^b and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” ⁸ So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.” ¹

^a Other ancient authorities read *the Lord*

^b Other ancient authorities lack *from the dead*

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mt 28:1–10). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.