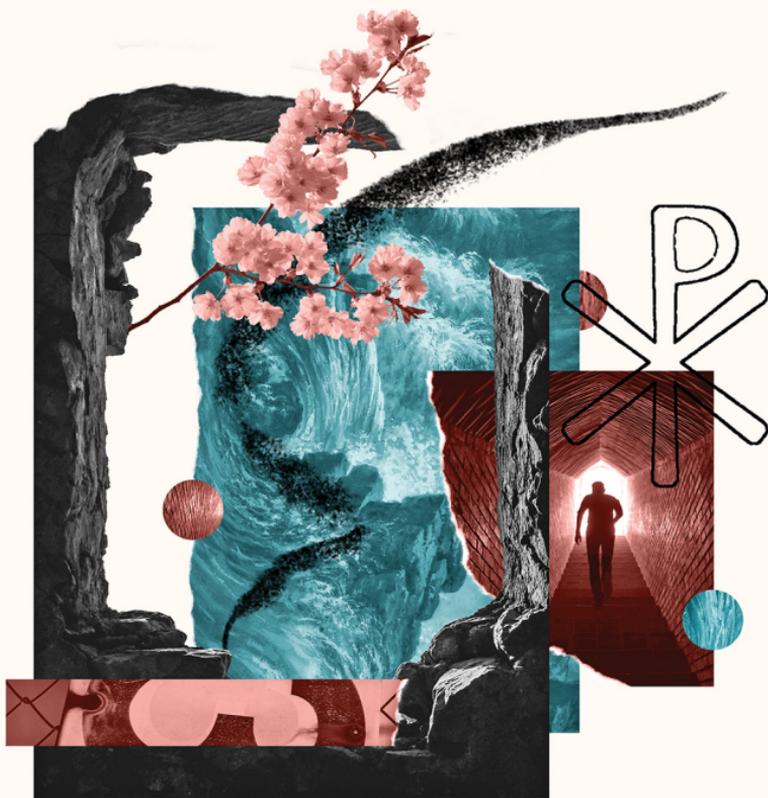


TGC

HARD QUESTIONS



Did the Resurrection Really Happen?

Timothy Paul Jones

“The Christian faith is more than a philosophy of life. It is rooted in concrete historical events. Timothy Paul Jones demonstrates that Jesus’s resurrection isn’t a myth but is grounded in history. Here is a powerful reminder that Jesus is truly risen, and this changes everything about our lives today.”

Thomas R. Schreiner, James Buchanan Harrison
Professor of New Testament Interpretation,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Well written, fast-paced, and filled with popular stories and illustrations, this book takes up the challenging question of whether Jesus’s resurrection is a historical event. Follow Timothy Paul Jones as he treks through nagging doubts and uncertainty, one reasonable step at a time. If you are learning why the resurrection is true, this is the sort of book you want to read.”

Gary R. Habermas, Distinguished Research Professor,
Liberty University School of Divinity

“Timothy Paul Jones utilizes an interdisciplinary approach to provide a lucid, accessible, concise, and compelling case for the historical fact of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. This book will serve as a conversation starter to help churches point people to Jesus Christ as the exalted and risen Lord!”

Jarvis J. Williams, Professor of New Testament
Interpretation, The Southern Baptist
Theological Seminary

“With up-to-date scholarship and engaging prose, Timothy Paul Jones provides a compact text we can share with our university and seminary students to show them how to defend the resurrection in a winsome way. Highly recommended.”

Mark Allen, Professor of Biblical and Theological Studies, Liberty University

“Jones blends the heart of a pastor with the precision of a scholar to tackle one of the most vital questions of our faith. He offers a relatable and compelling perspective, bringing to the church and skeptics alike a clear and convincing case for the resurrection.”

Jamaal Williams, Pastor, Sojourn Midtown,
Louisville, Kentucky

“Christianity rises or falls on a single historical claim: the resurrection of Jesus. This short, powerful book makes the case for the pivotal moment in human history. If you’re curious about the unparalleled nature of Jesus, start your journey here.”

J. Warner Wallace, *Dateline*-featured cold-case detective;
Senior Fellow, the Colson Center for Christian Worldview

“The Christian faith is rooted in the historical resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Jones has written an accessible case for the resurrection of Jesus that is easy to read while carrying the weight of rigorous scholarship. This resource will prove valuable to both the skeptic and the believer wrestling with doubt.”

Dayton Hartman, Lead Pastor, Redeemer Church,
Rocky Mount, North Carolina

Did the Resurrection Really Happen?

TGC Hard Questions

Jared Kennedy, Series Editor

Did the Resurrection Really Happen?, Timothy Paul Jones

Does God Care about Gender Identity?, Samuel D. Ferguson

Is Christianity Good for the World?, Sharon James

What Does Depression Mean for My Faith?, Kathryn Butler, MD

Where Is God in a World with So Much Evil?, Collin Hansen

Why Do We Feel Lonely at Church?, Jeremy Linneman

Did the Resurrection Really Happen?

Timothy Paul Jones

 **CROSSWAY®**

WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Did the Resurrection Really Happen?

© 2025 by Timothy Paul Jones

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law. Crossway® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

This book is published in association with Nappaland Literary Agency, an independent firm dedicated to publishing works that are: Authentic. Relevant. Eternal. Visit us on the web at: <http://www.NappalandLiterary.com>.

Cover design: Ben Stafford

Cover images: Unsplash

First printing 2025

Printed in the United States of America

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. The ESV text may not be quoted in any publication made available to the public by a Creative Commons license. The ESV may not be translated in whole or in part into any other language.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-9855-5

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-9857-9

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-9856-2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Jones, Timothy P. (Timothy Paul), author.

Title: Did the resurrection really happen? / Timothy Paul Jones.

Description: Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway, 2025. | Series: TGC hard questions | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024017391 (print) | LCCN 2024017392 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433598555 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781433598562 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433598579 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Resurrection—Biblical teaching. | Jesus Christ—Resurrection.

Classification: LCC BS2655.R35 J66 2025 (print) | LCC BS2655.R35 (ebook) | DDC 236/.8—dc23/eng/20240917

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024017391>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024017392>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|---|---|---|
| BP | 35 | 34 | 33 | 32 | 31 | 30 | 29 | 28 | 27 | 26 | 25 | | | |
| 15 | 14 | 13 | 12 | 11 | 10 | 9 | 8 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |

Contents

Did the Resurrection Really Happen? *1*

Notes *61*

Recommended Resources *73*

Scripture Index *77*

A JEWISH NOBLE STARES UP the slope that terminates at the walls of Jerusalem. An arrow's shot from the walls, rugged knolls and hillocks flatten into a plain where twisted tree trunks are jammed into the earth. These trees are barren, with wooden beams affixed to them at a myriad of angles.

Dangling from the crossbeams are the flayed bodies of human beings.

The soldiers wandering among the crosses have vowed before the gods that they will enforce the will of Caesar no matter the cost. The men twisted in agony on the beams have been accused of insurrection against Caesar's will. As night falls and bodies fail, packs of wild dogs will arrive on the plain and plant their forelegs against the crosses, teeth bared and straining to rip away mangled muscles and exposed organs. Once the collapsing lungs of the crucified have squelched their last guttural breaths, vultures will descend on the carcasses, gorging themselves on congealing strips of skin.¹ Such is the fate of those sentenced to die on crosses.

The year is AD 70. The Roman legions are crushing a rebellion that began four years earlier. Faced with the imminent fall of their city, thousands of Jews have attempted escape, only to be captured and tortured on these barren trees. Today, as many as five hundred Jews will be nailed to the timbers outside the city. Hundreds will face the same fate tomorrow, and again the next day, and again and again until there are no trees left for miles around Jerusalem.

The name of the Jewish noble surveying the scene outside the city is Josephus. He is a Pharisee trying to convince his fellow Jews to give up their insurrection. Years later, Josephus will describe the abuse inflicted by the Romans on the captives: “Soldiers, out of the rage and spite they held . . . nailed them to the crosses in a variety of positions to ridicule them. Their number was so great that there . . . were not enough crosses for the bodies.”²

This was far from the first or last time Roman soldiers crucified mass numbers of suspected insurrectionists. Over the span of centuries, the Romans repeated this practice with tens of thousands of rebels and slaves, spiking them to wooden beams in grotesque positions and leaving them to die. Suspended naked before the world,

the cadavers of the crucified screamed a silent warning, declaring the inevitable demise of anyone who dared to defy the power of Rome. For dissidents and enslaved persons in particular, crucifixion loomed as a constant threat. Of the many thousands of victims who lived and died on the margins of the Roman social order, only the minutest fraction of names were recorded. Fewer still can be recalled today.

And yet, two thousand years after his death, the name of one crucified man is cherished around the globe.

This man was lynched on the outskirts of Jerusalem around AD 30, a generation before the city's destruction in AD 70. From the perspective of the rulers in Rome, his execution was insignificant and routine. Following a bit of unrest in the streets during a volatile Jewish festival, three suspects were stapled to crosses on a hill outside the city. The warning worked, at least from the Roman perspective. After this reminder not to provoke Rome's power, the Passover proceeded peaceably, with no riots or revolts reported.

But a revolution happened nonetheless.

According to a tiny band of faithful Jews, the cross did not mark the end for one of those three men. The message

of his miraculous return to life would eventually engulf the very empire that had sentenced him to die. Today, this singular crucified man is not merely remembered. He is revered by billions as divine.

What Is So Different about Jesus?

But why should anyone think that out of all the thousands crucified by the Romans, this one victim of the cross returned to life, never to die again? It doesn't take many trips to the graveyard before you realize resurrection is far from the most common outcome for a corpse. Why suggest that this man's corpse didn't decay into dust like everyone else's?

What's so different about Jesus of Nazareth?

The entirety of Christianity stands or falls on the question of whether Jesus really returned from the dead. The apostle Paul stated as much in one of his letters: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (1 Cor. 15:17). Either there was an empty tomb, or Christians have an empty faith. That's because if the life of Jesus ended when they laid him in the grave, there's no meaningful difference between him and all the other would-be messiahs executed by the Romans. "It is

no great thing to believe that Christ died,” an influential North African pastor named Augustine of Hippo told his people in the fifth century. “This is what matters to us, that we believe that he rose from the dead.”³ If Jesus is alive, heaven has made an appearance on earth, and that changes everything.

I don’t know what you think about the resurrection of Jesus. Maybe you’ve never thought much about it. If that’s the case, I hope this book challenges you to consider the immensity of the claim that Jesus is alive. Perhaps you’ve thought a lot about the resurrection, and the very notion that someone returned from the dead two thousand years ago seems absurd to you. If so, I’m glad we’re on this journey together, because you’re right to recognize that no one should make or take such a claim lightly.

Truth be told, I haven’t always realized how outrageous it is to suggest that someone exited a stone-sealed cave on the third day after he was laid to rest. I lived nearly two decades before considering how preposterous such a claim might sound. When I was seventeen, all that began to change. That’s when my credulous acceptance of Christian faith collapsed at a library desk in a college town in northeast Kansas.

That's also where the resurrection of Jesus began to matter to me like never before.

How the Resurrection Stopped Being a Problem and Started Being a Solution

I graduated from high school in the gap between glam metal and grunge, in the year that Germany was reunified and Alec Baldwin went on his hunt for Red October. In the churches my family attended during my later childhood and high school years, the King James Version of the Bible was the only Bible accepted, neither the Bible nor the pastor could ever be questioned, all contemporary music and entertainment was to be avoided, and every barrier between us and the rest of the world had to be built high.

Then I went to college.

It was a Christian college, and the professors believed the Bible. But none of them believed the Bible like I'd been taught to believe it. My studies quickly plunged me into a dark corridor of doubt. One of the discoveries that troubled me most came from a book I ran across while writing a paper for a New Testament class. According to this book, the resurrection of a divine being

wasn't a unique notion in the ancient world. People had believed in the death and resurrection of gods like Attis and Horus and Osiris centuries before Jesus, and early Christians may have borrowed the resurrection from these myths.⁴ So the story of the resurrection was not surprising from the perspective of ancient people—or so the author suggested.

Around this time, I was offered a job at the college library. Each evening, it was my responsibility to shelve the books that had been returned that day. I remember noticing the title of one particular collection of essays one night as I slid the volume into its spot on the shelf. It was *Why I Am Not a Christian*, and the author was a philosopher named Bertrand Russell. The bluntness of the title appealed to my growing sense of frustration toward the only form of Christianity I knew, and I began reading the book on the way back to my desk.

In the titular essay, Russell declared with disarming confidence that “historically it is quite doubtful whether Christ ever existed at all, and if he did we do not know anything about him.”⁵ Years later, I recognize that Russell’s words ignore a vast breadth of historical evidence. No reputable historian today doubts that Jesus existed

or that the Romans crucified him.⁶ But I didn't know that then. In that moment, Russell's words unleashed yet another torrent of doubt within me. The more I read, the more it seemed like Jesus—the deity I had once trusted without question—might be as mythical as the gods of Egypt and Greece and Rome. The resurrection of Jesus, in particular, began to seem like a problem. If the claims of resurrections in other religions are mythical, why should I think the same claims are historical when they're applied to Jesus?

Is there really anything different about Jesus?

For the first time in my life, I began to sense the strangeness of supposing a once-deceased man left his tomb alive and well nearly two thousand years ago. Yet I also recognized that without the resurrection of Jesus, there is no Christian faith worth believing. Increasingly, my primary concern turned toward the question of how I would tell the people who knew me best that I had left my faith behind.

It was an Irishman whose name I previously knew only from novels who first opened my mind to a new set of possibilities. Some of C. S. Lewis's fictional works had been banned in one of the Christian schools I attended as

a teenager (to this day, I'm still not sure why). As a result, I was intrigued when I was shelving books and discovered this professor of literature had produced dozens of books and essays defending the logical and historical coherence of the Christian faith.

The text from Lewis that most captivated me was *Surprised by Joy*, a meandering spiritual autobiography that traced the professor's journey from atheism to theism and finally to Christianity. What I realized as I read *Surprised by Joy* was that losing my religion wasn't the only possible response to the doubts I was experiencing. What's more, certain questions that seemed new and shocking to me—the possibility that there were parallels between the Gospels and pagan myths, for example—weren't really new at all.

This became more apparent to me when I ran across one of Lewis's essays entitled "Myth Became Fact." When considering parallels between ancient myths and the stories of Jesus, Lewis didn't deny the existence of at least a few similarities. Instead, he opened the door to new ways of seeing the parallels, and he showed how the similarities were not nearly as similar as some scholars seemed to suggest.

The old myth of the Dying God, without ceasing to be myth, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. It happens—at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences. We pass from a Balder or an Osiris, dying nobody knows when or where, to a historical Person crucified . . . under Pontius Pilate.⁷

Soon, I was reading the writings of Lewis alongside the skeptical texts that had sustained and multiplied so many of my doubts. Along the way, I found more books that included evidence for the reliability of the Gospels and the resurrection of Jesus. *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* by F. F. Bruce affected me deeply, and so did Josh McDowell's *More Than a Carpenter*. Looking back, I realize that some of these texts were better grounded in historical evidence than others, but all of them opened new gateways in my mind.

At some point in all this reading, something started to shift. It seemed like there may be something different about Jesus after all. In the months that followed,

the resurrection of Jesus increasingly appeared less like a problem and more like a possible solution. I was still struggling to believe, and I still found myself abandoning many false claims I'd heard in the churches of my childhood. Yet, the more I held on and dug into the evidence, the harder it became for me to maintain my skepticism about the resurrection.

When I compared the New Testament with other ancient texts, I began to see that, whether or not the Gospel authors were telling the truth, they clearly intended their writings to describe real events in human history. What's more, at least some of their testimony seemed traceable to eyewitnesses. Perhaps most significantly, explaining away the martyrdoms of those who knew Jesus was a lot more difficult than I had previously thought. Why would some of these witnesses maintain their testimonies all the way to death if they had not experienced something extraordinary, perhaps even supernatural?

Little by little, the evidences eroded my skepticism. A few months later—not all at once but subtly and slowly, like a morning walk that begins in starlight but ends in sunlight and you cannot recall exactly when the dark

turned to dawn—a glimmer of confidence pierced the surface of my consciousness again. I had left behind the cultural trappings of the churches of my childhood, but I believed in the crucified and risen Jesus more than ever before. The repercussions of this newfound confidence redirected my entire life.

*How Can We Know Whether the
Resurrection Happened in History?*

Today, more than three decades after I first read *Why I Am Not a Christian*, I eagerly embrace every essential claim that seemed so unbelievable during those months of doubt. I believe in a Jewish Messiah who drew his first breaths between a virgin's knees. I believe in a wandering teacher who was crucified but who returned from the dead on the third day. I believe this divine Messiah is also the second person of the triune God. I am convinced that the same three-personed God who crafted the cosmos in the beginning will someday recreate the world and flood every crest and crevasse of the universe with justice. I do not accept any of these tenets blindly. Yet, the deeper I've delved into the claims of Christianity, the more I believe this faith remains the best explanation of reality, particu-

larly when it comes to the question of the resurrection. When I examine historical texts and artifacts, I find good reasons to believe Jesus was unlike any other man crucified by the Romans, yet also unlike any god described in ancient myths. His resurrection is only implausible if we presuppose a world where miracles are impossible.

I'm convinced there really is something different about Jesus.

When it comes to what's different about him, the resurrection stands as the cornerstone. The bodies of other perceived threats to the peace of Rome expired on their crosses, and their bodies decomposed. The myths of dying-and-rising gods describe deities who never lived at all. Jesus left a mark in history that suggests he lived and died but didn't stay dead. Historically speaking, that's what's so different about Jesus.

But how can anyone be confident that the resurrection really happened?

In a book as brief as this one, I can't dispel every doubt or provide every piece of evidence for the resurrection. My hopes are far more modest. I simply want you to recognize that the first followers of Jesus didn't claim their leader rose from the dead because of gullible ignorance or blind

faith. They knew dead people stay dead. Especially after they began to be persecuted, they had nothing to gain by persisting in their claim that Jesus had returned to life. Yet some of these women and men had encountered an event so momentous they were ready to die rather than deny they saw a once-dead man alive. These initial eyewitnesses declared what they experienced, and in some cases they died for what they declared. At least a few of their firsthand testimonies eventually found their way into the New Testament.

Even if you think the resurrection of Jesus and the existence of a “Flying Spaghetti Monster” are equally preposterous, the testimonies of the first generation of witnesses should not be dismissed lightly. Something upended the lives of these men and women and made them willing to die for what they believed they had seen. After decades of studying the historical aftermath of these events, I still believe the resurrection makes the best sense of the evidence.

What Faith Is—and Isn't

For at least a few of you, it may sound strange that I am mentioning evidence in the same context as faith. Maybe

you have understood the word *faith* the way biologist Richard Dawkins defines the term: “Faith is a state of mind that leads people to believe something—it doesn’t matter what—in the total absence of supporting evidence.” Dawkins later declares, “People believe in the resurrection not because of good evidence (there isn’t any) but because, if the resurrection is not true, Christianity becomes null and void.”⁸ Dawkins is right to recognize that without the resurrection, Christianity is meaningless. Where Dawkins swerves into the wrong lane is in his claim that faith is the enemy of evidence.

If that is what you think when you hear the word *faith*, it may be helpful for you to know that faith, at least as it was understood among the earliest Christians, has never stood in opposition to evidence. Faith is a disposition of confidence that includes evidence. “They are very much in error,” declared Augustine, “who think that we believe in Christ without any proofs of Christ.”⁹ Faith may entail more than mere acceptance of evidence, but it certainly includes no less. Far from eschewing evidence, faith seeks evidence. At its best, faith is even open to reconfiguration in response to better evidence.

Once we understand that faith and evidence aren't enemies, we begin to see that everyone lives by faith. All of us trust in presuppositions and possibilities we cannot prove beyond every possible doubt, and none of us believes all we believe solely on the basis of evidence. "When we confront the claim of the resurrection," pastor Tim Keller once pointed out, "we address it not only with logic but with a lifetime of hopes and fears and preexisting faith commitments."¹⁰ This reality is not limited to Christians. Many agnostics and atheists also acknowledge the fact that faith is not limited to religious people. Bart Ehrman, speaking as an agnostic biblical scholar, admits: "Everybody has faith in something. My agnosticism is a kind of faith."¹¹ Rhett McLaughlin of the duo Rhett and Link had this to say when he reflected on his rejection of Christianity:

There's a tendency for people like me, who've not only deconstructed but deconverted, to just . . . believe that you no longer have faith. . . . But the thing that I'm realizing is that . . . I'm still human, and I believe that faith is a feature of humanity. . . . I wholeheartedly believe that the things that I'm going to tell you are not things that I can prove.¹²

Every human being lives by faith. The question is not whether we have faith. The question is how closely our faith fits with reality.

If you are skeptical of Christian claims about the resurrection, here is all I am asking of you as you read this book: Are you open-minded enough to consider the possibility that there is a power that can reverse death? If you are, would you at least consider the evidences for the resurrection and see where the evidence leads?

A Fact to Which We Can Call Witnesses

After years of wrestling with the evidence, I remain convinced there is something different about Jesus. Unlike any other human being in all of human history, he died and returned to life, never to die again.

When you reach the end of this book, you may agree with me that a crucified man was once raised from the dead, or you might not. Either way, my hope is that you will at least recognize these claims are not made without evidence. “This is,” British journalist G. K. Chesterton once pointed out, “the sort of truth that is hard to explain because it is a fact; but it is a fact to which we can call witnesses.”¹³

Now it is time to call some witnesses.