A Brief Defence of the Historicity of Jesus's Resurrection

Background

I was invited to give a short defence of the historicity of Jesus's resurrection at the Equip 2015 [1] Easter convention. I was limited to about five minutes. This was challenging, as this subject by itself could have filled the five day conference. That said, this was a good exercise in brevity. Anyone wanting to critique what was said needs to bear in mind the time limit. I shall be happy to engage them on this topic privately.

Transcript

Dead men don't come back to life. We all know this. As the American blues musician Seasick Steve sings in his *The Dead Song*, "No one coming back from the dead—at least I haven't met 'em". Any of us would need to admit that, by our own experience, once dead, someone does not come back. Even if we accept the stories of people whom Jesus had brought back to life in the Bible, or the occasional medical miracle, we recognise that these people were only resuscitated and would eventually die again—permanently.

So how can we believe that Jesus was truly resurrected from the dead? Some people argue that the Resurrection, which is central to our faith, never happened and was fabricated by people who had an agenda.

Firstly we need to recognise that it is improbable that the story of Jesus's resurrection was made up in the first century. People simply did not expect anyone to be resurrected physically. The Greeks and pagans believed that people would live on after death as spirits in a shadowy underworld. Hades was a place where restless, almost demented, spirits would mill around aimlessly, cut off from the physical world. The Jewish Sheol was similar. However, the Jews did believed that people would be resurrected on the Last Day of God's judgement on the world. We see all of this, for example, in Ecclesiastes 9, Isaiah 38:18, Daniel 12 and Ezekiel 37.

But when Jesus was resurrected, He was restored in body (not just spiritually), and in glory as well. We see this in that He could appear and vanish suddenly, and that even though His body was wounded, it did not hinder Him. Some Greeks believed that the physical world is evil and corrupted, so a physical resurrection was undesirable for them. The story of Jesus's bodily resurrection, to be blunt, would have been too absurd for anyone in the first century to believe for it to have been made up. As N.T. Wright has said, the Greek word used to describe Jesus's resurrection implies *a life after* a life after death1.

Also, that the disciples came to a sudden and radical belief in Jesus's resurrection is undeniable. As someone once said: liars make poor martyrs. From the first sermon in Acts 2 onwards, the disciples preached Jesus's resurrection, and all the disciples suffered for doing so.

In your NIV or ESV Bible, if you turn to Mark 16:9, you will see a disclaimer like: The earliest manuscripts do not have verses 9–20. The story ends at the women discovering the empty tomb. Does this mean that the Resurrection was made up by the church later? Why else would Mark have stopped his story so abruptly? Was Mark himself uncertain about the Resurrection and did not want to elaborate? I don't believe so. The disclaimer does not mean that what follows is false or invalid, just that Mark did not originally include it as part of his story. I believe that he was clear that the Resurrection did take place and that his intention was to leave us with the question: what is the real implication of the Resurrection? The abrupt ending forces us to go read through the gospel again to see that story is not yet finished. Jesus had confidently predicted His resurrection. Prophecies from hundreds of years before accurately predicted His resurrection. Jesus has been proven trustworthy

so that we need to take all else that He had said seriously.

So now, how will you respond when you read that the young man in the robe said to the women at the grave, "He is risen!"?

- 1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVhgAiGihoA [2]
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