

35 Foundations 106 – The Resurrection on Trial

What Even Skeptical Historians Grant, and Why the Resurrection Still Wins

September 20, 2026

If you put the resurrection on trial, you don't need a jury of believers to get a conviction.

This is the idea behind the minimal facts method, created by historian Gary Habermas and later refined with New Testament scholar Michael Licona. Rather than assuming every detail in the Gospels is true, they begin from a different angle. They focus only on facts that most scholars in the field, even skeptics and agnostics, already agree on.

Then they ask a straightforward question: What best explains this evidence?

The Short List

The minimal facts approach is based on four facts that nearly all historians who study this period accept, plus a fifth that a majority agree on. Habermas calls this the “four plus one” method.

Jesus died by crucifixion under Pontius Pilate. No one seriously disputes this.

Jesus's followers truly believed they saw him alive after his death. From a skeptical historian's view, this doesn't mean he actually appeared, but it does mean they were convinced enough to change their lives because of it.

Paul, who once persecuted the church, became a dedicated follower after his own experience of what he believed was the risen Jesus. He completely changed his life, even though it cost him dearly.

Jesus's brother James, who early sources say was skeptical during Jesus's life, also converted and became a leader in the Jerusalem church.

The fifth fact, accepted by about three-quarters of scholars, is that the tomb was found empty.

That's the foundation. There's no need to assume Scripture is inspired or that miracles are possible. These are just the facts that historians can't ignore, set out together, and then the question becomes which explanation covers all of them without missing anything.

Why the Alternatives Keep Failing

For the past two hundred years, skeptics have suggested many theories to explain these facts without a resurrection. Some say the disciples hallucinated, the body was stolen, the women went to the wrong tomb, or that Jesus never actually died on the cross.

Each of these theories explains part of the evidence, but none explains all of it.

The hallucination theory might explain why some people thought they saw Jesus, but it doesn't account for group sightings or the empty tomb. The stolen body theory explains the empty tomb, but not the disciples' transformation or why Paul and James were convinced. The swoon theory, which says Jesus only fainted and later recovered, overlooks how thorough Roman execution was and doesn't explain why the disciples were willing to die claiming he had conquered death, not just survived.

The resurrection is the only explanation that covers all the facts at once, without leaving anything out. While this doesn't prove it happened, it's about as strong as historical arguments get.

A Word About the Apostles

You might hear people say, "people don't die for something they know is a lie." This is an important part of the case, but it deserves a closer look, since the common version often overstates what we can really prove about each apostle's death.

I'll cover that topic in a separate article later in this series. For now, it's enough to note that the best-documented cases – Peter, Paul, and Jesus's brother James – all had the chance to quietly step away from a risky claim, but chose not to. We'll look more closely at what the sources actually say as we continue.

Lewis and the One Miracle That Changes Everything

C.S. Lewis spent much of his career thinking about which parts of Christianity could be removed and still leave something that could truly be called Christian.

In his essay "The Grand Miracle," found in *God in the Dock*, Lewis argued that you can remove miracles from most religions and not lose much. For example, he said if you take the miracles out of the Buddha's story, the teachings remain mostly the same. Christianity, however, is different.

Lewis put it directly. If you take away the miracle at the center of the Christian claim, "there is nothing specifically Christian left."

He wasn't only talking about the resurrection by itself. He saw it as the turning point of the whole story – the moment when, as he described, God's entry into human life reverses and begins to rise again. Everything else in Scripture either leads up to that moment or follows from it.

If you remove the resurrection, you're left with just a moral teacher who died for his beliefs. If you keep it, you have what Paul said the entire faith depends on.

Reaching a Verdict

Let's do what the title suggests: put the resurrection on trial and examine it as a jury would.

A jury can't expect absolute, mathematical certainty. No historical event, and almost no legal case, provides that. Instead, a jury decides which explanation fits all the evidence beyond a reasonable doubt – not beyond all doubt, but beyond reasonable doubt.

So here's the evidence you've already been handed.

Exhibit one. A man was executed by Roman crucifixion, a method the empire had perfected specifically to guarantee death. Nobody disputes this. Not even the harshest skeptic.

Exhibit two: Soon after, Jesus's closest followers claimed – not years later, but almost right away – that they had seen him alive. This wasn't a rumor that developed over decades, but a direct and immediate claim from those who said they witnessed it.

Exhibit three: A man who had been trying to destroy this movement, even hunting down and imprisoning believers, suddenly changed completely and became one of its strongest supporters, even though it cost him his safety and reputation and ultimately his life.

Exhibit four: Jesus's brother, who early accounts say was skeptical during Jesus's life, also became convinced and became a leader in the church founded on this claim.

Exhibit five, which is considered carefully: Most historians who study this topic agree that the tomb was empty.

Now, like any good jury, you have to weigh the competing theories that try to explain this evidence away.

The defense suggests a few possibilities. Maybe the disciples were hallucinating, but hallucinations don't happen to groups of people at the same time, and they don't explain an empty tomb that anyone could check. Maybe someone stole the body, but that doesn't explain why the disciples, Paul, and James were willing to risk everything, since a stolen body brings grief, not strong conviction. Maybe Jesus never really died and just recovered, but Roman execution squads were thorough, and a badly injured man leaving his tomb wouldn't inspire people to claim he had conquered death.

Each defense theory has to explain away part of the evidence by ignoring another part. None of them account for everything.

Only one explanation fits all five exhibits without leaving any out. You're not required to accept it, just as a jury isn't forced to reach a certain verdict. But this shows the resurrection isn't just a desperate, faith-only answer as some skeptics claim. It's the explanation that best matches the evidence, using the same standards historians use for other ancient events.

I won't give you a final verdict or say that's the end of the discussion. That's not how real trials work, and it's not how I want you to approach this series. You've seen the evidence and the different theories, including their weaknesses. Now it's your turn to think it over.

What's your verdict?

Why This Still Matters

This is where the idea of walls (from my book) comes back into the discussion.

It would be easy for me to give you the minimal facts and martyrdom evidence, say it's settled, and move on. But that's what I've cautioned against in this series. If you accept a wall of evidence without checking it yourself, it's not a real foundation. It can become a kind of fortress that holds you back, just like doubt can, if you only believe it because I said so.

So check it for yourself. Read Habermas's own work on the minimal facts. Look at what Josephus actually wrote about James, not just my summary. Read Lewis's essay in full, since I've only shared a small part here.

The resurrection either happened or it didn't. It's not a claim that becomes stronger just by believing it, and serious historians don't dismiss it without thought. It stands in the middle, needing careful examination instead of assumptions, whichever side you're on.

Be like the Bereans with this question in particular. It's the key point that everything else depends on.

For Further Study

Gary Habermas's own writing and audio on the minimal facts approach, including "The Minimal Facts Approach to the Resurrection of Jesus," is available at garyhabermas.com.

Michael Licona's *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* goes into far more depth on the historical methodology behind this argument.

Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 20, Chapter 9, contains his account of the death of James, and can be read in full for free at penelope.uchicago.edu.

C.S. Lewis's essay "The Grand Miracle" is collected in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*.

Look at the actual sources. Follow the citations. Be a Berean.

If you're struggling:

- Christian Faith-Based Resources: <https://mentalhealthhotline.org/christian-faith-resources/> or call 1-866-903-3787 (24/7)
- The Hope Line: <http://thehopeline.com/> Chat with trained professionals for free 24/7.
- Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988 (call or text)

You matter. Whatever verdict you're still working toward, whatever doubts are part of that process – you don't have to reach it alone. Please stay.

William James Meyer is the author of “Do You Live In A Castle? Breaking Free From The Walls That Hold You Hostage.” He writes from a Christian perspective as a fellow traveler and Berean trying to examine the Scriptures daily and share what he finds.

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