

# Masterwork of the Messiah

## Expositional Study Of Matthew's Gospel

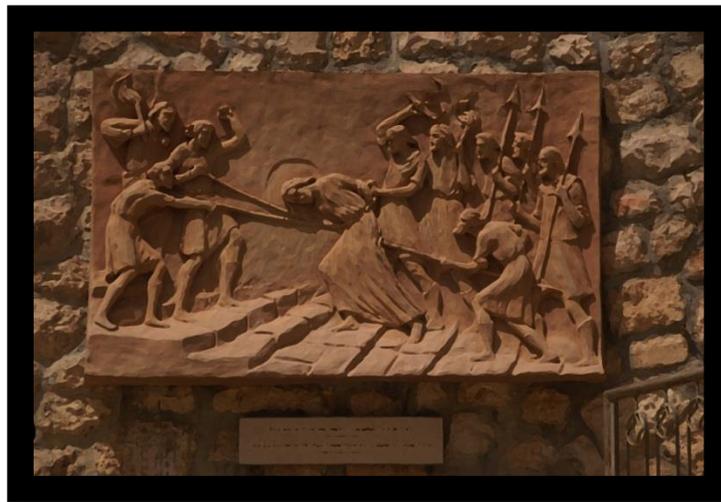
*Facing The Facts*

Matthew 28:16-17

Written By

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I have said it before, and I'll say it again. *I'm a Christian because I'm a thinking person*, not because I'm emotional or weak in some fashion and require a God of my making to lean on. Put differently, the God who created the beauty and highly complex cosmos does not want you to check your brain at the door when you consider Him. On the contrary, He has created your intricate, highly ordered mind so you can investigate the evidences of His divine fingerprints and not only discover Him through general revelation, but so you can also embrace and worship Him through special revelation (viz., the Bible).<sup>1</sup>

For instance, general revelation speaks of how God has built the cosmos so we can readily and logically surmise, if we are willing to shelve our volitional, not factual, aversion to

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<sup>1</sup> Ravi Zacharias defines faith most effectively in his book *Jesus Among Other Gods* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000): 58, First, let us clearly understand what faith is not before establishing what it is. The faith the Bible speaks of is not antithetical to reason. It is not just a will to believe, everything to the contrary notwithstanding. It is not a predisposition to force every piece of information to fit into the mold of one's desires. Faith in the biblical sense is substantive, based on the knowledge that the one in whom that faith is placed has proven that he is worthy of that trust. In its essence, faith is a confidence in the person of Jesus Christ and in His power, so that even when His power does not serve my end, my confidence in him remains because of who He is. They for the Christian is the response of trust based on who Jesus Christ claimed to be, and it results in a life that brings both mind and heart and a commitment of love to Him."

the God-concept, there is a divine, intelligent designer. From what we know of the world, intelligent agents, like man, produce complex and specified information, information which is related to events unlikely to happen on their own because of their complexity, and which typically conform to a specified pattern. Ostensibly, then, machine-like structures like the twin human DNA chains represent a high volume of CSI: they are two yards long and a trillionth-of-an-inch thick, they function like a computer by storing highly encoded information capable of filling 1,000 books with 500 pages of extremely small type, and they contain a ladder structure built on four nitrogen bases (adenine, thymine, cytosine, and guanine, typically classified by the letter A, T, C, and G). Change the carefully constructed ladder and you have something but not a man, as it were.

The mathematical probability this unique chain of human life, in this instance, formed itself by random chance is  $10^{87}$  power.<sup>2</sup> Since modern scientists believe our universe is some 20 billion years old, there is a practical problem because there are less than  $10^{17}$  seconds in 20 billion years. Additionally, there is the problem of how specific, complex information could have just randomly assembled itself into life as we know it ... to name just a few problems. Cognitively, then, it seems the most logical conclusion, based on the CSI in this instance, is to follow the evidence to a Master Designer, viz. God. Such is the nature of general revelation. It presents us with facts which can help us reason ourselves to belief in that magnificent, lofty, and powerful Being who made all of the highly specific CSI, from a DNA chain to a intricately ordered water molecule.

Special revelation is represented in how this God spoke specifically through the highly unusual book we now call the Bible. In it, He gives us equally amazing facts to demonstrate this book is the book of all books. Just the mathematical probability of Jesus fulfilling all of the some sixty-plus exact and ancient prophecies of His arrival as the Messiah is statistically and logically impossible. Just His fulfilling one of eight prophecies is, according to Josh MacDowell's *Evidence That Demands A Verdict*, a whopping  $10^{17}$ . No other holy book on the planet has this off-the-charts ability. From the Old to the New Testament, the prophetic evidence piles up to validate the Bible as God's revelatory book to mankind.

Where the person and work of Jesus is concerned, God continues to give us spectacular evidence to consider so we can move from spiritual darkness to spiritual light. Christ's bodily resurrection from the dead, which is the historical event of all events, is jam-packed with proofs crafted to arrest your attention, to grip your thinking mind, so you can, hopefully, follow the evidence to God and to redemption and salvation. Yes, the God who created general and special revelation has put before you the facts of His Son's glorious defeat of sin and death by means of the crucifixion and the empty tomb so you can cognitively embrace that information and become an eternal member of His family. Today, then, as we study the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, I must say it is time to ...

## Face The Facts (Matthew 28:16-17)

Matthew has supplied us with a plethora of facts regarding Jesus as the long-awaited divine Messiah. His narrative about the resurrection of Jesus is no exception, and, in many respects,

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<sup>2</sup> Paul S. Taylor, *The Illustrated Origins Answer Book* (Films For Christ Association, Inc.: Mesa, Arizona, 1989): 24.

stands as the pinnacle of his finely ordered proofs. His statement in verses 16 through 17 is a case deserving further analysis:

<sup>16</sup> But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated. <sup>17</sup> When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some were doubtful.

From this statement, it appears the disciples immediately headed to Galilee to meet the resurrected Jesus after the women, who had seen Jesus in the area of the empty tomb in Jerusalem, informed them of the Lord's specific command. Such is not what occurred when you consider the other gospel accounts, and this is not surprising for Matthew had, as we have seen, a penchant of combining or condensing events to buttress and support His authorial purpose. Here he moved quickly over a wide array of appearances by Jesus after His glorious resurrection to get to our responsibility, as believers, to that resurrection; namely, the proclamation of the life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ so secure converts and to create future, mature disciples. Yet in order to fully appreciate the final mandate of Jesus, I think it is all-important to face, in a fuller format, the more detailed facts of the resurrection.

Resurrection facts are based primarily on two key points:

## The Core Word

Paul, writing to the Corinthian church from Ephesus (1 Corinthians 16:8-9) around 57 A.D., gives us a creedal formula he received, most likely, from Peter and James, Christ's brother, as he states in Galatians 1:17-19:

<sup>17</sup> nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus. <sup>18</sup> Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. <sup>19</sup> But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother.

There should be no doubt Paul picked their minds and learned much from both of these great, godly men: Christ's closest disciple and one of His brothers who came to trust Him as the Messiah. The Greek word *historeo* (ἵστορέω) translated "acquainted" in our English text tells you Paul's motive in speaking with Peter. He, like a historiographer, desired firsthand, eyewitness, historical information about the same resurrected Lord who appeared to Him on the road to Damascus. Stunning.

Now, bearing in mind Paul converted to Christianity around 35 A.D., that Christ's crucifixion occurred on Friday, April 3, 33 A.D., and Paul, after his conversion, spent three years in Arabia before going to Jerusalem means the creed, in question, existed prior to 38 A.D.

<sup>3</sup> For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup> and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. <sup>6</sup> After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some

have fallen asleep;<sup>7</sup> then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles;<sup>8</sup> and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also (1 Corinthians 15).

Amazing, isn't it? Here we have the oldest attestation to the death and resurrection of Jesus. This could not be a mythical or legendary account for a couple of reasons: One, not enough time had elapsed for it to be either; two, living witness could be interviewed to dispel the myth or legend, and, three, it is written as straight historical narrative. Concerning the ancient nature and authenticity of this creed, the following quote by Michael Licona in his book *Paul Meets Muhammad* is most enlightening:

Atheist New Testament scholar Gerd Lüdemann says that the appearance traditions in the creed are “doubtless very old, since they all go back to the time before the appearance of Christ to Paul.” See Gerd Lüdemann, *The Resurrection of Christ* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2004), 31. Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz write, “the whole tradition in 15.3–7 will go back in substance to the time *before the Apostolic Council*.... It follows from this that there was already a stereotyped tradition about the death and resurrection of Jesus fifteen years after his death.” See Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 488. James D. G. Dunn writes, “This tradition, we can be entirely confident, was *formulated as tradition within months of Jesus's death*.” See James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 855.

Paul didn't cleverly concoct the resurrection story. He obtained it from eyewitnesses of the event, and from men who eventually died for their testimony. More on that later. The point we need to stress at this juncture is a simple, concise, easy to memorize theological creed concerning the death and resurrection of Christ existed in the early Church by means of viable witnesses, and it is a creed which could have been easily refuted had it been false. The fact the early Church grew and flourished and many of them eventually went to the lions for their faith, underscores the veracity and authenticity of the ancient testimony.

To all this I would add this observation. Clement of Rome, a devoted disciple of Peter, who was an eyewitness of the resurrected Lord Jesus on several occasions, also preached the essence of this ancient creed and eventually experienced martyrdom for his belief in these facts.<sup>3</sup> Hard to believe how saint after saint experienced horrific martyrdom for a belief they had received from authentic, genuine, logical witnesses.

These are facts God places in front of your thinking mind and bids you to consider and analyze. From the very beginning, really within a year of Christ's crucifixion, Jewish believers, who believed in a general resurrection (Daniel 12), but not an individual one, wholeheartedly embraced the testimony and teaching of those witnesses who had actually seen the risen Christ. And from all of this, they devised a clear, concise creed to remind saints of the historical reality

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<sup>3</sup> Gary Habermas and Michael Licona, *The Case For The Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004): 56-62. Cf. also 1 Clement 42:3. Habermas details other ancient saints who either knew some of the disciples or lived in close proximity to their time who died for their belief in the resurrection: Polycarp, Ignatius, Dionysius, Tertullian, Origen. Either these men were fools or easily deceived, or they had irrefutable evidence which changed their lives and emboldened them.

of the Lord's resurrection so they would be motivated to share that truth with sinners in needs of a living Savior.

A second line of facts comes from ...

## The Core Witnesses

Let's turn our attention, once more, back to Matthew 28 :

<sup>16</sup> But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated. <sup>17</sup> When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some were doubtful.

Obviously, from the creed mentioned by Paul, coupled with the other perspectives of post-resurrection appearances by Jesus, it is readily apparent that Matthew purposefully excluded much data in order to get right into the theological importance of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). I, however, want us to slow down (I know, it's shocking since I never do this), and touch upon these appearances in chronological fashion for they serve as the bedrock, the launch pad, and the motivating force behind Christ's command to saints in light of His absence after the glorious ascension. My attempt to reconstruct the proper historical flow will not be perfect because it is extremely difficult to effectively harmonize all the gospel data; however, I will give it a good shot in hopes of showing you the factual nature of Christ's resurrection.

According to Acts 1:3, Jesus appeared numerous times over a period of forty days after His resurrection:

<sup>3</sup> To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God.

For forty days, Jesus appeared to various people to underscore the reality of His resurrection, and, as Luke states, in some of those episodes He did what He did best: He taught His saints about the coming messianic kingdom. Wouldn't you have loved to be seated in that select group? Count me in.

Just who did He appear to? From the creed Paul presented to the Corinthians, which he received most likely from either Peter or James (the Lord's brother), to the information contained in the other gospel accounts about Christ's post-resurrection appearances, we can isolate eight chronological resurrection revelations.

- Matthew sandwiches the women meeting Christ near the tomb on resurrection morning together, when from John we know that Mary Magdalene was the first to see Jesus (Mark 16:9-11; John 20:10-18). The other women, who probably came trailing behind her, eventually encountered the same risen Lord in the same location (Matthew 28:8-10). As I said in our last study, the fact Christ chose women to be His first resurrection witnesses shows the account is factual, because their testimony would not have held

- weight equal to that of a man. The account, therefore, is straightforward and honest in its details.
- Toward the evening of Resurrection Sunday, two believers left Jerusalem for a seven mile western walk to the village of Emmaus (Luke 24:15-24). While walking and talking about what had happened to Jesus, the Prophet, during the crucifixion and how His body had gone missing according to the report of the women, Jesus pulled up alongside them and listened. When they finished recounting all the sad, sordid, shocking events, Jesus then gave them a detailed study from the Old Testament about how all these things had to happen to the Messiah in order for Him to fulfill His God-ordained mission (Luke 24:25-27). As they approached their homes, they invited Jesus to stay with them and He obliged. He even went so far as to have communion with them. Amazing. And it was just after communion they realized who He really was and at that point He simply vanished. His body did not resemble a beaten, scourged, ripped apart crucified body at all. That is never suggested in the text because that is not what they saw. They just thought He was another Jewish pilgrim on the road home after Passover. He was a pilgrim all right. Once they recognized Him, his seemingly fleshly body, a body capable of walking, talking, and presumably eating, ... simply vanished as if someone beamed Him up and out of there. Interesting story. It did not make these two disciples look very good, did it? They failed to recognize the resurrected Lord when He was up close and personal. Again, this serves to lend credibility to the fact of the resurrection.
  - Sometime prior to this appearance, in another location, Jesus had appeared privately to Peter on Resurrection Sunday. The two Emmaus disciples expressed this truth when they headed back to Jerusalem to tell the eleven disciples they had seen the resurrected Lord: Luke 24:33-34: <sup>33</sup> *And they got up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem, and found gathered together the eleven and those who were with them,* <sup>34</sup> *saying, "The Lord has really risen and has appeared to Simon."* From the sound of this, Peter had told everyone he, too, had seen Jesus, but it does not sound like anyone believed him.
  - Christ's fourth appearance occurred with the eleven disciples hold up in a locked room somewhere in Jerusalem on resurrection evening. Mark (16:14), Luke (24:36-43), and John (20:19-25) record this spectacular appearance. Luke's words give us a good picture of what happened: Luke 24:36-43: <sup>36</sup> *While they were telling these things, He Himself stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be to you."* <sup>37</sup> *But they were startled and frightened and thought that they were seeing a spirit.* <sup>38</sup> *And He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?"* <sup>39</sup> *"See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have."* <sup>40</sup> *And when He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet.* <sup>41</sup> *While they still could not believe it because of their joy and amazement, He said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?"* <sup>42</sup> *They gave Him a piece of a broiled fish;* <sup>43</sup> *and He took it and ate it before them.* Luke said Jesus employed many convincing proofs to validate the veracity of His resurrection, and we catch a glimpse of

some of them here. Imagine the setting. Ten disciples, minus Thomas (John 20:24), cowered in fear in some dimly lit room, afraid of every noise they heard outside the building. Suddenly, there's a knock at the door. Someone finally mustered the courage to open the door, and standing there were the two disciples bound for Emmaus. They let them in and then re-locked the door. The two weary disciples were excited, joyous, and talking a mile a minute, and no sooner did they get out who they had just seen, than Jesus just suddenly and without warning simply appeared in bodily form in the room. After He comforted them with words of peace, He challenged them to touch His nail-pierced hands and His feet. Why, He even ate a piece of fish to demonstrate not just the fact of His resurrection, but to underscore the unique nature of the resurrected body. Again, I direct you to the construction of the narrative. Does this sound like a bunch of men who want to create a new, fake religion? Far from it. They were scared to death and are pictured as such. Obviously, they believed in whom they saw that night because all of them, save John, would die martyrs deaths for daring to serve and worship this risen Savior. Had it all been a hoax, do you not know that one of them would have broken ranks under the pressure of persecution. But none did. Why? They had really seen Jesus post-crucifixion and post-resurrection enjoying a body beyond comprehension.

- Jesus appeared a fifth time to Thomas eight days later on the next Resurrection Sunday (John 20:24-31). We all know how quickly the skeptic turned to a firm believer when Jesus challenged Him to actually touch His wounds to verify His identity. Thomas was so overcome by the moment, he called Jesus "my Lord and my God."
- Figuring in about a week to walk to Galilee as Jesus had instructed them through the women, the disciples headed due north. After their arrival, seven of the disciples wound up fishing all night on the lake (John 21:1-3). By morning they had not caught one fish. Sounds like one of my fishing excursions. Jesus, again, appeared. This time He stood on shore. He even directed them which side of the boat to cast their net to land a haul of fish (John 21:5-6). While they attempted to bring in the net-busting amount of fish, Peter recognized the man on the beach. He dove in the water to swim to Him. Once everyone reached the beach, Jesus served them a breakfast He had lovingly prepared. He, then, went on to challenge the once cowardly Peter to be bold and feed His sheep in His absence (John 21:15-25). Peter must have listened because the book of Acts recounts His absolute bravery to share the gospel on the Temple mount with the same officials who had falsely accused and crucified Christ. The book also recounts Peter's wonderful shepherding of the growing, but persecuted New Testament Church (Acts 3-12). What happened to him? How do you account for this turnabout? How do you explain the courage Peter had as they led him to his own crucifixion cross under Nero? The factual resurrection of Jesus changed and charged him up in ways we may never comprehend. Once more, the story is written with a

straightforward, honest, bear-all style, and one you would expect from truthful eyewitnesses.

- After Christ's appearance to the disciples on the Sea of Galilee that morning, which was some fifteen to sixteen days after the original resurrection, we have unknown time duration before Jesus appeared to His disciples on a mountain in northern Galilee. Only Matthew recounts this appearance, and I think the creed references it when it speaks of Jesus appearing to five hundred saints at one time (I Corinthians 15:6). This would explain how, then, the eleven, according to Matthew, worshipped Jesus (Matthew 28:17), while others doubted. The disciples worshipped because they had already seen Him on three other occasions and knew, beyond a shadow of any doubt, that He was very much enjoying an indescribable resurrected body. The five hundred saints had not seen Jesus and that is why their response was something akin to that of the disciples when first exposed to Him. Interestingly enough, the Greek word is not the usual word for doubt, but is more precisely translated, hesitated.<sup>4</sup> They logically needed a moment to process who they saw. I'm sure questions flooded their minds: Could it be? How could it be? How is His skin so new looking? Where did all the scouring wounds go? Interestingly enough, the ancient creed Paul recites in I Corinthians 15:4 specifically states that many of these saints were still alive when he wrote this. Since Christ appeared to these saints in 33 A.D., and Paul wrote the Corinthians around 57 A.D., one can easily see how these saints were still around. Why is this important? If the account were mythical or legendary, you would not disclose witnesses like this, witness who could be tracked down and interviewed. Could it have been a mass hallucination? Really? You want to go there? When's the last time you heard of that many people being deceived all at one time by something they thought they saw? Further, how long could a hallucination story sustain you? Could it sustain you as they tethered you to a stake in a Roman arena and slowly opened the underground doors to release the wild beasts? I do not think so. Five hundred witnesses walked off the hillside that day forever changed by their close encounter with Christ in a resurrected body. When are you going to believe the evidence for the resurrection? How many viable witnesses does God have to parade across your vision before you will trust their testimony? Playing left field at our baseball stadium in High School, I sprinted back to the warning track to watch a ball from our opposing team exit the ball park. It had homerun written all over it, and because this was my field, I knew every inch of it and I knew what a real blast from the plate looked like. As I ran toward the fence, however, something shocking happened. The rocketed line drive, which was about twenty feet up in the air, simply and all of a sudden fell straight downward. It was as if an angel had just knocked it out of the sky. I scrambled back to get the ball and throw it into the infield. Boy, did I look dumb on that play, which was quite unusual. When I returned to the dugout, the coach chewed me out, and I told him my unbelievable story.

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<sup>4</sup> Expositor's Bible Commentary, *Matthew*.

He was not buying it, so after the game I took him out in the outfield. Standing there and looking up, we spotted a small, thin, taunt wire running from one light on the fence and one light along the left field base line. Amazingly, that ball hit that little wire perfectly as it attempted to leave the ball park. Nobody believed me, the witness, until they did a little investigation. Once the proof was presented, I had a whole team of believers. This story really serves as a small metaphor for the resurrection of Christ as witnessed by five hundred plus people. I think it is time to listen to them.

- Our Lord's eighth appearance occurred when He appeared privately to James, one of His brothers (1 Corinthians 15:7). Yes, Jesus had family members: brothers and sisters (Mark 6:3; John 7:5). Let me ask you. If your brother said he was the Messiah, the Son of God, how would you respond? Better yet, what would it take for you to actually believe him? James's life radically went from entrenched unbelief to open, vibrant belief. The only way you can explain this is to embrace the impact Christ's resurrected bodily appearance had on him. James went on to be a key, pivotal leader in the Jerusalem Church, and the mere fact he changed his worship from Sabbath (Saturday) to Sunday is telling enough. His encounter with his risen brother challenged, changed, and motivated him to be a saint of saints. So committed was he to Jesus, that at the age of 94, he stood by the reality of His brother's resurrection story as he was beaten and stoned to death under the direction of another corrupt Jewish High Priest. Josephus actually recounts the tragic death of a stellar man of God (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*: XX, IX). Had all this just been a hoax, a ruse, an inflated story, do you not think the old man would have said so? No, he stood his ground unto death because he knew the story about his brother's resurrection represented the essence of historical truth. Again, I ask: How many witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus does the Father have to parade in front of you before you will believe?
- The ninth appearance of Jesus occurred at the end of 40 days when He ascended back into heaven right before Pentecost (Acts 1:3-8). Once more, multiple believable witnesses wrote about what they saw that day, and they suffered martyrdom for hanging onto that story. I'd dare say these level-headed people knew who and what they had seen and that's why they had so much faith and courage. Yes, they had courage in the face of hatred because they had faced the facts of the resurrection. What about you?

Just the fact that so many people held tenaciously to the resurrection story should tell you something. Had this been a cleverly designed lie to deceive people and start a new religion, I highly doubt this many folks could have held the fallacious story together. Consider, by way of analogy, the words of Chuck Colson about the Watergate debacle:

Watergate involved in a conspiracy to cover up, perpetuated by the closest aides to the President of the United States -- the most powerful men in America, who were intensely loyal to their president. But one of them, John Dean, turned state's evidence, that is, testified against Nixon, as he put it "to save his own skin" -- and

he did so only two weeks after informing the president about what was really going on -- two weeks! The real cover-up, the lie, could only be held together for two weeks, and then everybody else jumped ship in order to save themselves. Now, the fact is that all that those around the president facing was embarrassment, maybe position. Nobody's life was at stake. But what about the disciples? Twelve powerless men, peasants really, facing not just embarrassment or political disgrace, the beatings, stoning, execution. Every single one of the disciples insisted, to their dying breaths, that they had physically seen Jesus bodily raised from the dead. Don't you think that one of those apostles would've cracked before being beheaded or stoned? That one of them would have made a deal with the authorities? None did.<sup>5</sup>

Why? Why didn't anyone crack? They had faced the facts with the minds God had given them and those facts concerning the resurrection of Jesus changed everything. It is now your turn.

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Colson, An Unholy Hoax? *Breakpoint* commentary, March 29, 2002 (No. 020329). Posted online at <http://www.epm.org/UnholyHoax.htm>.