Christians are people who have accepted the love and grace of God, and who are learning to live lives that are motivated by love for him and for others, guided and helped by God’s Spirit living in them. This is God’s gift to everyone who trusts Jesus. Christians believe the offer of forgiveness and eternal life is there for everyone, but each person must choose for themselves whether or not to accept it.

For many people, the gospel message is very unattractive because it confronts us with the idea that we cannot make it on our own. Christians have come to believe that we are all the same as the first people – we would rather try to *be* God than admit that God is bigger and better than we are.

Believing that the gospel message is actually true forces us to take ourselves out of the centre of the universe and put God there instead. To do this, we have to admit that someone else knows more than we do and is more important than us. God has every right to decide how the world should work, and he is not answerable to us – we are answerable to him.

Christians believe that God knows each of us completely – our best and our worst and everything in between. Even though none of our faults and failures are hidden from him, he loves us so much that he was willing to pay any price to ***save*** us. You could say that God would rather die than live without us – now and in eternity. Believing the gospel changes the way a person thinks and acts in their life now. It also offers a confident hope that this new relationship with God will continue after death – that nothing will ever be able to separate God’s people from his love.

**Thinking about what Christians call “the resurrection” of Jesus..**

1. **Did Jesus actually die?**

In the first century, Jewish leaders wanted the victims of crucifixion dead and buried before the Jewish sabbath started, so the executioners broke the victims’ legs, leaving them unable to push themselves up to breathe. However, when they came to break Jesus’ legs, they saw that he was already dead.

To confirm this, one of the Roman soldiers stabbed Jesus’ side with a spear, drawing blood and water- medical evidence that he had already died. Because Jesus’ death was unusually quick, Pilate double-checked with the centurion that Jesus had already died.

1. **Did the disciples accidentally look in the wrong tomb?**

Mark’s biography records that Mary Magdalene was there when Jesus’ body was laid in the tomb on the Friday evening. So she knew which tomb to go back to. Joseph of Arimathea is even less likely to have forgotten the tomb in which Jesus was placed, because he owned it. The disciples would have been able to spot the correct tomb because there were Roman soldiers guarding it.

1. **Did the disciples deliberately make up the story about Jesus’ tomb being empty**

It is hard to imagine that the disciples would have been willing to die a martyr’s death for a cause they knew to be false — yet many of them did die for their commitment that Jesus had been raised. Today, suicide bombers are prepared to die for what they believe to be true (whether or not it actually is true). But no one is stubborn enough to die for what they know to be false. The Jewish and Roman leaders would have gladly silenced the new movement by publicly showing the dead body if the body was still in the tomb.

1. **Did grave-robbers steal the body?**

Grave-robbing did happen in the first century, and maybe because Pilate posted the sign ‘King of the Jews’ over Jesus’ head as he died, some might have thought that this king’s grave might have contained riches. Why would the robbers have stolen a worthless corpse, and left the valuable burial cloths behind? (There are no records of anything else worth stealing being placed with Jesus). But it is unlikely that robbers would have managed to get past the Roman guards on duty at the tomb anyway.

1. **Did the disciples remove the body?**

Were the disciples expecting Jesus to rise again, and so they removed the body to try to make it look like Jesus had been raised to life? It is clear from the reactions of the disciples that they were not expecting Jesus to come back to life, so them ‘engineering’ his resurrection is not logical.

But the Jewish leaders started this rumour. Matthew’s biography of Jesus records that some of the guards from the tomb..

 *“went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, ‘You are to say, “His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.” If this report gets to the Roman governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.’ So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.”*

But could there be any truth behind the rumour? could the disciples have removed the body?

The disciples had already shown themselves to be cowardly, by running away when Jesus was arrested—Were they suddenly courageous enough to take on the professionally trained Roman guards, knowing that Jesus had been killed by them? If they did get past the guard, why were they never charged with the theft of the corpse, which was state property? That such a charge was never made indicates that there was no evidence of it having happened.

1. **Did the Jewish leaders remove the body?**

Of all the tactics the leaders could have tried to stop the new movement, the one that would have worked best would have been producing either Jesus’ body or witnesses stating that they had removed and destroyed the body. If they had Jesus’ body, then they would have shown it publicly.

1. **Did the Roman authorities remove the body?**

The ‘Jesus movement’ obviously had political overtones, with people claiming that Jesus was King of the Jews. The Roman leaders had as much desire as the Jewish leaders to clamp down on the new movement, because they feared it would lead to a popular uprising against their brutal occupation. So maybe they moved the body?

But for much the same reasons as if the Jewish authorities had taken the body, it is also highly unlikely that the Roman ones did. As soon as the new movement began gathering pace (which it did very quickly), they could have produced Jesus’ corpse and stopped the movement in its tracks. But they did not.

1. **Did the disciples actually see Jesus alive again ?**

Were they just hallucinating? After all, it is not uncommon for those who are grieving to think that they have glimpsed or heard their loved one after their death. But the historical accounts we have of Jesus’ appearances do not merely involve people *seeing* him, they also include people *touching* him and *eating* with him.

Hallucinations happen to individuals, not groups, yet the first century texts tell us that Jesus appeared to Cleopas and his friend; to eleven of the disciples; to a group at breakfast; and to five hundred people at once. Paul wrote about this last event while most of the eye-witnesses were still alive- able to confirm or deny the story.

Some people say that Mary Magdalene was sufficiently emotional to hallucinate, and it is true that some people are more susceptible to hallucinations than others. But the resurrection appearances are recorded as having happened to a wide variety of people — men and women; tough fishermen, sneaky tax-collectors.. Thomas the sceptic was an unlikely person to hallucinate, yet even he was very quickly convinced that Jesus had come back to life.

Hallucinations tend to increase in severity over time, as the condition becomes worse, yet the historical accounts tell us that the sightings of Jesus stopped abruptly after forty days.

1. **Did the disciples expect to see Jesus alive?**

No-one expects to see a dead person alive again — not even Jesus’ friends did. So on one of the first occasions when they saw the resurrected Jesus, it is not surprising that they assumed it was a ghost. “But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said to them, ‘Look at my hands and my feet.. Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.’ Then he showed them his hands and feet, and ate some fish with them.”

**What do you think about the resurrection of Jesus?**

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