

COLD-CASE CHRISTIANITY

A HOMICIDE DETECTIVE INVESTIGATES
THE CLAIMS OF THE GOSPELS

J. WARNER
WALLACE

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Foreword by

LEE STROBEL

I loved hanging out with homicide detectives.

I started my journalism career as a general assignment reporter on the overnight shift at the *Chicago Tribune*, and that meant covering the frequent murders committed around the city—crime-syndicate hits, gang-related violence, domestic disputes gone awry, robberies that got out of hand. Later I was assigned to the criminal courts, where I reported on the major homicide trials from around Cook County.

All of which meant that I spent a lot of time interviewing and socializing with homicide detectives. I liked them because they were no-nonsense, get-to-the-point people, with an uncanny ability to cut through the fog of deception that defendants used to cover their tracks. These street-toughened investigators were seldom fooled by a phony alibi or a flimsy excuse as they systematically unraveled the mysteries that confounded everyone else. They were evidence driven—“just the facts, ma’am,” as the old Jack Webb character in *Dragnet* used to say—and so was I, constantly checking and rechecking my information before publishing my reports for the city to see.

Back then, I was an atheist. I thought that faith in God was based on conjecture, wishful thinking, and emotions; in fact, the idea that there might be evidence supporting the existence of God was totally alien to me. And I wasn't alone.

J. Warner Wallace is a cold-case homicide investigator who also started out as an outspoken spiritual skeptic. He began with the assumption that the supernatural was impossible. Yet when he diligently applied his skills as a detective—allowing the evidence to take him wherever it would lead—he came to a far different conclusion. Assessing the evidence with razor-like precision, he solved the most important mystery of all time—whether Jesus of Nazareth is the unique Son of God.

In his savvy and captivating book, Jim will introduce you to the kinds of tools and techniques that he routinely uses to crack unsolved murders that have long baffled other cops. He will show you how this same analytical thinking can be used to crack the case of a long-ago killing on a cross—and the incredible resurrection that followed. It's a fascinating process, with Jim drawing on his quarter century of police experience to explain how and why the evidence of history decisively tips the scales in favor of Christianity.

If you're a spiritual skeptic like Jim and I were for many years, then you'll find this investigative adventure to be an irresistible, eye-opening, and potentially life-changing journey, full of helpful insights and wisdom. Like a good cop, I hope you'll pursue the evidence to the conclusion it ultimately supports. That verdict, in the end, will be yours to reach.

If you're a follower of Jesus, then Jim's account will not only bolster your own faith, but also sharpen your skills in explaining to others why so many incisive thinkers throughout history have concluded that Christianity is uniquely credible and trustworthy.

Undoubtedly, you've seen media stories that have traced how cold-case detectives have pieced together an evidential puzzle in order to solve the most perplexing of homicides. Perhaps one of those accounts was based on a case that Jim actually helped crack. But as important as these investigations are, none of them approach the significance of the case that this book tackles.

So get ready to shadow Jim as he probes the evidence for faith. You'll find his approach to be compelling, his logic to be sound, and his conclusions to be amply supported. Unravel with him the historical case for Jesus—and discover its eternal implications for you and all the people you know.

Lee Strobel, author of The Case for Christ and The Case for Faith; www.LeeStrobel.com

THE DETECTIVE WAY

I got the call at about 1:00 a.m. Detectives who are assigned to the homicide unit also investigate officer-involved shootings (OISs), and all of us on the OIS team were called out for this one. When I arrived at the scene, Officer Mark Walker was standing by his patrol car, talking with a sergeant, and waiting for our arrival. I shook his hand, made sure he was ready to talk about the shooting, and began to walk through the events that precipitated our “callout.”

Mark told me that he was working patrol when he saw a man driving down the street, swerving from lane to lane as though he was drunk. He pulled the driver over and approached his car. When he leaned in to talk to the man, he could smell the alcohol on his breath. Mark asked the man to step out from the car, and the driver reluctantly complied. As the man stood outside his car, Mark could see that he was angry and defiant. Mark decided to conduct a quick “pat-down” search to make sure the irritated driver wasn’t carrying any weapons. Mark had no idea that the driver was Jacob Stevens, a parolee with a long arrest record in an adjacent city. Jacob had just been released from state prison. He was on parole for an assault charge, and tonight he was carrying a loaded Colt .45-caliber pistol hidden in his waistband. Jacob knew that he would go back to jail if the gun was discovered, and he was determined to stay out of jail.

When Mark asked Jacob Stevens to turn around so he could conduct the pat-down search, Jacob turned away for a moment, pulled his gun, and then turned back toward Mark, pointing the gun at Mark’s chest.

“I knew that he had the drop on me,” Mark told me as he recalled the events. “His gun was already drawn and pointed at me before I could even get my hand on mine.”

Jacob had no intention of discussing the situation with Mark. He'd already decided that he wasn't going back to jail, even if it meant killing this police officer. Jacob pointed his gun at Mark and started to squeeze the trigger. Mark was about to enter the fight of his life, and he was starting off with a distinct disadvantage; he was already seconds behind his opponent.

All of us who work in law enforcement understand the importance of wearing our bullet-proof vests. When we first became officers, we were trained with these vests, and at some point most of us were shown how the vests performed in *live-fire* tests. We knew that they could stop a bullet, including a .45 round. On this night, Mark was going to put his vest to the test.

"I just tensed my stomach muscles and prepared to take the shot as I pulled my gun out of the holster. I knew he was going to get the first round off."

While Mark knew *that* his vest could sustain the impact of a .45-caliber round, tonight he trusted *in* the vest for the very first time. In that singular moment, Mark went from "belief that" to "belief in." It's one thing to believe that the vest can save a life; it's another thing to trust it to save your own life. Mark obviously survived the shooting and lived to describe it for us. The lesson I learned from Mark, however, had far more impact on my life than he would ever know.

FROM "BELIEF THAT" TO "BELIEF IN"

I was thirty-five years old before I first paid attention to a pastor's sermon. A fellow officer had been inviting me to church for many months, and while I was able to put him off for some time, I eventually acquiesced and attended a Sunday-morning service with my family. I managed to ignore most of what the pastor talked about until he began to paint a picture of Jesus that caught my attention. He characterized Jesus as a really smart guy who had some remarkably wise things to say about life, family, relationships, and work. I began to believe *that* this might be true. While I was uninterested in bowing my knee to Jesus as God, I was at least willing to listen to Jesus as a teacher. A week later I purchased my first Bible.

My friends knew me as an angry atheist, a skeptic who thoughtfully dissected Christians and the Christian worldview, yet I suddenly found myself reading the Gospels to hear what Jesus had to say. Something about the Gospels caught my attention, more as an investigator than as someone interested in the ancient philosophy of an imaginary sage. By this time in my life, I had already served as a patrol officer and a member of the Gang Detail, the Metro

Team (investigating street narcotics), the SWAT Team, and the Crime Impact Team (investigating career criminals). I had interviewed hundreds (if not thousands) of eyewitnesses and suspects. I had become familiar with the nature of eyewitness statements, and I understood how testimony was evaluated in a court of law. Something about the Gospels struck me as more than mythological storytelling. The Gospels actually appeared to be ancient eyewitness accounts.

I conducted so many interviews and had such success getting suspects to “cop-out” that my department sent me to a number of investigative schools to refine my skills; I was eventually trained in Forensic Statement Analysis (FSA). By carefully employing this methodology and scrutinizing a suspect’s choice of pronouns, use of tensed language, compression or expansion of time (along with many other linguistic tendencies), I was typically able to determine if he or she committed the crime, and I could often establish the time of day when the crime actually occurred! If this technique could provide me with such incredible insight into the statements of suspects and witnesses, why couldn’t it be used to investigate the claims of the Gospels? I began to use FSA as I studied the gospel of Mark. Within a month, and in spite of my deep skepticism and hesitation, I concluded that Mark’s gospel was the eyewitness account of the apostle Peter. I was beginning to move from a belief *that* Jesus was a wise teacher to a belief *in* what He said about Himself. I began a journey from casual assent to committed trust, from *belief that* to *belief in*.

In my current assignment, I investigate cold-case murders. Unlike other lesser crimes, an unsolved homicide is never closed; time doesn’t *run out* on a murder investigation. My particular agency has dozens of unsolved murders that remain open, waiting for someone to take the time to reexamine them. There are many similarities between investigating cold cases and investigating the claims of Christianity. Cold-case homicides are events from the distant past for which there is often little or no forensic evidence. These kinds of cases are sometimes solved on the basis of eyewitness testimony, even though many years have passed between the point of the crime and the point of the investigation. While there may not be any surviving eyewitnesses to the actual murder, there are often witnesses available who can help puzzle together the events leading up to the crime or the behavior of a suspect following the crime. These witnesses can be evaluated in a number of ways to confirm their reliability. In the end, a strong “circumstantial” case can usually be made by collecting witness statements and verifying

these observations with what little forensic evidence is available. By taking this approach, I have arrested and successfully prosecuted a number of cold-case suspects who thought they had gotten away with murder.

Christianity makes a claim about an event from the distant past for which there is little or no forensic evidence. Like cold cases, the truth about what happened can be discovered by examining the statements of eyewitnesses and comparing them with what little additional evidence is accessible to us. If the eyewitnesses can be evaluated (and their statements can be verified by what we have available), an equally strong circumstantial case can be made for the claims of the New Testament. But are there any reliable eyewitness statements in existence to corroborate in the first place? This became the most important question I had to answer in my personal investigation of Christianity. Were the gospel narratives *eyewitness accounts*, or were they only *moralistic mythologies*? Were the Gospels reliable, or were they filled with untrustworthy, supernatural absurdities? The most important questions I could ask about Christianity just so happened to fall within my area of expertise.

I hope to share some of that expertise with you in this book. Somewhere on my journey from “belief that” to “belief in,” a friend told me about C. S. Lewis. After reading *Mere Christianity*, I purchased everything Lewis had written. One quote from *God in the Dock* stuck with me through the years. Lewis correctly noted, “Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of no importance, and, if true, is of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important.”¹ Christianity, if it is true, is worthy of our investigation. Over the years I’ve retained my skepticism and my desperate need to examine the facts, even as I’ve journeyed from “belief that” to “belief in.” I am still a detective, after all. I think I’ve learned a few things that may help you investigate the truth claims of the Bible.

I will tell you up front that I am going to provide you with a number of examples from my career as a homicide and cold-case detective as I share what I’ve learned over the years; I will be telling some *cop stories*. I’ve carefully edited these examples, however, changing the names of those who were involved and modifying the details of each case slightly to protect the officers and victims. I’ve had the privilege of working some of the most important and well-publicized cases our city has encountered in the past twenty years. While I want you to learn from what we did right and what we did wrong, I want to respect the privacy of the detectives (and victims’ families) along the way.

If you're a skeptic who rejects the Bible like I did, my experiences and insights might help you assess the gospel writers in a new light. If you're someone who has encountered Christians who were unprepared to defend what they believe, I'd like to encourage you to be patient with us because the Christian tradition is actually intellectually robust and satisfying, even if we believers are occasionally unable to respond to your challenges. The answers are available; you don't have to turn off your brain to be a believer. Yes, it is possible to become a Christian *because* of the evidence rather than *in spite* of the evidence. Many of us have done just that.

If you're already a believer, my experiences might provide you with a few tools that can help you defend your faith in a more vigorous and informed way. You may learn something new about the history of Christianity or the nature and power of evidence. I want to encourage you to become an informed Christian, to worship God with your mind, and to prepare yourself as a Christian *case maker*. Let's start by examining ten simple principles of evidence that may change the way you look at Christianity forever.

Section 1

LEARN TO BE A DETECTIVE

Ten important principles every aspiring detective needs to master



LEARN HOW TO “INFER”

“I hate these kinds of cases,” Mark muttered as he carefully pulled back the sheet on the bed. Detective Mark Richardson had a child of his own about the same age as the victim. Nothing is more disturbing than the homicide of a small infant, and it was Mark’s turn to handle this murder. Three of us stood there and examined the scene while we waited for the coroner’s investigator to arrive. Two of us were glad it wasn’t our turn.

“How do parents do this kind of thing to their own kids?” Mark posed the question rhetorically, as if he didn’t know the kind of response he was going to get from our senior partner.

“Don’t call this dirtbag a ‘parent,’”

Al responded, casting a look of disgust in the direction of the disheveled parolee sitting on the couch down the hall. “If he did this, he’s nothing more than the sperm donor for this kid.”

I often get called out to assist members of our homicide unit at suspicious death scenes such as these when the manner of death is not immediately obvious. Better safe than sorry; these scenes have to be worked as homicides (until we determine otherwise), or



Cold-Case Homicides

While most felonious crime investigations are limited by a *statute of limitations* (a legislated period of time, beyond which the case cannot be legally prosecuted), homicides have no such restriction. This means that *fresh* homicides, should they go unsolved, can be investigated many years after they were committed. Investigators who have experience with cold cases can sometimes recognize the investigative pitfalls that cause cases to go cold in the first place.

they may become cold cases that I will eventually have to add to my list. The situation surrounding this death was suspicious, so I got called to lend a hand. The baby appeared to have asphyxiated as he was lying in his father's bed, just feet away from an unused crib located in the same room. Mom and dad had recently separated, and the baby's father had a history of violence against his wife going back several years. The baby's mother was no longer living at the house, and she often worried about the safety of her child. Her husband refused to release the baby to her, and she was afraid to seek legal help to retrieve the infant, based on her husband's violent nature. To make matters worse, her husband made several threats about strangling the boy in an effort to terrorize her.

We observed that the house was generally filthy and unkempt, and there were signs of drug use in the living room. When we first contacted the victim's father, he seemed nonresponsive and hostile. He initially refused to answer simple questions and displayed a general distrust of law enforcement personnel. He was a parolee with a history of drug use, domestic violence, and felonious behavior. At first glance, one might suspect that this man was capable of doing the unthinkable.

We called the coroner as we began to collect evidence and photograph everything in sight, and we didn't touch the body until the coroner's investigator arrived. Only then were we able to get a clear picture of the baby's condition. As we removed the bedding around the body and examined the child more closely, we discovered that he was surprisingly clean and tidy. He looked healthy and well fed. He was lying next to a bottle of fresh formula, cleanly dressed in a new diaper and pajama suit. His hair was washed, and he was lying next to a long pillow that had been propped up against one side of his torso. A second long pillow appeared to have been propped against the other side of the baby, but this pillow was now lying on the floor. The baby was lying, facedown, on the bed, a short distance from the first pillow. There were no signs of neglect or abuse on the child, not a single bruise or suspicious mark.

In our follow-up interview of the baby's father, Al came to learn that the child was his greatest treasure. In spite of his many admitted failures and his emotionless, hardened exterior, the man's one joy was the baby. He carefully slept with the infant every night and was so concerned about sudden infant death syndrome that he placed the child, faceup, between two large pillows next to him on the bed so he could monitor his breathing. On this particular

night, one of the two pillows rolled off the bed, and the baby managed to roll over on his stomach. Given everything we saw at the scene and the condition of the baby, we ruled his asphyxiation an accidental death. Al agreed that this was not a homicide.

THINKING LIKE A DETECTIVE

As investigators, we just employed a methodology known as *abductive reasoning* (also known as “inferring to the most reasonable explanation”) in order to determine what we had at this scene. We collected all the evidential data and made a mental list of the raw facts. We then



Inferences and Reasonable Inferences

To *infer* means “to gather in.” In logic, inference refers to the process of collecting data from numerous sources, and then drawing conclusions on the basis of this evidence. In legal terms, an inference is a “deduction of fact that may logically and reasonably be drawn from another fact or group of facts found or otherwise established” (Cal Evid Code § 600 [b]).

In addition, courts across the land instruct jurors to draw “reasonable inferences.” These are described as “conclusions which are regarded as logical by reasonable people in the light of their experience in life.” *Lannon v. Hogan*, 719 F.2d 518, 521, (1st Cir. Mass. 1983).

developed a list of the possible explanations that might account for the scene in general. Finally, we compared the evidence to the potential explanations and determined which explanation was, in fact, the most reasonable inference in light of the evidence.

As it turns out, detectives aren’t the only people who use abductive reasoning in an effort to figure out what really happened. Historians, scientists, and all the rest of us (regardless of vocation or avocation) have experience as detectives. In fact, most of us have become accomplished investigators as a matter of necessity and practice, and we’ve been employing abductive reasoning without giving it much thought. I had a partner once who gave me a bit of parental advice. Dave was a few years older than I was, and he had been working patrol for many years. He was a seasoned and salty officer,

streetwise, cynical, and infinitely practical. He had two children who were already married when mine were still in high school. He was full of sage advice (along with some other stuff).

“Jim, let me tell ya something about kids. I love my two boys. I remember when they were in high school and used to go out with their friends on the weekends. I would stay up late and

wait for them to come home. As soon as they walked in the door, I would get up off the couch and give them a big hug.”

This struck me as a bit odd, given what I knew about Dave. He seldom exposed a sensitive side. “Wow, Dave, I have to tell you that I don’t usually think of you as a touchy-feely kind of guy.”

“I’m not, you moron,” Dave said, returning to form. “I hug them as tightly as possible so I can get close enough to smell them. I’m not a fool. I can tell if they’ve been smoking dope or drinking within seconds.”

You see, Dave was an evidentialist, and he applied his reasoning skills to his experience as a parent. The smell of alcohol or marijuana would serve as evidence that he would later take into consideration as he was evaluating the possible activities of his children. Dave was thinking *abductively*. I bet you’ve done something similar in your role as a parent, a spouse, a son, or a daughter.

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN *POSSIBLE* AND *REASONABLE*

All of us have learned the intuitive difference between *possible* and *reasonable*. When it comes right down to it, just about anything is *possible*. You may not even be reading this



Speculation

Speculation is dangerously nonevidential by its very definition:

“Reasoning based on inconclusive evidence; conjecture or supposition” (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Fourth Edition, 2003).

“A hypothesis that has been formed by speculating or conjecturing, usually with little hard evidence” (*Collins Thesaurus of the English Language—Complete and Unabridged* 2nd Edition, 1995, 2002).

book right now, even though you think that you are. It’s *possible* that aliens covertly kidnapped you last night and have induced a dreamlike, out-of-body, extraterrestrial hallucination. While you think this experience of reading is real, you may actually wake up tomorrow morning to discover yourself in an alien spaceship. But let’s face it, that’s not reasonable, is it?

While it’s interesting to imagine the *possibilities*, it’s important to return eventually to what’s *reasonable*, especially when the truth is at stake. That’s why judges across the land carefully instruct juries to

refrain from what is known as “speculation” when considering the explanations for what has occurred in a case. Jurors are told that they “must use only the evidence that is presented”⁵ during the trial. They are told to resist the temptation to consider the attorney’s opinions about unsupported possibilities and to ignore unsupported speculation wherever they may hear it.

We also tell jurors to resist the impulse to stray from the evidence offered and ask questions like “What if ...?” or “Isn’t it possible that ...?” when these questions are driven by evidentially unsupported speculation. They must instead limit themselves to what’s reasonable in light of the evidence that has been presented to them.

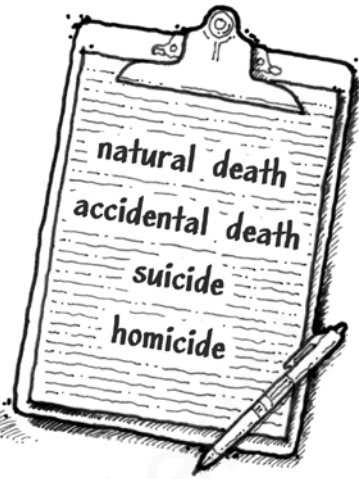
In the end, our criminal courts place a high standard on *reasonableness*, and that’s important as we think about the process of abductive reasoning. This rational approach to determining truth will help us come to the most reasonable conclusion in light of the evidence. It can be applied to more than criminal cases; we can apply the process of *abduction* to our spiritual investigations as well. But first, let’s examine the concept with a real-life example from the world of homicide investigations.

ABDUCTIVE REASONING AND DEAD GUYS

Let’s use the example of another death scene to fully illustrate the process. You and I have been called out to a “dead-body scene”—a location where a deceased person has been discovered and the circumstances seem rather suspicious. While scenes like this are sometimes homicides, they are often less sinister; there are a few other explanations. Deaths fall into one of four categories: natural deaths, accidental deaths, suicides, or homicides. It’s our job to figure out which of the four explanations is the most reasonable in the following scenario.

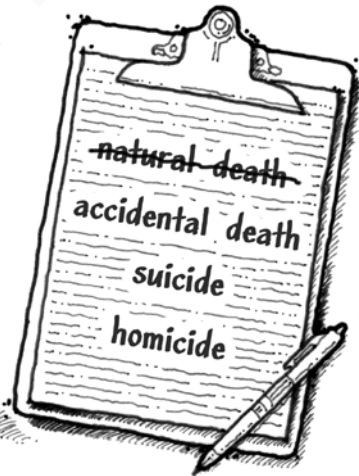
We have been called to the scene of a DBR (a “Dead Body Report”) to assist patrol officers who have already arrived and secured the location. Here are the facts we are given when we enter the room: A young man was discovered on the floor of his apartment when his roommate returned from work. The man was lying facedown. The man was cold to the touch, nonresponsive, and stiff. Okay, given these minimal facts, it is clear that we actually do have a dead guy, but which of the four potential explanations is most reasonable given the facts? Is this death a natural death, an accident, a suicide, or a homicide?

Dead Man Lying Face Down



Given the minimal facts so far, all four of the potential explanations are still in play, aren't they? Unless we have something more to add evidentially, it will be difficult to decide if this case should be worked as a homicide or simply documented as something other than criminal.

Dead Man Lying Face Down Pool of Blood



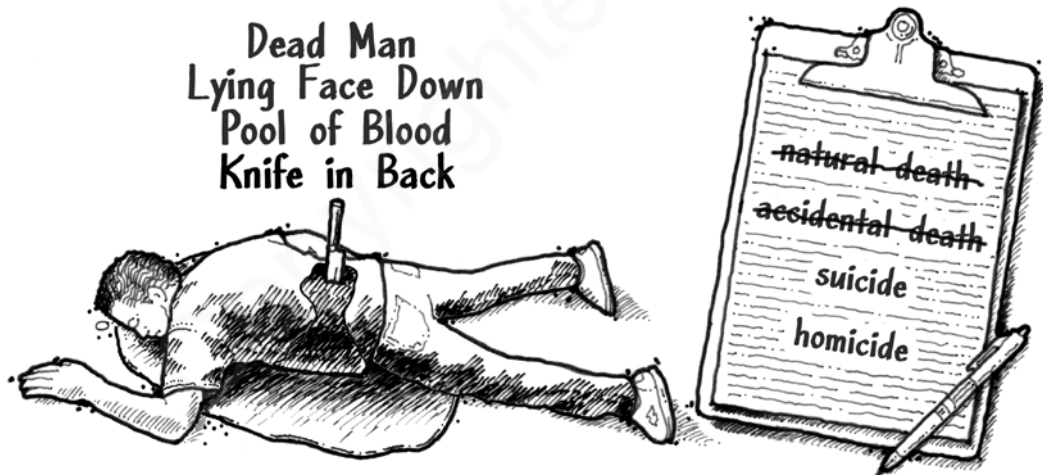
Let's change the scenario slightly and add a new piece of evidence to see if it will help. Imagine that we entered the room and observed that the man was lying in a pool of his own blood and that this blood seemed to be coming from the area of his abdomen (under his body). These are the new minimal facts: (1) a man is dead, (2) lying facedown on the floor, (3) in a pool of blood that seems to be coming from the front of the man's lower abdomen. Given

this new set of facts, is there any direction our investigation might take? Are any of our four explanations more or less reasonable?

Given the new evidence, we may be comfortable in removing the *natural death* explanation from our consideration. After all, what kind of natural event in the human body would cause someone to bleed from his lower abdomen? Without an orifice from which to bleed naturally, this does seem to be an unfounded conclusion to draw; a natural death might be *possible*, but it isn't *reasonable*.

What about the other three explanations? Could this still be an accidental death? Sure, the man could have tripped and fallen on something (we wouldn't know this until we turned him over). What about a suicide or a homicide? It seems that these three remaining explanations are still reasonable in light of what limited evidence we have about this case. Until we learn a bit more, it will be difficult to decide which of these final three options is the most reasonable.

Let's add a new dimension to the case. Imagine that we enter the room and see the man lying on the floor in a pool of his own blood, but now we observe a large knife stuck in his lower back. This presents us with a new set of facts: (1) the man is dead, (2) lying facedown on the floor, (3) in a pool of blood, and (4) there is a knife stuck in the man's lower back.

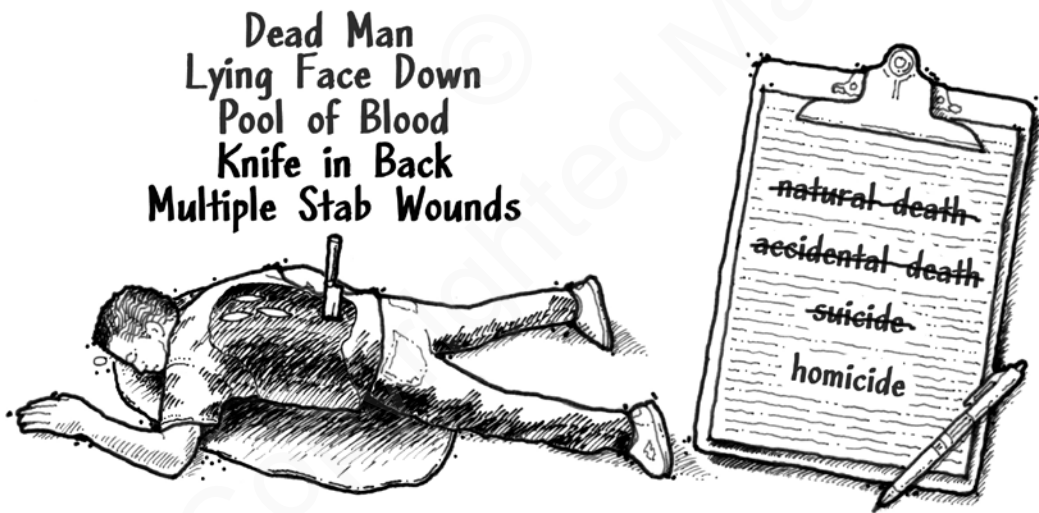


The presence of a knife in the victim's back seems to eliminate as unreasonable the conclusion that he died accidentally. It's hard to imagine an accident that would account for this fact; an accidental death might be *possible*, but it's not *reasonable*. If nothing else, the presence of the knife

most certainly affirms the unreasonable nature of a natural death, doesn't it? The most reasonable remaining explanations are either suicide or homicide, and suicide seems less and less likely, given the fact that the victim's wound is located on his back. But since the wound is located in the lower portion of his back (within his reach), let's leave this option on the table for now.

Imagine, however, that a new fact has entered into our scenario. Imagine that we discover three extra wounds on the victim's upper back, in addition to the one we observed earlier. Our fact list now includes (1) a man who is dead, (2) lying facedown on the floor, (3) in a pool of blood, (4) with multiple knife wounds on his back. Our reasonable explanations are dwindling, aren't they?

In this situation, natural death, accidental death, and suicide seem out of the question. While someone may argue that they are still *possible*, few would recognize them as *reasonable*. The most reasonable conclusion in light of the evidence is simply that this man was murdered. As responsible detectives, you and I would have no choice but to initiate a homicide investigation.



MAKING MORE DIFFICULT DISTINCTIONS

We just used abductive reasoning to determine which explanation most reasonably explained what happened at this scene. It was simple, right? But what if the scenario is more ambiguous than our dead-body scene? What if two competing explanations seem similarly reasonable? Are there any rules or principles that might help us distinguish between the most reasonable explanation and a close contender? Well, over the years, I've given this a lot of thought as I've

investigated potential homicide suspects in cold-case murders. When considering two or more closely competing explanations for a particular event (or suspects in a murder), I now assess the following factors (keep in mind that these terms are mine and may not reflect the language of other philosophers or thinkers in the area of abductive reasoning):

THE TRUTH MUST BE FEASIBLE

(The explanation has explanatory viability)

Before I even begin to think about the evidence related to a particular murder suspect, I need to make sure that he or she was available to commit the crime in the first place. I investigate the *alibis* of potential suspects, eliminating those who are simply impossibilities based on confirmed alibis.

THE TRUTH WILL USUALLY BE STRAIGHTFORWARD

(The explanation demonstrates explanatory simplicity)

When considering a number of suspects, I look for the man or woman who most simply accounts for the evidence. If one person can account for the evidence (rather than some theory that requires three or four different potential suspects to account for the same evidence), he or she is most likely the killer.

THE TRUTH SHOULD BE EXHAUSTIVE

(The explanation displays explanatory depth)

I also consider the suspect who most exhaustively explains the evidence that I have in a case. While a particular suspect may explain one, two, or three pieces of evidence, the suspect who accounts for most (or all) of the evidence is typically the killer.

THE TRUTH MUST BE LOGICAL

(The explanation possesses explanatory consistency)

The truth is rational; for this reason the truth about the identity of my killer must also *make sense*. Suspects commit murders for reasons of one kind or another, even if these reasons seem insufficient to you and me. The true killer will *make sense* to the members of the jury once they understand his or her misguided motivation. Conversely, some candidates will appear logically inconsistent because they lack motive altogether.

THE TRUTH WILL BE SUPERIOR

(The explanation achieves explanatory superiority)

Finally, I recognize that one of my suspects is unique in the superior way that he or she accounts for the evidence. In essence, this particular suspect is a far better choice when compared to other candidates who are offered. The quality of his or her connection to the evidence is better. When I see this characteristic of *explanatory superiority*, I know I have my killer.

When a suspect meets these five criteria, I am confident that I have reached the most reasonable conclusion; I know I have identified the killer.

AN ANCIENT DEATH-SCENE INVESTIGATION

Now it's time to apply this form of reasoning to a death scene that has been the topic of discussion for over two thousand years. What happened to Jesus of Nazareth? How can we explain His empty tomb? Did His disciples steal His body? Was He only injured on the cross and later recovered? Did He actually die and resurrect from the dead? We can approach these questions as detectives, using abductive reasoning.

The question of Jesus's fate might be compared to our dead-body investigation. We examined our death scene by first identifying the characteristics of the scene (the facts and pieces of evidence). We next acknowledged a number of potential explanations that might account for what we observed. Let's apply that same approach to the issue of the alleged death and resurrection of Jesus.

Dr. Gary Habermas⁶ and Professor Mike Licona⁷ have taken the time to identify the "minimal facts" (or evidences) related to the resurrection. While there are many claims in the New Testament related to this important event, not all are accepted by skeptics and wary investigators. Habermas and Licona surveyed the most respected and well-established historical scholars and identified a number of facts that *are* accepted by the vast majority of researchers in the field.

They limited their list to those facts that were strongly supported (using the criteria of textual critics) and to those facts that were granted by virtually all scholars (from skeptics to conservative Christians). Habermas and Licona eventually wrote about their findings in *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*.⁸

As a skeptic myself, I formed a list of New Testament claims as I first investigated the resurrection. When I was an unbeliever, I found four of Habermas and Licona’s minimal facts to be the most substantiated by both friends and foes of Christianity:

1. Jesus died on the cross and was buried.
2. Jesus’s tomb was empty and no one ever produced His body.
3. Jesus’s disciples believed that they saw Jesus resurrected from the dead.
4. Jesus’s disciples were transformed following their alleged resurrection observations.

You’ll notice that none of these “minimal evidences” necessitates that Jesus truly rose from the dead. There may be any number of explanations that account for these facts (we’ll get to those



The *Minimal-Facts* Approach

Gary Habermas (distinguished research professor at Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary) has popularized the minimal-facts approach to examining the resurrection by identifying those aspects of the resurrection story that are accepted by the vast majority of scholars and experts (from Christians to nonbelievers). This list of accepted “minimal facts” can then be used as the basis for our process of abductive reasoning.

in a moment). This is simply a list of evidences that most scholars (believers and unbelievers alike) would accept, and all of us (believers and unbelievers alike) must explain. As I examined these *bare-bones* claims related to the resurrection, I assembled the possible explanations that have been historically offered to account for them (employing the process of abductive reasoning). I quickly recognized that every one of these explanations had its own deficiencies and liabilities (including the classic Christian account). Let’s take a look at the potential explanations and list their associated difficulties:

THE DISCIPLES WERE WRONG ABOUT JESUS’S DEATH

Some skeptics have offered the possibility that the disciples were mistaken about Jesus’s death on the cross. They propose that Jesus survived the beating (and the crucifixion) and simply appeared to the disciples after He recovered.

THE PROBLEMS:

While this proposal seeks to explain the empty tomb, the resurrection observations, and the transformation that occurred in the lives of the apostles, it fails to satisfactorily explain what the disciples observed and experienced when they pulled Jesus from the cross. It's been my experience that witnesses who first come upon the dead body of someone they care about quickly check for the most obvious sign of life. Is the person who was injured still breathing? This test is simple and effective; everyone is capable of performing it, and even those who know nothing about human biology instinctively resort to it. It's also been my experience that three conditions become apparent in the bodies of dead people: temperature loss, rigidity, and lividity. Dead people lose warmth until they eventually reach the temperature of their environment. They begin to feel "cold to the touch" (this is often reported by those who find them). In addition, chemical reactions begin to take place in the muscles after death occurs, resulting in stiffening and rigidity known as "rigor mortis." Dead people become rigid, retaining the shape they were in when they died. Finally, when the heart stops beating, blood begins to pool in the body, responding to the force of gravity. As a result, purple discoloration begins to become apparent in those areas of the body that are closest to the ground. In essence, dead bodies look, feel, and respond differently from living, breathing humans. Dead people, unlike those who are slipping in and out of consciousness, never respond to their injuries. They don't flinch or moan when touched. Is it reasonable to believe that those who removed Jesus from the cross, took possession of His body, carried Him to the grave, and spent time treating and wrapping His body for burial would not have noticed any of these conditions common to dead bodies?

In addition to this, the Gospels record the fact that the guard stabbed Jesus and observed both blood and water to pour from His body. That's an important observation, given that the gospel writers were not coroners or medical doctors. While I am certainly not a doctor, I've been to my share of coroners' autopsies, and I've spoken at length with coroner investigators at crime scenes. When people are injured to the point of death (such as the result of an assault or traffic accident), they often enter into some form of "circulatory shock" prior to dying (because their organs and body tissues are not receiving adequate blood flow). This can sometimes result in either "pericardial effusion" (increased fluid in the membrane surrounding the heart) or "pleural effusion" (increased fluid in the membrane surrounding the lungs). When Jesus was pinned to the cross in an upright position following the terrible flogging He received,

it's reasonable to expect that this kind of effusion might have taken place in response to the circulatory shock He suffered prior to dying. These fluids would certainly pour out of His body if He were pierced with a spear. While the gospel writers might expect to see blood, their observation of the water is somewhat surprising. It is certainly consistent with the fact that Jesus was already dead when stabbed by the guard.

In addition to these concerns from the perspective of a homicide detective, there are other problems with the proposal that Jesus didn't actually die on the cross:

1. Many first-century and early second-century *unfriendly* Roman sources (i.e., Thallus, Tacitus, Mara Bar-Serapion, and Phlegon) and Jewish sources (i.e., Josephus and the Babylonian Talmud) affirmed and acknowledged that Jesus was crucified and died.
2. The Roman guards faced death if they allowed a prisoner to survive crucifixion. Would they really be careless enough to remove a living person from a cross?
3. Jesus would have to control His blood loss from the beatings, crucifixion, and stabbing in order to survive, yet was pinned to the cross and unable to do anything that might achieve this.
4. Jesus displayed wounds following the resurrection but was never observed to behave as though He was wounded, in spite of the fact that He appeared only days after His beating, crucifixion, and stabbing.
5. Jesus disappeared from the historical record following His reported resurrection and ascension and was never sighted again (as one might expect if He recovered from His wounds and lived much beyond the young age of thirty-three).

THE DISCIPLES LIED ABOUT THE RESURRECTION

Some non-Christians claim that the disciples stole the body from the grave and later fabricated the stories of Jesus's resurrection appearances.

THE PROBLEMS:

While this explanation accounts for the empty tomb and the resurrection observations, it fails to account for the transformed lives of the apostles. In my years working robberies, I had the

opportunity to investigate (and break) a number of conspiracy efforts, and I learned about the nature of successful conspiracies. We'll examine the problem with conspiracy theories in chapter 7, but until then, let me simply say that I am hesitant to embrace any theory that requires the conspiratorial effort of a large number of people, over a significant period of time, when there is personally little or nothing to gain by their effort. This theory requires us to believe that the apostles were transformed and emboldened not by the miraculous appearance of the resurrected Jesus but by elaborate lies created without any benefit to those who were perpetuating the hoax.

In addition to this concern from the perspective of a detective, there are other concerns that have to be considered when evaluating the claim that the disciples lied about the resurrection:

1. The Jewish authorities took many precautions to make sure the tomb was guarded and sealed, knowing that the removal of the body would allow the disciples to claim that Jesus had risen (Matt. 27:62–66).
2. The people local to the event would have known it was a lie (remember that Paul told the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 that there were still five hundred people who could testify to having seen Jesus alive after His resurrection).
3. The disciples lacked the motive to create such a lie (more on this in chapter 14).
4. The disciples' transformation following the alleged resurrection is inconsistent with the claim that the appearances were only a lie. How could their own lies transform them into courageous evangelists?

THE DISCIPLES WERE DELUSIONAL

Some skeptics believe that the disciples, as a result of their intense grief and sorrow, only imagined seeing Jesus alive after His death on the cross. These critics claim that the appearances were simply hallucinations that resulted from wishful thinking.

THE PROBLEMS:

This proposal fails to explain the empty tomb and only accounts for the resurrection experiences at first glance. As a detective, I frequently encounter witnesses who are related in some

way to the victim in my case. These witnesses are often profoundly impacted by their grief following the murder. As a result, some allow their sorrow to impact what they remember about the victim. They may, for example, suppress all the negative characteristics of the victim's personality and amplify all the victim's virtues. Let's face it, we all have a tendency to think the best of people once they have died. But these imaginings are typically limited to the nature of the victim's character and not the elaborate and detailed events that involved the victim in the past. Those closest to the victim may be mistaken about his or her character, but I've never encountered loved ones who have collectively imagined an identical set of fictional events involving the victim. It's one thing to remember someone with fondness, another thing to imagine an elaborate and detailed history that didn't even occur.

Based on these experiences as a detective, there are other reasonable concerns when considering the explanation that the disciples hallucinated or imagined the resurrection:

1. While individuals have hallucinations, there are no examples of large groups of people having the exact same hallucination.
2. While a short, momentary group hallucination may seem reasonable, long, sustained, and detailed hallucinations are unsupported historically and intuitively unreasonable.
3. The risen Christ was reportedly seen on more than one occasion and by a number of different groups (and subsets of groups). All of these diverse sightings would have to be additional group hallucinations of one nature or another.
4. Not all the disciples were inclined favorably toward such a hallucination. The disciples included people like Thomas, who was skeptical and did not expect Jesus to come back to life.
5. If the resurrection was simply a hallucination, what became of Jesus's corpse? The absence of the body is unexplainable under this scenario.

THE DISCIPLES WERE FOOLED BY AN IMPOSTER

Some nonbelievers have argued that an imposter tricked the disciples and convinced them that Jesus was still alive; the disciples then unknowingly advanced the lie.

THE PROBLEMS:

While this explanation accounts for the resurrection observations and transformed apostles, it requires an additional set of conspirators (other than the apostles who were later fooled) to accomplish the task of stealing the body. Many of my partners spent several years investigating fraud and forgery crimes prior to joining us on the homicide team. They've learned something about successful con artists. The less the victim understands about the specific topic and area in which he or she is being "conned," the more likely the con artist will be successful. Victims are often fooled and swindled out of their money because they have little or no expertise in the area in which the con artist is operating. The perpetrator is able to use sophisticated language and make claims that are outside of the victim's expertise. The crook sounds legitimate, primarily because the victim doesn't really know what truly *is* legitimate. When the targeted victim knows more about the subject than the person attempting the con, the odds are good that the perpetrator will fail at his or her attempt to fool the victim.

For this reason, the proposal that a sophisticated first-century con artist fooled the disciples seems unreasonable. There are many concerns with such a theory:

1. The impersonator would have to be familiar enough with Jesus's mannerisms and statements to convince the disciples. The disciples knew the topic of the con better than anyone who might con them.
2. Many of the disciples were skeptical and displayed none of the necessary naïveté that would be required for the con artist to succeed. Thomas, for example, was openly skeptical from the beginning.
3. The impersonator would need to possess miraculous powers; the disciples reported that the resurrected Jesus performed many miracles and "convincing proofs" (Acts 1:2–3).
4. Who would seek to start a world religious movement if not one of the hopeful disciples? This theory requires someone to be motivated to impersonate Jesus other than the disciples themselves.
5. This explanation also fails to account for the empty tomb or missing body of Jesus.

THE DISCIPLES WERE INFLUENCED BY LIMITED SPIRITUAL SIGHTINGS

More recently, some skeptics have offered the theory that one or two of the disciples had a *vision* of the risen Christ and then convinced the others that these spiritual sightings were legitimate. They argue that additional sightings simply came as a response to the intense influence of the first *visions*.

THE PROBLEMS:

This proposal may begin to explain the transformation of the apostles, but it fails to explain the empty tomb and offers an explanation of the resurrection observations that is inconsistent with the biblical record. It's not unusual to have a persuasive witness influence the beliefs of other eyewitnesses (we'll discuss this in greater detail in chapter 4). I've investigated a number of murders in which one emphatic witness has persuaded others that something occurred, even though the other witnesses weren't even present to see the event for themselves. But these persuaded witnesses were easily distinguished from the one who persuaded them once I began to ask for their account of what happened. Only the persuader possessed the details in their most robust form. For this reason, his or her account was typically the most comprehensive, while the others tended to generalize since they didn't actually see the event for themselves. In addition, when pressed to repeat the story of the one persuasive witness, the other witnesses eventually pointed to that witness as their source, especially when pressured. While it's possible for a persuasive witness to convince some of the other witnesses that his or her version of events is the true story, I've never encountered a *persuader* who could convince everyone. The more witnesses who are involved in a crime, the less likely that all of them will be influenced by any one eyewitness, regardless of that witness's charisma or position within the group.

This theory also suffers from all the liabilities of the earlier claim that the disciples imagined the resurrected Christ. Even if the *persuader* could convince everyone of his or her first observation, the subsequent group *visions* are still unreasonable for all the reasons we've already discussed. There are many concerns related to the claim that a select number of *persuaders* convinced the disciples of resurrection:

1. The theory fails to account for the numerous, divergent, and separate group sightings of Jesus that are recorded in the Gospels. These sightings are described specifically with great detail. It's not reasonable to believe that all these disciples could provide such specified detail if they were simply repeating something they didn't see for themselves.
2. As many as five hundred people were said to be available to testify to their observations of the risen Christ (1 Cor. 15:3–8). Could all of these people have been influenced to imagine their own observations of Jesus? It's not reasonable to believe that a *persuader* equally persuaded all these disciples even though they didn't actually see anything that was recorded.
3. This explanation also fails to account for the empty tomb or the missing corpse.

THE DISCIPLES' OBSERVATIONS WERE DISTORTED LATER

Some unbelievers claim the original observations of the disciples were amplified and distorted as the legend of Jesus grew over time. These skeptics believe that Jesus may have been a wise teacher, but argue that the resurrection is a legendary and historically late exaggeration.

THE PROBLEMS:

This explanation may account for the empty tomb (if we assume the body was removed), but it fails to explain the early claims of the apostles related to the resurrection (more about this in chapters 11 and 13). Cold-case detectives have to deal with the issue of *legend* more than other types of detectives. So much time has passed from the point of the original crime that it seems possible that witnesses may now amplify their original observations in one way or another. Luckily, I have the record of the first investigators to assist me as I try to separate what the eyewitnesses truly saw (and reported at the time of the crime) from what they might recall today. If the original record of the first investigators is thorough and well documented, I will have a much easier time discerning the truth about what each witness saw. I've discovered that the first recollections of the eyewitnesses are usually more detailed

and reliable than what they might offer thirty years later. Like other cold-case detectives, I rely on the original reports as I compare what witnesses once said to what these witnesses are saying today.

The reliability of the eyewitness accounts related to the resurrection, like the reliability of the cold-case eyewitnesses, must be confirmed by the early documentation of the *first investigators*. For this reason, the claim that the original story of Jesus was a late exaggeration is undermined by several concerns:

1. In the earliest accounts of the disciples' activity after the crucifixion, they are seen citing the resurrection of Jesus as their primary piece of evidence that Jesus was God. From the earliest days of the Christian movement, eyewitnesses were making this claim.
2. The students of the disciples also recorded that the resurrection was a key component of the disciples' eyewitness testimony (more on this in chapter 13).
3. The earliest known Christian *creed* or oral record (as described by Paul in 1 Cor. 15) includes the resurrection as a key component.
4. This explanation also fails to account for the fact that the tomb and body of Jesus have not been exposed to demonstrate that this late legend was false.

THE DISCIPLES WERE ACCURATELY REPORTING THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

Christians, of course, claim that Jesus truly rose from the dead and that the Gospels are accurate eyewitness accounts of this event.

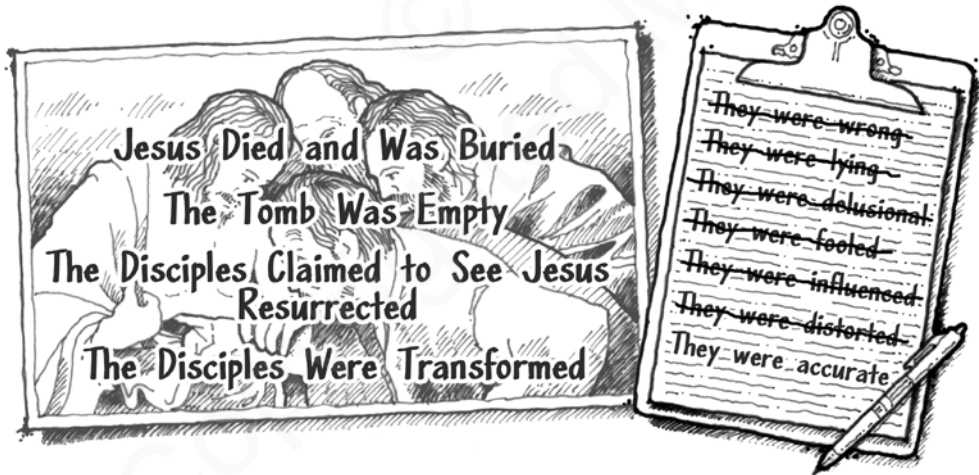
THE PROBLEMS:

This explanation accounts for the empty tomb, the resurrection observations, and the transformation of the apostles. It would be naive, however, to accept this explanation without recognizing the fact that it also has a liability that has been examined and voiced by skeptics and nonbelievers. The claim that Jesus truly rose from the dead presents the following concern and objection:

1. This explanation requires a belief in the supernatural, a belief that Jesus had the supernatural power to rise from the dead in the first place.

ABDUCTIVE REASONING AND THE RESURRECTION

I limited the evidence to four modest claims about the resurrection and kept my explanatory options open to all the possibilities (both *natural* and *supernatural*). The last explanation (although it is a miraculous, supernatural explanation) suffers from the least number of liabilities and deficiencies. If we simply enter into the investigation without a preexisting bias against anything supernatural, the final explanation accounts for all of the evidence without any difficulty. The final explanation accounts for the evidence most simply and most exhaustively, and it is logically consistent (if we simply allow for the existence of God in the first place). The final explanation is also superior to the other accounts (given that it does not suffer from all the problems we see with the other explanations).



If we approach the issue of the resurrection in an unbiased manner (without the presuppositions described in the previous chapter) and assess it as we evaluated the dead-body scene, we can judge the possible explanations and eliminate those that are unreasonable. The conclusion that Jesus was resurrected (as reported in the Gospels) can be sensibly inferred from the available evidence. The resurrection is reasonable.



A TOOL FOR THE CALLOUT BAG, A TIP FOR THE CHECKLIST

Okay, let's add another tool to our callout bag: an attitude about *reason* that will help us as we examine and discuss the claims of Christianity. Like other nonbelievers in our world today, I used to think of *faith* as the opposite of *reason*. In this characterization of the dichotomy, I believed that atheists were reasonable “freethinkers” while believers were simple, mindless drones who blindly followed the unreasonable teaching of their leadership. But if you think about it, *faith* is actually the opposite of *unbelief*, not *reason*. As I began to read through the Bible as a skeptic, I came to understand that the biblical definition of faith is a well-placed and reasonable inference based on evidence. I wasn't raised in the Christian culture, and I think I have an unusually high amount of respect for evidence. Perhaps this is why this definition of faith comes easily to me. I now understand that it's possible for reasonable people to examine the evidence and conclude that Christianity is true. While my skeptical friends may not agree on how the evidence related to the resurrection should be interpreted, I want them to understand that I've arrived at my conclusions reasonably.

As I speak around the country, I often encounter devoted, committed Christians who are hesitant to embrace an *evidential* faith. In many Christian circles, faith that requires evidential support is seen as weak and inferior. For many, *blind faith* (a faith that simply trusts without question) is the truest, most sincere, and most valuable form of faith that we can offer God. Yet Jesus seemed to have a high regard for evidence. In John 14:11, He told those watching Him to examine “the evidence of the miracles” (NIV) if they did not believe what He said about His identity. Even after the resurrection, Jesus stayed with His disciples for an additional forty days and provided them with “many convincing proofs” that He was resurrected and was who He claimed to be (Acts 1:2–3 NIV). Jesus understood the role and value of evidence and the importance of developing an evidential faith. It's time for all of us, as Christians, to develop a similarly reasonable faith.