

A CATHOLIC ARMORY STUDY FOR THREE FRIENDS AND ONE QUESTION

If Christ Has Not Been Raised

An Honest Investigation of the Resurrection of Jesus

“if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.”

1 Corinthians 15:14 (RSV2CE)

Eight sessions • Complete Leader Guide

CatholicArmory.com

Using This Guide

This study was built for a table of exactly three: a leader, a co-investigator, and a friend, gathered around one question: whether Jesus of Nazareth, really crucified, really rose. It works best when at least one person at the table grants that Jesus lived and was crucified but doubts that he rose. Every session assumes that shape. No one at this table is a subject or a project; all three take every test, write and seal verdicts alongside one another, and sign the same ledger lines.

The parts. Each session document has three parts. Part 1, the Leader Preparation Guide, is read before the session by the leader (and ideally the co-investigator): background, Old Testament roots, three Voices of the Church, Catechism connections, thread tracking, coaching for leading the study well, goals, and a time note with pre-chosen cuts. Part 2, the Discussion Guide, is the session itself: opening and closing prayer, two opening questions (Win), the evidence work (Build) with shaded answer boxes for the leader to share after discussion, and two sending questions (Send), with Live It This Week and a memory verse. Part 3 is a one-page reference card listing every passage used. Take-Home sheets are distributed at the end of each session, never before; they contain no spoilers for future sessions.

What is read aloud. Scripture blocks, source cards, and anything under a READ ALOUD marker are spoken as written. Lines under a LEADER marker, and every box marked leader only, are never read aloud. PRESS TOGETHER sections may be read as written or put in your own words. ANSWER boxes are shared by the leader after the group has discussed, read or paraphrased. Everything else in the Discussion Guide, the connective instructions between questions, is stage direction for the leader, not script.

The instruments. The Fact Ledger (printed separately, one copy for the table) admits a fact only when all three investigators sign it; anyone may decline any line without explanation, and any line may be reopened. The sealed verdicts, written by all three in Session 1, are returned unopened in Session 7 and read privately. The Verdict Grid (page 2 of the ledger sheet) runs every explanation against every signed fact in Session 7.

The method. Minimal facts, steelman first: every counter-theory (survival, wrong tomb, theft, hallucination, legend) is presented at its full strength, usually in the co-investigator's voice, before it is tested. Sources outside Scripture appear on printed source cards with public domain translations, read aloud at the table, hostile and neutral voices included, with each card's limits stated honestly.

What this study asks of the leader. Complete honesty about soft spots in the case; complete calm about silence and dissent; no pressure, no closing the sale, and a friendship that is visibly not contingent on the verdict. All Scripture is quoted from the Revised Standard Version, Second Catholic Edition (RSV2CE). Catechism references are to the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Contents

Using This Guide.....	2
Session 1: The Stakes.....	4
Session 2: Did He Die?.....	11
Session 3: The Tomb.....	19
Session 4: The Witnesses.....	27
Session 5: The Hostile Witnesses.....	34
Session 6: The Aftermath.....	41
Session 7: The Verdict.....	49
Session 8: What Rose.....	56
Appendix: The Fact Ledger and Verdict Grid.....	63

Take-Home sheets 1 through 8 are separate two-page handouts, distributed at the end of each session; they are collected in the companion file, the Take-Home Run.

The Stakes

Part 1 of 3: Leader Preparation Guide

■ Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that the resurrection is presented by St. Paul himself as a falsifiable claim about a public event, on which the entire Christian faith stands or falls, and the three of you agree together on fair rules for investigating it.

Catholic Touchstone. The Church claims that the resurrection is a real event with manifestations that were historically verified (CCC 639), while the rising itself was seen by no one and passes beyond history (CCC 647). We will argue toward the fact from its effects, honestly, without pretending to laboratory proof.

■ What You Need to Know

St. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus around AD 53 to 55, roughly twenty to twenty-five years after the crucifixion. In chapter 15 he answers Corinthians who doubted a future resurrection, and he does it by planting the whole faith on one past event. Read verses 12 to 19 slowly before the session. Paul does not say the resurrection is a beautiful idea that consoles believers whether or not it happened. He says the opposite: if it did not happen, the preaching is empty, the faith is empty, the witnesses are liars, the dead are gone, and Christians are pitiable. Paul does something remarkable here: he states, in public writing, the exact condition under which the whole faith would collapse. That is the door this study walks through, and it is why every person at this table can enter it with integrity fully intact.

This session sets the method for all eight. We will use what scholars call a minimal facts approach: we will build only on facts granted by the broad spectrum of scholarship, including scholars who are not Christians, and we will test every explanation of those facts, the Church's included, by the ordinary standards historians use. Your friend already grants more than many skeptics: a real Jesus, really crucified. His own working theory, that Jesus may have survived the cross, is a serious historical proposal with a long pedigree, and Session 2 will present it at full strength before testing it. Say that plainly tonight. He should hear from the start that his idea will be honored, not ambushed.

Be equally plain about what the Church does and does not claim. No evangelist describes the rising itself. No one saw it. The Church has never claimed otherwise (CCC 647). What the witnesses claimed to see were its effects: an empty tomb and a living man. The question of this study is what best explains those claimed effects. Keep that frame; it is honest, and it is the Church's own.

Finally, understand the two instruments introduced tonight. The Fact Ledger is a printed sheet kept on the table. A fact enters it only when all three of you sign it; anyone may decline any line without explanation, and any line may be revisited later. By Session 7 the ledger, not anyone's feelings, will be the thing on trial. The sealed verdicts are private: each of you writes what you actually think happened that Sunday morning, seals it, and no one reads anyone's until Session 7, and then only his own, privately. All three write, the leader first of all, so that no one at this table is ever the specimen. Everyone is a fellow investigator.

■ Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

The creed Paul hands on says Christ was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures (1 Cor 15:4). Which scriptures? Israel's prayers and prophets carry a pattern of God vindicating his faithful one beyond death. Psalm 16 prays, "For thou dost not give me up to Sheol, or let thy godly one see the Pit" (Ps 16:10), the very text St. Peter preaches at Pentecost (Acts 2:25-32). Hosea promises, "After two days he

will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him” (Hos 6:2). Jesus himself points to Jonah: “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matt 12:40). And Isaiah’s Servant, after being “cut off out of the land of the living,” somehow “shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days” (Isa 53:8, 10). Tonight the group hunts these texts themselves; do not hand them over early.

▪ Voices of the Church

St. Augustine of Hippo • *The City of God, Book 22, Chapter 5*

Augustine turns the skeptic’s challenge around. In substance he argues: if the world came to believe that a crucified man rose, without any miracles persuading it, then that worldwide belief, spread by a handful of uneducated fishermen against every instinct of Greek philosophy and Roman power, would itself be a miracle greater than all the rest. Either the miracles happened, or something at least as hard to explain did. We offer his argument here as an honest summary of the chapter rather than a quotation.

St. Thomas Aquinas • *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book I, Chapter 6*

St. Thomas, weighing whether assenting to faith is foolish credulity, answers in substance: the conversion of the world to Christianity is a public fact demanding an explanation. Simple men, preaching a message the wise ridiculed, promising persecution rather than pleasure, won the world. Divine confirmation, he argues, is the sober explanation; and if one denies all the miracles, the conversion of the world without miracles remains, as he puts it, the greatest sign of all. A summary in our words of his argument.

St. John Paul II • *Fides et Ratio, opening line (1998)*

“Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth.” This study takes both wings seriously. Reason can carry a person a long way toward Easter morning; this study exists because the Church is not afraid of the flight.

▪ Catechism Connection

- **CCC 639:** “The mystery of Christ’s resurrection is a real event, with manifestations that were historically verified, as the New Testament bears witness.”
- **CCC 643-644:** the appearances confronted disciples who did not expect them and at first did not believe them; the faith of the first community was born from real experience they initially resisted.
- **CCC 647:** no one was an eyewitness to the rising itself and no evangelist describes it; the event, while leaving historically verifiable signs, transcends history.
- **CCC 156:** the motives of credibility. Miracles, prophecies, the Church’s growth, holiness, and stability are “the most certain signs of divine Revelation, adapted to the intelligence of all,” yet the assent of faith remains a free act aided by grace, not the forced conclusion of a proof.

▪ Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • leader only

Thread 1, the Fact Ledger (Sessions 1 to 7). Introduced tonight. Only unanimous lines enter. Guard the unanimity rule jealously; the ledger’s power in Session 7 depends on your friend having signed every line himself.

Thread 2, the sealed verdicts (Sessions 1 to 7). Written and sealed tonight by all three. Do not refer to their contents again until Session 7.

Thread 3, “in accordance with the scriptures” (Sessions 1 to 8). Planted tonight when the group hunts the third-day texts. Each session’s Old Testament roots feed it. It resolves in Session 8 when the risen Christ himself opens the scriptures (Luke 24:44-47).

Thread 4, “they knew the difference” (Sessions 2 to 8). Not planted tonight. Beginning next session: the witnesses had seen resuscitations (Lazarus), and what they claimed for Jesus was something else entirely. Resolves in Session 8.

▪ **Leading This Study Well**

LEADING THIS STUDY WELL • leader only

Roles. One of you leads; the other sits as co-investigator. The co-investigator’s job all study long is to ask real questions, voice honest difficulties, and show what it looks like to hold a conviction and still examine the evidence without flinching. What must never happen is two voices pressing one. If the leader presses, the co-investigator does not pile on.

His theory is welcome. When the survival idea comes up tonight, and it may, receive it with genuine respect and say that Session 2 is built to give it the strongest hearing in this entire study. Do not rebut it tonight. Anticipation is your friend.

Prayer. Open and close briefly. Invite, never require: “We’re going to pray for a moment; you’re welcome to listen or join, whatever is comfortable.” No prayer aimed at him, ever.

Pace. He sets it. If a question lands hard, let silence do its work. You are not closing a sale in eight weeks; you are examining evidence with a friend.

▪ **Session Goals**

1. The group reads 1 Corinthians 15 and articulates exactly what Paul says collapses if the resurrection did not happen.
2. The group discovers the third-day scriptures themselves (Psalm 16, Hosea 6, Jonah, Isaiah 53).
3. All three agree to the Rules of the Investigation and understand the Fact Ledger.
4. The first ledger lines are proposed from what all three already grant.
5. All three write and seal private verdicts.

▪ **Time Note**

75 to 90 minutes. With three people, discussion moves faster than in a large group; resist the urge to fill saved time with more content. If you must cut: drop the Dig Deeper box and trim Build question 4, but never cut the Rules of the Investigation or the sealed verdicts. They are the spine of the study.

The Stakes

Part 2 of 3: Discussion Guide

▪ Opening Prayer

Leader: Lord, you are not afraid of our questions. For the next eight weeks, give the three of us honesty, courage, and friendship, and lead us wherever the truth is. Amen.

▪ Win

1. What is one belief you changed your mind about as an adult? What actually changed it?
2. When you hear the word “evidence,” what comes to mind first? What kinds of evidence do you trust most, and least?

▪ Build

Read aloud: 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, then 15:12-19.

if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.

1 Corinthians 15:14 (RSV2CE)

1. Make a list together: what exactly does Paul say is lost if Christ has not been raised? Go verse by verse through 12 to 19.

ANSWER • share after the discussion

The preaching is in vain (v. 14); the faith is in vain (v. 14) and futile (v. 17); the apostles are misrepresenting God, that is, lying about him (v. 15); “you are still in your sins” (v. 17); “those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished” (v. 18); and Christians are “of all men most to be pitied” (v. 19). Paul leaves no fallback position. There is no version of Christianity that survives a dead Jesus. That is not a modern apologist’s framing; it is the earliest Christian theologian’s own.

2. In verse 6 Paul mentions more than five hundred people who saw the risen Jesus at once, “most of whom are still alive.” Why would a writer include that phrase in a public letter?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

It is an invitation to check. “Still alive” means available for questioning. Whatever one concludes about the claim, this is not the voice of a man hedging a private myth; it is the voice of a man pointing at living witnesses in a world where his enemies would gladly have called his bluff. We will spend Session 4 on this passage; tonight it is enough to notice the posture.

3. Twice the creed says these things happened “in accordance with the scriptures.” Which scriptures? Hunt for them: start with Psalm 16:10, Hosea 6:2, Matthew 12:40, and Isaiah 53:8-10. What pattern do you find?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

A pattern of vindication beyond death: the godly one not abandoned to Sheol (Ps 16:10, preached of Jesus by Peter in Acts 2); raised “on the third day” (Hos 6:2); Jonah’s three days in the deep claimed by Jesus as his own sign (Matt 12:40); the Servant cut off from the land of the living who yet prolongs his days (Isa 53). The first Christians did not treat the resurrection as a surprise bolted onto their Bible; they claimed

it was the destination their Bible had been driving at. Whether that claim holds is part of what we are investigating. Keep the question open; it will return in Session 8.

4. Look again at 1 Corinthians 15:12-19. Based on that passage alone, what would it take to falsify Christianity? What would its enemies have needed to produce?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

A body, or a living, aging, dying Jesus. Paul stakes everything on a claim about a corpse and a tomb in a known city within living memory. This study exists because that is a claim evidence can touch.

The Rules of the Investigation

Read these aloud and agree to them together. Amend them together if you wish; they belong to the three of you.

- We follow the evidence where it leads, all three of us, in either direction.
- Every objection gets its strongest form before it gets an answer. If a theory is tested here, it will be the best version of that theory.
- We build only on facts all three of us accept. That is what the Fact Ledger is for.
- A fact enters the ledger only by unanimous signature. Anyone may decline any line, without explanation, and no one argues with a decline. Any line may be reopened later by anyone.
- Nobody here is a project. We are three investigators at one table.

The Fact Ledger: First Lines

Bring out the ledger sheet. Explain the unanimity rule. Then propose the first candidate lines, drawn from what everyone at this table already holds. Discuss, then sign or hold:

- *Proposed line 1:* Jesus of Nazareth was a real man who lived in first-century Judea.
- *Proposed line 2:* He was crucified by Roman authority under Pontius Pilate.

If either line does not get three signatures tonight, that is not a failure; it is the ledger working. Note the hold and move on.

What the Church Actually Claims

Read aloud CCC 639 and CCC 647 (printed on tonight's Take-Home).

5. Does anything in those two paragraphs surprise you? What is the Church claiming happened, and what is she explicitly not claiming?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Many people are surprised that the Church herself states that no one witnessed the rising and no evangelist describes it (CCC 647). The claim is not "we saw it happen" but "we met him afterward, and the tomb was empty." The Church claims a real event with historically verifiable manifestations (CCC 639), an event that nonetheless exceeds what history alone can capture. Our investigation targets exactly what the Church says is targetable: the manifestations, and what best explains them.

STEELMAN • "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence"

LEADER • do not read aloud. Give this objection its full weight before anyone answers it.

READ ALOUD. David Hume argued, in substance: dead men stay dead. All of human experience says so. So if someone tells you a dead man rose, it is always more likely that the teller is mistaken than that the

dead man rose. Carl Sagan's famous maxim, that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, compresses the same instinct into one line. It deserves respect: it is why we do not believe every ghost story, and anyone at this table is right to bring that instinct to the evidence.

PRESS TOGETHER • read or say in your own words. First, the maxim is a demand to weigh evidence, not permission to ignore it. A rule that says no evidence could ever count, no matter what, is not skepticism. It is a closed door. Second, Hume assumes the very thing we are investigating. He says uniform experience proves that dead men stay dead. But whether one man is the exception is exactly the question on this table. You cannot settle a question by assuming your answer and calling it experience; Hume's own critics have pressed him on this for two centuries. Third, ask what extraordinary evidence for a past event could even look like. History does not repeat itself on demand, so it cannot mean a rerun. For any singular past event, strong evidence looks like this: early testimony, from multiple witnesses, that could be checked, given by people with nothing to gain, whose lives changed in ways otherwise hard to explain, in a place where enemies could have shut the story down. Whether the resurrection has that kind of evidence is this study's question. Agree tonight only on the standard, not the verdict.

DIG DEEPER

How early is the creed of 1 Corinthians 15:3-7? Paul says he is handing on what he received, using the formal vocabulary of tradition (paradosis). Where and when did he receive it? Hold the question; Session 4 answers it, and the answer, agreed to even by prominent non-Christian scholars, is one of the most startling facts in ancient history.

The Sealed Verdicts

Each of the three of you now takes a verdict card (on your Take-Home sheet) and completes this sentence privately: "What I actually think happened that Sunday morning is..." Be as blunt as you like; no one will read it but you. Seal it in the envelope, write your name on the outside, and hand it to the leader. They will come back, unopened, in Session 7. All three write. All three seal.

▪ **Send**

1. If this turned out to be true, what would change for you personally? If it turned out to be false, what would honesty require of each of us?
2. Of everything on the table tonight, which single fact or claim would you most want to see checked in the coming weeks?

▪ **Live It This Week**

- Read 1 Corinthians 15:12-19 once more, slowly, on your own. Write one sentence: what is Paul risking by writing this?
- Notice this week how you decide what to believe about events you did not witness: news, history, other people's lives. What standards do you actually use?

▪ **Closing Prayer**

Leader: Lord, we have agreed to follow the evidence. Give us the honesty to keep that promise, and stay near each of us this week. Amen.

▪ **Scripture Memory Verse**

if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.

1 Corinthians 15:14 (RSV2CE)

The Stakes

Part 3 of 3: Leader Reference Card

▪ Every Passage Used Tonight

- 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 • read aloud (the creed and the witnesses)
- 1 Corinthians 15:12-19 • read aloud (the stakes)
- 1 Corinthians 15:14 • memory verse
- Psalm 16:10 • discovery hunt (Thread 3)
- Hosea 6:2 • discovery hunt (Thread 3)
- Matthew 12:40 • discovery hunt (Thread 3)
- Isaiah 53:8-10 • discovery hunt (Thread 3)
- Acts 2:25-32 • leader background (Peter preaching Psalm 16)
- CCC 639, 643-644, 647, 156 • doctrine anchors; 639 and 647 read aloud

Materials tonight: the Fact Ledger sheet, three pens, three envelopes, Take-Home 1 (distributed at the end; it carries the verdict cards).

Did He Die?

Part 1 of 3: Leader Preparation Guide

▪ Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group gives the survival hypothesis its strongest form, then tests it against the Roman machinery of death, the earliest hostile and neutral sources, and the text itself, and discovers whether “Jesus died on the cross” can enter the ledger.

Catholic Touchstone. CCC 645-646: even the witnesses distinguished resurrection from resuscitation. They had seen Lazarus. What they claimed for Jesus was categorically different, and that difference will matter tonight.

▪ What You Need to Know

Tonight is your friend’s night. His working theory, that Jesus was crucified and somehow survived, is the oldest naturalistic explanation of Easter on record, argued seriously by scholars such as Karl Venturini around 1800 and revived periodically since. Treat it as what it is: a real attempt to honor the evidence he already grants. Your job is to present it better than he would, then let the evidence speak. If the steelman feels weak, the whole night fails.

Know the machinery. Roman scourging with the flagrum, a whip of leather thongs set with metal and bone, preceded crucifixion and by itself sometimes killed. Crucifixion was death by slow trauma; the exact final mechanism is debated among modern researchers (asphyxiation, hypovolemic shock, cardiac rupture, or a combination), and you should say so rather than overclaim. What is not debated is Roman competence. Execution squads under a centurion certified deaths as a matter of military duty; the crurifragium of John 19:32, breaking the legs, existed precisely to finish victims quickly, and the spear thrust of John 19:34 reads most naturally as a stroke meant to make certain of death. The evangelist reports that blood and water came out. Some medical writers read that as consistent with fluid separation in a body already dead; present that as a possible reading, not a load-bearing proof. The evangelist himself offers no medical theory at all, which is itself worth noticing. He records what he does not understand, and the case for the death stands on the plainer sequence: scourging, crucifixion, soldiers finding him dead, the spear, the centurion’s report, the released body.

Face the steelman’s best texts honestly, because the group will find them. Mark 15:44: Pilate himself “wondered if he were already dead.” Jesus died faster than crucifixion victims often did. And Josephus, in his autobiography, recounts finding three crucified acquaintances still alive, begging Titus to take them down, and Rome’s best physicians saving one. Survival of crucifixion was not, in the abstract, impossible. Read both of those aloud tonight for the survival theory, not against it. Then let the same texts turn: Pilate’s surprise is followed by verification, a formal question to the supervising centurion, and Rome released the body only on that certification. And the Josephus episode is the theory’s undoing wearing its clothes: those three men were taken down alive, deliberately, into immediate expert care, and two of the three died anyway. None of the three had been scourged half to death first, and none had taken a spear to the chest.

Then there is the argument from a fellow skeptic. David Friedrich Strauss, the nineteenth century’s most formidable critic of the Gospels, rejected the survival theory in one devastating paragraph: a half-dead man who crept out of the tomb needing bandaging and nursing could never have given his disciples the impression that he was the conqueror of death, the Prince of Life, and that impression is the one historical certainty at the bottom of their preaching. A survivor does not found Easter faith; he

finds a sickbed vigil, and then he dies, and the faith dies with him. Strauss was no Christian. His point stands on skeptical ground.

Finally the Catholic point that quietly strengthens the whole case: the Church herself insists the resurrection was not resuscitation (CCC 646). The witnesses knew resuscitation; some had watched Lazarus stumble out still bound in grave clothes and go on to age and die again. What they claimed for Jesus, “death no longer has dominion over him” (Rom 6:9), is a different category altogether. A survived crucifixion would give you Lazarus with worse wounds. It cannot give you what they actually preached.

One caution for fidelity: when tonight’s sources mention the role of Jerusalem’s leadership, keep CCC 597 in view. The Church teaches that responsibility for the death of Jesus cannot be laid on all the Jews of that time, still less on Jews of later times. Say it if the topic arises.

▪ Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Isaiah’s Servant is not roughed up and rescued; he is “cut off out of the land of the living” and assigned a grave (Isa 53:8-9). Psalm 22, on the lips of Jesus from the cross, describes the sufferer’s hands and feet pierced (Ps 22:16). And Zechariah promises a day when “they look on him whom they have pierced” (Zech 12:10), the very text St. John cites as fulfilled by the spear (John 19:37). Tonight’s discovery hunt sends the group from John 19:36-37 backward to Zechariah 12:10 and to the Passover rule that no bone of the lamb be broken (Ex 12:46). Let them find the connections themselves.

▪ Voices of the Church

St. Ignatius of Antioch • *Letter to the Trallians 9, written on the road to martyrdom, c. AD 107*

“[Jesus Christ] was truly born, and ate and drank. He was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate; He was truly crucified, and died... He was also truly raised from the dead.” (Ante-Nicene Fathers translation, lightly abridged.) Within living memory of the apostles, against early sects claiming Jesus only seemed to suffer, a bishop being marched to his own execution hammers one word: truly. The reality of the death was the first thing the Church defended, before she defended anything else.

St. Melito of Sardis • *On the Pascha (Peri Pascha), second century*

In one of the earliest Christian sermons we possess, Melito preaches the crucifixion with shocking directness, pressing the paradox that the one suspended on the tree was the very one who suspended the earth, and that the Master was slain. A summary in our words; his point for tonight is that the earliest preaching did not soften the death. It magnified it.

St. John Chrysostom • *Baptismal Catecheses 3, read by the Church in the Office of Readings for Good Friday*

Chrysostom preaches on the blood and water from Christ’s side: in substance, that the Church herself is born from the side of Christ asleep in death, as Eve was drawn from the side of Adam, the water and the blood standing for baptism and the Eucharist. For Chrysostom the spear wound is not an embarrassment to be explained away; it is a fountain. A summary of his sermon in our words.

▪ Catechism Connection

- **CCC 645-646:** the risen Christ’s humanity is real, touchable, and glorified; his resurrection “was not a return to earthly life” like the raisings of Jairus’s daughter, the young man of Naim, and Lazarus, who all died again.
- **CCC 597:** responsibility for the death of Jesus cannot be attributed to all Jews then living nor to Jews today.
- **CCC 619:** Christ truly died; his death is part of the mystery of God’s plan, confessed in the Creed.

▪ Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • leader only

Ledger. Tonight's candidate lines appear in the Discussion Guide. The last one, "Jesus died on the cross," is the biggest signature of the study so far. If your friend holds, honor it visibly and note that Session 3's evidence bears on it too; a held line is a live line.

Thread 3. The discovery hunt (Zech 12:10, Ex 12:46) feeds "in accordance with the scriptures."

Thread 4 planted tonight. After CCC 646 is read, say it once and let it sit: the witnesses had seen a resuscitation. They knew the difference. Do not resolve it; it returns in Session 8.

▪ Leading This Study Well

LEADING THIS STUDY WELL • leader only

The co-investigator voices the steelman. Tonight the co-investigator, not the one who holds the theory, should present the survival theory at full strength. Your friend then hears his own position honored in someone else's mouth before he is ever asked to defend it, and he is free to strengthen it further. This single move sets the tone for the whole study.

Do not spike the ball. When the Josephus card lands (two of three died with Rome's best care), let it land in silence. No "see?" No summary victory lap. The facts are heavy enough; triumphalism would lighten them.

If he signs nothing tonight, the night still worked. He watched believers steelman his own theory honestly. That is the deposit.

▪ Session Goals

1. The survival hypothesis is presented at full strength by the co-investigator, with its two best evidences on the table (Mark 15:44; Josephus, Life 420-421).
2. The group weighs the Roman machinery of death and the certification sequence in John 19:31-37.
3. The group reads the non-Christian attestations of the death (Tacitus; the skeptical scholarly consensus).
4. Strauss's objection is heard from skeptical ground.
5. Ledger lines proposed; Thread 4 planted via CCC 646.

▪ Time Note

75 to 90 minutes. If you must cut: the Dig Deeper medical box and the Lucian mention. Never cut the steelman, the Josephus card, or the Strauss box; they are the architecture of the night.

Did He Die?

Part 2 of 3: Discussion Guide

▪ Opening Prayer

Leader: Lord, tonight we look hard at a death. Give us clear eyes, honest speech, and respect for one another's questions. Amen.

▪ Win

1. Tell about a time you were sure of something and turned out to be wrong. What finally convinced you?
2. How do you decide whom to trust about events none of us witnessed: a battle, a plague, an assassination? What makes an ancient report credible or not credible to you?

▪ Build

Read aloud: Mark 15:15-39.

1. List everything this text says Jesus endured before the cross itself. What condition is a man in after that?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Scourged (15:15); mocked, crowned with thorns, struck on the head with a reed (15:17-19); marched out, so weakened that Simon of Cyrene is compelled to carry the beam (15:21). Roman scourging with the flagrum tore flesh to muscle and sometimes killed by itself. The man who reaches Golgotha in this account is already in traumatic shock. Keep this list; it matters when we weigh survival.

2. Now the survival theory's best verse. Read Mark 15:44-45. Pilate "wondered if he were already dead." What does his surprise honestly tell us, in both directions?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Honestly for the theory: Jesus died faster than crucifixion victims often did; even the governor noticed. Honestly against it: surprise triggered verification. Pilate "summon[ed] the centurion, and asked him whether he was already dead," and released the body only "when he learned from the centurion that he was dead." The one man professionally accountable for the execution certified the death to the governor's face. Mark, writing while Roman procedure was universally known, invites exactly this check.

STEELMAN • The Survival Hypothesis, at full strength

LEADER • do not read aloud. The co-investigator presents this; anyone may add whatever makes it stronger.

READ ALOUD. Jesus was on the cross only about six hours (Mark 15:25, 34), far less than the days victims could linger. Pilate himself was surprised. Crucifixion survival was physically possible: Josephus records a man surviving after being taken down (card below). No physician certified this death; a fainting spell or deep shock could be mistaken for it by soldiers eager to finish before the feast. The tomb was cool; the aloes and linen could act as dressings; the great stone was rolled away by human hands from outside; and the "appearances" that followed were of a recovered man, which would explain why his followers were so sure they had seen him bodily. On this theory nothing supernatural is needed, and everything

already granted at this table is preserved.

SOURCE CARD • read aloud at the table

Flavius Josephus, The Life 420-421

Jewish historian, eyewitness account of the siege of Jerusalem's aftermath, c. AD 99. Translation: William Whiston (1737), public domain.

"...I saw many captives crucified, and remembered three of them as my former acquaintance. I was very sorry at this in my mind, and went with tears in my eyes to Titus, and told him of them; so he immediately commanded them to be taken down, and to have the greatest care taken of them, in order to their recovery..."

Josephus then records the outcome: even under that care, two of the three died; only one recovered.

3. Read the card twice: once as evidence *for* the survival theory, once as evidence about its odds. What do you notice?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

For the theory: survival was genuinely possible; this text proves it. About the odds: these three were taken down alive, on purpose, by order of the commanding general, into the immediate care of Roman physicians, and two of the three died anyway. They had not first been scourged to collapse, and none had been speared. The only ancient case of crucifixion survival on record required rescue plus expert care and still failed two times out of three. The survival theory needs a scourged, speared, certified-dead man, sealed without care in a tomb, to beat those odds alone, then walk on wounded feet.

Read aloud: John 19:31-37.

4. Walk through the sequence as a procedure. Why break legs? Why the spear? And what came out?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

The crurifragium existed to end crucifixions fast; the soldiers break the two others' legs but find Jesus "already dead" and do not break his (19:33), which the evangelist ties to the Passover lamb rule. Instead a soldier drives a spear into his side, a thrust whose evident purpose is to make death certain, from a squad whose duty was completed deaths. "At once there came out blood and water" (19:34). Some modern medical writers read separated blood and watery fluid as consistent with a body already dead; hold that as a possible reading rather than a proof, because the argument does not need it. The evangelist offers no theory at all. He records a detail he does not interpret, insists an eyewitness saw it, and a writer inventing a survivable wound would have invented a smaller one.

5. Discovery hunt: John says these things fulfilled Scripture (19:36-37). Find the sources: Exodus 12:46 and Zechariah 12:10. What is John claiming by the connections?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Exodus 12:46: no bone of the Passover lamb may be broken; John presents Jesus dying as the true Lamb at Passover. Zechariah 12:10: "when they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn," a text about God's own pierced one. The unbroken bones and the piercing are, for John, not accidents of procedure but signatures. Add both finds to Thread 3's question: which scriptures?

SOURCE CARD • read aloud at the table

Tacitus, Annals 15.44

Roman senator and historian, no friend of Christians, writing c. AD 116 on Nero's persecution. Translation:

Church and Brodribb (1876), public domain.

“Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome...”

6. What does Rome’s own historian, writing with contempt, confirm? And notice his aside: what “broke out” again after being “checked”?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Execution under Pilate in Tiberius’s reign: the core fact, from a hostile pen with access to Roman records and no Christian source in his hands he would have trusted. “The extreme penalty” is death; Tacitus reports no survival rumor, and neither does any ancient enemy of the faith. His aside is its own puzzle: the movement was “checked” by its founder’s execution, exactly as executions are supposed to work, and then “again broke out.” Something restarted it. That question belongs to Session 6, but log it now. Note also that among modern scholars, including those most skeptical of Christianity, the death of Jesus by crucifixion is about as close to unanimous as ancient history gets; John Dominic Crossan, co-founder of the Jesus Seminar, has written that his crucifixion is as sure as anything historical can ever be.

STEELMAN • A skeptic answers the survival theory: David Friedrich Strauss

READ ALOUD. Strauss, the nineteenth century’s most influential critic of the Gospels and no believer, rejected the survival hypothesis in substance as follows: a man who had crept half dead out of the tomb, weak and ill, needing bandaging and nursing and indulgence, and who at last still succumbed to his wounds, could not possibly have given the disciples the impression that he was the conqueror of death and the grave, the Prince of Life. Yet that impression is the bedrock of their entire subsequent ministry. (A close summary of Strauss, *A New Life of Jesus*, vol. 1; the passage is among the most quoted in the literature.)

PRESS TOGETHER • read or say in your own words. The survival theory must explain not a sighting but a transformation, worship, and a proclamation of victory over death by monotheistic Jews. A convalescent explains none of that. And a survivor eventually dies. Where is that second death in any record, friendly or hostile? The theory replaces one missing body with another.

Read aloud: CCC 646 (printed on tonight’s Take-Home), then Romans 6:9.

For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.

Romans 6:9 (RSV2CE)

7. The witnesses had seen Lazarus come back (John 11) and go on living an ordinary mortal life. What are they claiming for Jesus that they never claimed for Lazarus?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Not a reprieve but a conquest: “will never die again.” The Church’s own teaching (CCC 646) is that the resurrection was not a return to earthly life like Lazarus’s. This cuts against the survival theory from an unexpected direction: even if a man had survived the cross, the most that could produce is another Lazarus, a mortal recovering. The witnesses knew that category intimately, and they insisted this was not that. Hold this thought; it returns in Session 8.

DIG DEEPER

The medical literature: a widely cited 1986 study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (Edwards, Gabel, and Hosmer, “On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ”) reconstructed the scourging and

crucifixion and concluded that the evidence indicates Jesus was dead before the spear wound. Be honest about its epistemic status: it answers the question “if the accounts describe what happened, was death certain?” It tests the story’s internal coherence with modern medicine, and the story passes. The blood and water detail, recorded without explanation by a writer who could not have known its significance, is the piece that most impresses physicians. Also debated among researchers: the final mechanism of death in crucifixion generally (asphyxiation, shock, cardiac causes); certainty about the that does not require certainty about the how.

The Fact Ledger: Proposed Lines

- *Proposed:* Jesus was scourged and crucified by a professional Roman execution squad.
- *Proposed:* The squad and its centurion were accountable to the governor for completed executions, and the body was released only on the centurion’s certification.
- *Proposed:* The earliest hostile and neutral sources report his death; none reports a survival.
- *Proposed:* Jesus died on the cross. (*The big one. Sign or hold; a hold is honored, and the line stays open.*)

▪ **Send**

1. If the survival theory were true, what would you expect the movement’s earliest enemies to have said about the tomb and the body? Next week we will read what they actually said.
2. What, if anything, would you still need to see before signing the last ledger line?

▪ **Live It This Week**

- Read John 19:31-37 once on your own, slowly, as if you were a coroner reading a report. Write down one detail you had never noticed.
- This week, notice how often you trust certifications by professionals you have never met: pilots, pharmacists, engineers. What makes such trust reasonable?

▪ **Closing Prayer**

Leader: Lord, we have looked at your death tonight without flinching. Whatever each of us believes about what came next, teach us what it cost. Amen.

▪ **Scripture Memory Verse**

And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that he thus breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!”

Mark 15:39 (RSV2CE)

Did He Die?

Part 3 of 3: Leader Reference Card

▪ Every Passage Used Tonight

- Mark 15:15-39 • read aloud (scourging through death)
- Mark 15:25, 34 • steelman (six hours)
- Mark 15:44-45 • read aloud (Pilate's surprise and the certification)
- John 19:31-37 • read aloud (crurifragium, spear, blood and water)
- Exodus 12:46 • discovery hunt (unbroken bones)
- Zechariah 12:10 • discovery hunt (the pierced one)
- Psalm 22:16; Isaiah 53:8-10 • leader background (OT roots)
- Romans 6:9 • read aloud (Thread 4)
- John 11 • leader background (Lazarus contrast)
- Mark 15:39 • memory verse
- CCC 645-646, 597, 619 • doctrine anchors; 646 read aloud

Source cards tonight: Josephus, Life 420-421; Tacitus, Annals 15.44. Both printed above in full excerpt with public domain translations.

The Tomb

Part 1 of 3: Leader Preparation Guide

■ Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that the burial and the empty tomb rest on embarrassing, early, checkable testimony, that the earliest recorded counter-explanation itself concedes the tomb was empty, and tests the wrong-tomb and theft theories at full strength.

Catholic Touchstone. CCC 640: the empty tomb is an essential sign, the first step in the disciples' recognition of the resurrection, though not by itself a direct proof; its meaning had to dawn on them, and at first it did not.

■ What You Need to Know

Two figures anchor tonight, and both are historically awkward for inventors. First, Joseph of Arimathea: all four Gospels agree the burial was performed by a named, prominent member of the very council that had condemned Jesus, and the creed of 1 Corinthians 15 includes “that he was buried” in its earliest layer. If the burial story were fiction, this is the last burier a Christian would invent: the disciples themselves fled, and the honor goes to a Sanhedrist. He is also checkable; a “respected member of the council” (Mark 15:43) is a public figure whose family and tomb could be located by anyone in Jerusalem who cared to ask.

Second, the women. In all four Gospels the first witnesses of the empty tomb are women, led by St. Mary Magdalene, at a time when a woman's testimony carried little or no legal weight; Josephus records the prevailing attitude bluntly (source card tonight). Luke adds the humiliating detail that the male apostles dismissed the women's report as “an idle tale” (Luke 24:11). Historians call this the criterion of embarrassment: details that embarrass the movement reporting them are unlikely to have been invented by it. An invented empty-tomb story has Peter and John discover it heroically at dawn. The story we actually have was, in its own culture, an evidential liability, told anyway. The natural explanation of a liability told anyway is that it happened that way.

Third, the earliest counter-story. Matthew reports that the guard and the chief priests circulated the explanation that “his disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep” (Matt 28:13), and that “this story has been spread among the Jews to this day” (28:15). Independently, a century later, St. Justin Martyr reports the same theft explanation still circulating. Notice what the reported enemies of the movement did not say. They did not say: the body is right here. They did not say: wrong tomb, come and see. Be precise with the group about the kind of evidence this is: Matthew is a Christian source reporting what opponents were saying, not an opponent's own surviving document, so it does not carry the independent weight of a Tacitus. Its force lies elsewhere. Matthew appeals to a rival story his readers could hear in circulation for themselves (“to this day”), where inventing an opponents' explanation no opponent actually gave would be self-defeating; and the exchange, from whichever side one reads it, presupposes a missing body. Justin's report a century later shows the accusation persisted; treat it as evidence of the polemic's long currency, not as independent first-century confirmation. Debates about the guard's historicity (it appears only in Matthew; say so honestly) do not touch the core point, because the polemic presupposes emptiness on both sides of it.

Tonight's two steelmen: the wrong-tomb theory (grieving women in the dark confused the site, argued in scholarly form by Kirsopp Lake in 1907) and the theft theory in its best form. Present both fully; the discussion guide arms you. Note honestly, and say aloud if useful, that the empty tomb is the one item

tonight where scholarly consensus, while favorable, is not overwhelming; a minority of scholars dispute it. Our ledger line is worded to carry exactly what the evidence carries.

▪ Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Isaiah 53:9 says of the Servant: “And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death.” Executed criminals expected a criminal’s pit; this one gets a rich man’s tomb. Tonight the group hunts the fulfillment and finds Matthew 27:57, the only Gospel to mention it: “there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph.” Keep also in your back pocket, without spending it tonight, John’s quiet note that the tomb lay in a garden (John 19:41); the garden will matter in Session 8.

▪ Voices of the Church

St. Cyril of Jerusalem • *Catechetical Lectures 14, delivered in Jerusalem, c. AD 350*

Cyril catechized converts within sight of the sepulchre itself and appealed to it as a standing witness: in substance, the very place testifies; the stone, the garden, the rock-cut tomb remain before your eyes. For Cyril the resurrection was preached not in a faraway land but at the scene, to audiences who could walk there. A summary in our words. (A note for your own preparation: the precise occasion and audience of some of Cyril’s lectures is a live scholarly question; his location is not.)

St. John Chrysostom • *Homilies on Matthew 90*

On the guards’ story Chrysostom presses the obvious question with lawyerly relish: in substance, if the soldiers were asleep, how could they know the disciples stole the body? Sleeping men make poor eyewitnesses; and if they were awake, why did they permit the theft? The explanation refutes itself in the telling, he argues, and its circulation shows only that the body could not be produced. A summary of his homily in our words.

St. Gregory the Great • *Homilies on the Gospels 25*

Preaching on St. Mary Magdalene at the tomb, Gregory dwells on her perseverance: in substance, the others departed, but she remained, seeking him whom she had not found, and because she remained and sought, she found; love that would not leave the tomb was the first to see it opened. The Church came to call her the apostle to the apostles (apostolorum apostola), the messenger sent to the messengers. A summary in our words.

▪ Catechism Connection

- **CCC 640:** the empty tomb and the linen cloths signify that Christ’s body escaped the bonds of death and corruption; yet the empty tomb by itself is not a direct proof, and its meaning dawned gradually, beginning with the disciple who “saw and believed” (John 20:8).
- **CCC 641:** St. Mary Magdalene and the holy women were the first to encounter the risen Christ and became the first messengers of his resurrection to the apostles themselves.
- **CCC 515:** the mysteries of Jesus’s life were signs to be read; the investigation of visible facts is a path the Gospels themselves invite.

▪ Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • leader only

Ledger. Three candidate lines tonight, worded carefully; the empty-tomb line carries an honest concession clause. If your friend held on “Jesus died on the cross” last week, tonight’s polemic evidence

(the theft story concedes death too: nobody steals a survivor) may reopen it. Reopen gently or not at all.

Thread 3. The Isaiah 53:9 hunt feeds “in accordance with the scriptures.”

Garden seed. John 19:41 is deliberately not discussed tonight. If someone notices the tomb was in a garden, smile and say: hold that thought until Session 8.

▪ **Leading This Study Well**

LEADING THIS STUDY WELL • leader only

Let him build the theft case. Invite your friend to make the strongest theft case he can before the steelman box is read, and add the box’s points to his rather than replacing them. He should experience the counter-theories as his tools, freely offered, fairly tested.

The embarrassment criterion needs plain speech. Put it in modern terms: nobody invents the detail that humiliates their own side. If he pushes back that embarrassment can be faked as reverse psychology, concede the logical possibility and ask which explanation is simpler across four independent tellings and an embarrassed leadership.

Honesty is your best apologetic tonight. Volunteer the guard’s single attestation and the minority scholarly dissent on the empty tomb before he finds them. A case that concedes its soft spots earns the right to press its strong ones.

▪ **Session Goals**

1. The group meets Joseph of Arimathea and weighs why his role is an unlikely invention.
2. The group discovers Isaiah 53:9 fulfilled in Matthew 27:57.
3. The group weighs the women’s witness against the era’s legal attitudes (Josephus card).
4. The group reads the earliest counter-explanation and identifies what it concedes.
5. Wrong-tomb and theft theories steelmanned and tested; ledger lines proposed.

▪ **Time Note**

75 to 90 minutes. If you must cut: the Dig Deeper box and Win question 2. Never cut the Justin card or the two steelmans.

The Tomb

Part 2 of 3: Discussion Guide

▪ Opening Prayer

Leader: Lord, tonight we stand at a grave. Give us the patience to look carefully and the honesty to say what we see. Amen.

▪ Win

1. What is something true and embarrassing about your own past that you would never have invented about yourself? Why do embarrassing admissions tend to be believable?
2. If you were inventing a religion in the first century and wanted it believed, what would your founder's story look like? Who would discover the great miracle?

▪ Build

Read aloud: Mark 15:42-47.

1. What do we learn about the man who buried Jesus? Why is he a strange character for Christians to invent?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Joseph of Arimathea is “a respected member of the council” (Mark 15:43), the council that had condemned Jesus that morning; he must “take courage” to approach Pilate. All four Gospels name him; the creed already includes “that he was buried.” An inventor gives the burial to a loyal disciple, not to the enemy bench, and does not name a checkable public figure while the man's family, colleagues, and tomb were all still there to ask. Note also the double confirmation in the passage: Pilate's inquiry to the centurion sits inside the burial account itself.

2. Discovery hunt: read Isaiah 53:9, written centuries earlier. Now hunt through the burial accounts; does any Gospel record the detail? (Try Matthew 27:57.)

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Isaiah: “they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death.” Matthew 27:57: “there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph.” A condemned criminal, destined for a criminal's grave with the wicked, ends instead in a rich man's new tomb. Only Matthew mentions Joseph's wealth, and he does not even flag the Isaiah connection for his readers; the fulfillment sits quietly in the record. Add it to Thread 3.

Read aloud: Mark 16:1-8.

SOURCE CARD • read aloud at the table

Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 4.219

First-century Jewish historian, summarizing the legal custom of his people. Translation: William Whiston (1737), public domain.

“But let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex...”

We print this statement as historical evidence of first-century attitudes, not as a view anyone at this table holds. The Church honors St. Mary Magdalene precisely as the first witness.

3. All four Gospels agree: women found the tomb first, and Luke 24:11 adds that the apostles dismissed their report as “an idle tale.” Given the attitude on the card, what would you conclude about a movement that reported its central miracle this way?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

That it was reporting what happened rather than what would persuade. In that legal culture, women as sole first witnesses is an evidential handicap, and the apostles’ recorded contempt for their report doubles the embarrassment. Fabricators optimize; all four accounts carry the same liability instead. The simplest explanation of a handicap preserved across every telling is memory.

Read aloud: Matthew 27:62-66 and 28:11-15.

SOURCE CARD • read aloud at the table

St. Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho 108

Philosopher convert, writing c. AD 155, reporting the explanation still circulating among opponents a century after the crucifixion. Ante-Nicene Fathers translation, summarized with a brief quotation.

Justin tells Trypho that emissaries had gone out proclaiming that a godless sect had arisen from a deceiver whom “we crucified,” and that “his disciples stole him by night from the tomb” and were deceiving men by proclaiming him risen. The theft explanation, first recorded in Matthew 28, was still the standing counter-story a hundred years on.

4. Here is the earliest counter-explanation on record, from the movement’s opponents, still circulating a century later. What does it concede? What does it *not* say?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

It concedes everything except the miracle: that he was crucified, that he was dead (nobody builds a story around stealing a survivor), that the tomb was known, and that it was empty. What it never says is “here is the body” or “you have the wrong tomb.” Weigh it precisely: this is Matthew’s report of the counter-story, not an opponent’s own document, so its force is not independent hostile attestation like Tacitus. It is self-exposure: Matthew points at an explanation “spread among the Jews to this day,” circulating where his readers lived, and a story no opponent told would have been a self-defeating invention. And the one refutation that would have ended the movement in an afternoon, producing the corpse in the city where the preaching began, is a refutation no surviving source, on any side, ever claims was made. Absence of that claim, from parties with every reason to make it, is quiet but real evidence.

STEELMAN • The Wrong Tomb, at full strength

LEADER • do not read aloud. The co-investigator presents this; strengthen it freely.

READ ALOUD. The women had watched from a distance, in grief, at dusk before a Sabbath; Jerusalem’s garden tombs were numerous and similar; they returned in half-light. An honest mistake at the wrong, unused tomb, plus a young man’s ambiguous words, could ignite the whole story. Kirsopp Lake argued a scholarly form of this in 1907. No fraud required, no miracle, only grief and dawn shadows.

PRESS TOGETHER • read or say in your own words. Mark 15:47 exists precisely to close this door: the women “saw where he was laid,” and the tomb was not anonymous; it belonged to a named public figure who could point to it. A mistake by the women is corrected in ten minutes by Joseph, by Peter and John (who also ran and looked, John 20:3-8), or, most decisively, by the authorities, who needed only to walk

to the right tomb and end the movement. The theory also explains none of what follows: mistaken women do not produce appearances to groups, a transformed Peter, or a converted persecutor.

STEELMAN • The Theft, at full strength

LEADER • do not read aloud. Invite your friend to build the theft case himself first. When he has finished, add whatever is missing from the case below.

READ ALOUD. The disciples had motive (shame, sunk cost), tomb robbery was common enough that an imperial edict later threatened death for it, the guard appears only in Matthew and may be apologetic legend, and a small group with one night could move a body. Alternatively, unknown third parties (gardener, grave robbers, authorities relocating the body) could have taken it, seeding an honest mistake.

PRESS TOGETHER • read or say in your own words. Read John 20:6-7 together. Thieves work fast and take the valuables; the valuables were the spiced linens, left behind, with the face cloth “rolled up in a place by itself.” A staged theft by disciples founders on psychology (they fled, denied, hid, and did not expect a resurrection, Luke 24:21: “we had hoped”) and, decisively, on what comes later: men do not endure torture and death for a body they buried themselves; Session 6 weighs this fully. Third-party theft explains the missing body but leaves untouched the appearances, the transformed lives, and the authorities’ silence: whoever held the body could have produced it, and no one ever did.

DIG DEEPER

The Nazareth Inscription: a marble slab bearing an imperial edict threatening death for disturbing tombs, acquired in Nazareth in 1878. Its date, origin, and connection to Christianity are all debated (a 2020 isotope study traced the marble to the Greek island of Kos), so we hang no argument on it; it stands only as evidence that grave robbery was real and taken seriously. And a word on the Shroud of Turin: fascinating, contested, and deliberately not part of this study’s case. The Church takes no doctrinal position on its authenticity, and nothing tonight rests on it.

The Fact Ledger: Proposed Lines

- *Proposed:* Jesus was buried in a known, identifiable tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the council.
- *Proposed:* Within days, his followers were reporting that tomb empty, with women as first witnesses in every account, and the earliest counter-explanation on record (reported in Matthew 28, still current in Justin’s day) presupposes an empty tomb. (*A minority of modern scholars dispute the empty tomb itself; this line asserts what the earliest reports and counter-reports show.*)
- *Proposed:* No source, friendly or hostile, ever claims the body was produced.

▪ **Send**

1. Between wrong tomb, theft, and something else, which explanation seems strongest to you tonight, and what evidence would test it?
2. Is there a line you are not ready to sign? What exactly is missing?

▪ **Live It This Week**

- Read John 20:1-10 on your own. Picture the scene as a detective would: what is out of place, and what does each detail suggest?
- Think of one occasion when someone’s honest admission of a weakness in their own case made you trust them more. What does that tell you about testimony?

- **Closing Prayer**

Leader: Lord, the women stayed at the tomb when staying seemed pointless. Give us their stubbornness in seeking the truth. Amen.

- **Scripture Memory Verse**

Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him.

Mark 16:6 (RSV2CE)

The Tomb

Part 3 of 3: Leader Reference Card

▪ Every Passage Used Tonight

- Mark 15:42-47 • read aloud (the burial; the women see the place)
- Isaiah 53:9 • discovery hunt (grave with a rich man)
- Matthew 27:57 • discovery hunt (the rich man from Arimathea)
- Mark 16:1-8 • read aloud (the empty tomb)
- Luke 24:11 • cited (an idle tale)
- Matthew 27:62-66; 28:11-15 • read aloud (the guard; the theft story)
- John 20:1-10 • leader background and Live It (the cloths; vv. 6-7 read in steelman press)
- Luke 24:21 • cited (we had hoped)
- John 19:41 • leader background only; do not discuss (garden seed for Session 8)
- Mark 16:6 • memory verse
- CCC 640, 641, 515 • doctrine anchors

Source cards tonight: Josephus, Antiquities 4.219; St. Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho 108.

The Witnesses

Part 1 of 3: Leader Preparation Guide

■ Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group dates the creed of 1 Corinthians 15 for themselves using Paul's own biography, discovers that the appearance reports go back to within a few years of the crucifixion at most, and tests the hallucination theory at full strength against the character of the reports.

Catholic Touchstone. CCC 641-644: the appearances confronted men who did not expect them and at first did not believe them; the disciples' doubt, preserved in the record, is part of the evidence.

■ What You Need to Know

Tonight the group performs a piece of real historical detective work, and you should let them feel it. In 1 Corinthians 15:3 Paul uses the formal rabbinic vocabulary of tradition: "I delivered to you... what I also received" (paradosis, handing on). What follows in verses 3 to 7 is a compact, rhythmically structured formula that Paul presents as received tradition and that most scholars judge substantially pre-Pauline, though how much is fixed wording and how much is Paul's framing remains debated; say it with that precision. When did he receive it? He wrote around AD 53-55 and had founded the Corinthian church around 50-51, so the tradition predates that. But Paul's own letters push it much earlier: in Galatians 1:18-19 he says that three years after his conversion he went up to Jerusalem and spent fifteen days with Cephas, also seeing James, the two men the formula names. Paul's conversion is generally dated within about one to three years of the crucifixion. Do the arithmetic with the group: the tradition was in Paul's hands by the mid-30s at the latest, within a few years of the event, and his fifteen days with Cephas and James is the most natural occasion for receiving or confirming it, even though the texts do not let us fix the exact moment. This is not a Christian apologist's private claim; scholars across the spectrum, including prominent non-Christian scholars such as Gerd Lüdemann, date the tradition to the first years after the crucifixion. In ancient history, testimony that early, that formal, and that traceable is almost unheard of.

Second, the character of the appearance reports. They are strikingly various: to individuals (Cephas, James, Mary Magdalene) and to groups (the Twelve, "more than five hundred brethren at one time," all the apostles); indoors and outdoors; to mourners and, later, to an enemy; involving conversation, touch, and shared meals. Luke 24 and John 20-21 insist on physicality: "handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones" (Luke 24:39); broiled fish eaten "before them" (24:42-43); breakfast on the beach (John 21). And the record repeatedly preserves initial disbelief: they "supposed that they saw a spirit" (Luke 24:37), "some doubted" (Matt 28:17), Thomas refused secondhand testimony for a week (John 20:24-29). CCC 644 makes the disciples' doubt part of the Church's own account. Witnesses who report their own slowness to believe are not exhibiting the psychology of wish fulfillment.

Third, the background expectation, which is the quiet key to the whole night. First-century Jews who believed in resurrection at all expected it as one general event at the end of history (Dan 12:2; 2 Macc 7; and see Martha in John 11:24: "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day"). Nobody's categories contained a single man rising in the middle of history while Rome still ruled. A hallucinating mourner sees what his categories supply: a comforting presence, a vision of the beloved in glory with the Father. "He is risen bodily and I have eaten with him" was not in the deck of available conclusions. Something forced a category no one had.

▪ Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Daniel 12:2 promises that “many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake,” and the martyrs of 2 Maccabees 7 die confessing that the King of the universe will raise them up: resurrection hope, firmly at the end of history. Tonight’s discovery hunt sends the group to Daniel 12:2 and John 11:24 to establish for themselves what a first-century mourner expected, and therefore what a grief-vision could and could not have produced. The hunt feeds Thread 3 from an unexpected angle: the scriptures shaped expectations, and the reports broke them.

▪ Voices of the Church

St. Gregory the Great • *Homilies on the Gospels 26*

On the apostle Thomas, Gregory makes the Church’s boldest claim about doubt: in substance, that the disbelief of Thomas has done more for our faith than the belief of the other disciples, for in touching the wounds and being convinced, he healed in advance the wound of our unbelief. God permitted the doubt, Gregory argues, for the sake of every later generation that would need a witness who had checked. A summary in our words of a homily read by the Church in her liturgy.

St. Augustine of Hippo • *Tractates on the Gospel of John 121*

On the same scene Augustine observes, in substance, that Thomas saw and touched the man, and confessed the God he neither saw nor touched: “My Lord and my God!” The senses delivered a living body; faith, moving through what the senses delivered, reached who it was. Augustine’s point is precise for our study: evidence and faith are not rivals; the one carries a person to the threshold of the other. A summary in our words.

St. Leo the Great • *Sermons on the Resurrection (Sermon 71)*

Pope St. Leo preaches that in the forty days the Lord ate with his disciples, conversed, and let them handle him precisely so that the reality of his risen flesh would be established beyond doubt, and our faith fortified against every denial: the delays and proofs, Leo says in substance, were for us. A summary in our words.

▪ Catechism Connection

- **CCC 641:** the women, then Peter, then the Twelve: the chain of first witnesses on whose testimony the community’s faith is built.
- **CCC 642-643:** the apostles’ witness to concrete appearances; so real that the news was at first not believed.
- **CCC 644:** “Even when faced with the reality of the risen Jesus the disciples are still doubtful”; the faith of the first community was born, under grace, from direct experience that overcame their hesitation, not from credulity.

▪ Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • leader only

Ledger. Three candidate lines tonight. The dating line is the study’s crown jewel; make sure the group derived the date themselves from Galatians before it is proposed, or the signature will feel borrowed rather than earned.

Thread 3. Daniel 12:2 and John 11:24 feed the scriptures thread by defining the expectation the reports

broke.

Bridge to Session 5. The hallucination press ends by noting that grief theories require griever, and the two most consequential witnesses were not grieving. Leave it exactly there.

▪ **Leading This Study Well**

LEADING THIS STUDY WELL • leader only

Let him do the arithmetic. The creed-dating exercise works only if your friend holds the pencil: crucifixion, plus one to three years to Paul's conversion, plus three years to the Jerusalem visit with Cephas and James. If the leader announces the answer, it is apologetics; if your friend computes it, it is discovery.

Respect the hallucination theory's real science. Bereavement experiences are genuinely common; concede that immediately and warmly. The press is not "hallucinations aren't real" but "here is what they are like, and here is what was reported; compare."

The five hundred. If he objects that we cannot interview them, agree, and point at what we can verify: that Paul publicly claimed, in a letter to a fractious church, that most were alive to be asked. Then let it weigh what it weighs.

▪ **Session Goals**

1. The group identifies the creed in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 and its transmission vocabulary.
2. The group derives the creed's date themselves from Galatians 1:18-19.
3. The group catalogs the variety and physicality of the appearance reports, and the preserved doubt.
4. The group establishes the first-century resurrection expectation and why grief-visions could not supply the actual claim.
5. The hallucination theory is steelmanned and tested; ledger lines proposed.

▪ **Time Note**

75 to 90 minutes. If you must cut: the Dig Deeper box and question 6. Never cut the dating exercise or the hallucination steelman.

The Witnesses

Part 2 of 3: Discussion Guide

▪ Opening Prayer

Leader: Lord, tonight we listen to witnesses. Give us fair minds, sharp questions, and the humility to follow what we find. Amen.

▪ Win

1. Have you ever been certain you saw or heard something that turned out not to be there? What was the experience like, and how did you find out?
2. What separates a rumor from testimony, in your view? What would you want to know about a witness before trusting them?

▪ Build

Read aloud: 1 Corinthians 15:3-8.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures,

1 Corinthians 15:3-4 (RSV2CE)

1. “Delivered... received” is the formal vocabulary of handing on fixed tradition. What follows reads like a formula: short parallel clauses, a list of witnesses. What is Paul doing here, and what is he *not* doing?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

He is handing on, not inventing: presenting to the Corinthians a confession he says he himself received (“what I also received”), very likely already-formulated tradition rather than his own composition, though how much of the wording was fixed is debated. He is not telling a story that grew in his own hands; he is producing the receipt. The question that decides everything is when he received it.

2. The dating exercise. Take a pen. Read Galatians 1:13-19. Paul converted within a few years of the crucifixion; three years later he spent fifteen days in Jerusalem with Cephas, and saw James. The creed names Cephas and James. Build the timeline yourselves: by what date, at the very latest, was this tradition in Paul’s hands? Who plausibly gave it to him?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Crucifixion around AD 30; Paul’s conversion within about one to three years; the Jerusalem visit three years after that: roughly the mid-30s. The tradition was in Paul’s hands within a few years of the event at most, and the fifteen days with the two men the formula names is its most natural occasion, even if no text lets us fix the exact moment of transmission. Scholars across the spectrum, including the non-Christian scholar Gerd Lüdemann, date this tradition to the first years after the crucifixion. Whatever one concludes about what the witnesses saw, there is no gap here for legend to grow in. The claim “he was raised, and he appeared” is not the end product of decades of retelling; it is the founding announcement.

3. Catalog the appearances in the creed plus the Gospel accounts (Luke 24; John 20-21; Matt 28): to whom, how many at once, in what settings, doing what? What patterns emerge?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Individuals and groups; women and men; indoors, outdoors, on a road, on a beach; conversation, touch, broiled fish eaten before them, breakfast served; over weeks; to mourners, to doubters, and later to an enemy. “More than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive” is a public dare to check. The reports are various in every dimension in which hallucinations are uniform.

Read aloud: Luke 24:36-43.

4. What do the disciples first assume they are seeing (v. 37)? How does the account answer that assumption, and why does it matter that the doubt is in the record at all?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

They “supposed that they saw a spirit,” exactly the conclusion a vision would license, and the account answers it in the flesh: “handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have,” then the fish, eaten before them. The record preserves their wrong first guess and its correction. CCC 644 points here: the disciples doubted, and said so forever after. Wish fulfillment does not archive its own resistance.

5. Discovery hunt: what did first-century Jews actually expect about resurrection? Read Daniel 12:2, then John 11:24 (Martha, days before Easter). When was resurrection supposed to happen?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

At the end: “many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake” on the last day, which is exactly Martha’s creed about her own brother: “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” Nobody expected one man to rise in the middle of history. This is the hallucination theory’s hidden problem: visions draw on the categories mourners already have, and this category did not exist to be drawn on.

STEELMAN • The Hallucination Theory, at full strength

LEADER • do not read aloud. The co-investigator presents this; strengthen it freely.

READ ALOUD. Bereavement hallucinations are among the best documented phenomena in grief psychology: a large fraction of the widowed report sensing, seeing, or hearing the deceased, and the experiences can be vivid, consoling, and recurrent. The disciples were traumatized, guilt-ridden, sleep-deprived, and desperate. Peter, who denied him, had every psychological motive for a vision of forgiveness. Once one revered leader announced an experience, expectation could cascade through the group; religious history knows collective enthusiasms. On this theory the witnesses are perfectly sincere, which fits their later courage, and nothing supernatural is required.

PRESS TOGETHER • read or say in your own words. Grant the science, then compare the phenomena. Grief visions are private; these reports are dominated by groups, up to five hundred at once, and hallucinations are not networked; they cannot be shared like a film. Grief visions console within existing categories; these reports forced a category (bodily resurrection mid-history) that tonight’s hunt just showed did not exist. Grief visions do not eat broiled fish, hold conversations across weeks with groups, or cook breakfast. Grief visions famously do not empty tombs: a Jerusalem full of sincere visionaries still has a body in Joseph’s tomb, and Session 3’s evidence says nobody could produce one. And grief requires griever: the theory has nothing to say about a persecutor and an unbelieving brother, which is exactly where we go next week.

DIG DEEPER

On “spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:44): some argue Paul meant a non-physical appearance, making the Gospel physicality later embellishment. But Paul’s phrase *sōma pneumatikon* means a body animated by the Spirit, not a body made of spirit; the same adjective describes the “spiritual rock” and “spiritual food” of Israel’s Exodus (1 Cor 10:3-4), which were physical rock and physical manna. Paul, the earliest witness we possess in writing, insists on transformation of the body, not escape from it: “this mortal nature must put on immortality” (15:53). Session 8 returns here.

The Fact Ledger: Proposed Lines

- *Proposed:* Within a few years of the crucifixion at most, a fixed creed was circulating in Jerusalem naming eyewitnesses to appearances of the risen Jesus.
- *Proposed:* Groups as well as individuals reported seeing him, in varied settings, including eating with him.
- *Proposed:* The reports arose among people whose own record says they did not at first believe, and whose culture had no category for one man rising in the middle of history.

▪ Send

1. If you had been Thomas, absent that first Sunday, what would you have demanded? Was his demand reasonable?
2. Which is harder for you to explain away tonight: the earliness of the creed, or the group character of the reports? Why?

▪ Live It This Week

- Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 and Galatians 1:11-24 on your own; redo the timeline arithmetic in your head until you own it.
- Ask someone you trust this week how they would tell a vivid dream from something that really happened. Note what tests they name.

▪ Closing Prayer

Leader: Lord, you did not scold Thomas; you showed him your hands. Show each of us what we honestly need to see. Amen.

▪ Scripture Memory Verse

See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have.

Luke 24:39 (RSV2CE)

The Witnesses

Part 3 of 3: Leader Reference Card

▪ Every Passage Used Tonight

- 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 • read aloud (the creed)
- Galatians 1:13-19 • read aloud (the dating exercise)
- Luke 24:36-43 • read aloud (flesh and bones; the fish)
- Daniel 12:2 • discovery hunt (resurrection at the end)
- John 11:24 • discovery hunt (Martha's expectation)
- Matthew 28:17 • cited (some doubted)
- John 20:24-29 • cited (Thomas)
- 1 Corinthians 10:3-4; 15:44, 53 • Dig Deeper (spiritual body)
- Luke 24:39 • memory verse
- CCC 641, 642-643, 644 • doctrine anchors

No source cards tonight; the primary sources are Scripture itself, dated by the group's own hands.

The Hostile Witnesses

Part 1 of 3: Leader Preparation Guide

■ Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group meets the two witnesses no grief theory can reach, a persecutor and an unbelieving brother, weighs what each gained and lost, and tests the legend theory at full strength against the dated evidence.

Catholic Touchstone. CCC 639 again, now sharpened: the historically verified manifestations include appearances to men who did not want them.

■ What You Need to Know

Every naturalistic theory so far has assumed the witnesses wanted to see Jesus alive. Tonight's two did not. Saul of Tarsus tells us in his own hand what he was: "I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it" (Gal 1:13). This is not a biographer's flattery; it is a self-accusation in a public letter, corroborated by Acts and remembered against him for decades ("Is not this the man who made havoc...?", Acts 9:21). Whatever happened near Damascus, it happened to a man whose career, reputation, zeal, and theology all pointed the other way, and it cost him everything he lists in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28: labors, imprisonments, countless beatings, five times the thirty-nine lashes, three times beaten with rods, stoned, shipwrecked, and finally, by the unanimous memory of the early Church, death under Nero. Grief hallucination requires grief; cognitive dissonance requires prior commitment. Saul had neither. His own explanation is 1 Corinthians 15:8: "Last of all... he appeared also to me."

James is quieter and, in his way, stranger. The Gospels record with characteristic embarrassment that during the ministry "even his brothers did not believe in him" (John 7:5). Yet within a few years this same James is the acknowledged leader of the Jerusalem church, a "pillar" alongside Cephas and John (Gal 2:9), presiding at the council of Acts 15, and the creed of Session 4 records the hinge in four words: "then he appeared to James" (1 Cor 15:7). His death is reported not by a Christian but by Josephus: the high priest Ananus, in the interval between Roman governors in AD 62, had "the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James" and certain others stoned (source card tonight). A hostile family member does not convert to his dead brother's messiahship, lead the movement in the city of the execution, and die for it, because of a mood.

Tonight's steelman is legend, and it deserves an honest, even generous presentation, because legends about Jesus really did grow; we can watch them. The second-century Gospel of Peter narrates the resurrection moment itself: soldiers watch two giant angels walk a giant Jesus out of the tomb, followed by a floating, talking cross. That is what legend looks like when it happens. Now set the canonical accounts beside it: no evangelist narrates the rising at all (CCC 647 makes this the Church's own observation); the witnesses are women; the heroes doubt, flee, and deny; the risen one cooks fish. The restraint of the canonical record, compared against real legendary growth in the same century, is itself evidence. And the dating from Session 4 closes the door: the classicist A. N. Sherwin-White, studying rates of legendary accretion in Greco-Roman sources, argued in substance that even two full generations is too short a span for legend to erase a hard historical core, and the creed leaves no generations at all, let alone two.

▪ Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

When Paul describes his conversion, he reaches for a prophet's call: God "had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace" (Gal 1:15). Tonight's discovery hunt sends the group to Jeremiah 1:5, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you," to hear the echo Paul intends: the persecutor understands himself drafted, like Jeremiah, against his own inclinations, into a word he did not choose. It feeds Thread 3: Paul reads his own violent reversal as scripture-shaped.

▪ Voices of the Church

St. Clement of Rome • *Letter to the Corinthians (1 Clement) 5, c. AD 96*

Writing from Rome within one generation, Clement holds up "the good apostles": Peter, who after many labors bore his witness and went to his appointed place of glory, and Paul, who taught righteousness to the whole world, reached the limits of the West, and bore his witness before the rulers. The Greek word Clement uses for their deaths, *martyreō*, still meant "to bear witness"; in men like these it was becoming the word for dying rather than unsaying. A close summary of the chapter.

St. John Chrysostom • *In Praise of St. Paul (De Laudibus Sancti Pauli)*

Chrysostom returns throughout his panegyrics to a single wonder: in substance, that the wolf became the shepherd; the man breathing threats carried the name he had hunted to kings and nations, gladly trading honor for chains. For Chrysostom, Paul himself, more than any argument Paul wrote, is the standing proof of the resurrection: only a living Christ, he insists, turns a persecutor into an apostle. A summary in our words.

St. Jerome • *Lives of Illustrious Men (De Viris Illustribus) 2*

Jerome's entry on James, called the Just, gathers the early traditions: the brother of the Lord, first bishop of Jerusalem, who governed the church there for thirty years, a man of such relentless prayer that tradition (from the second-century writer Hegesippus) said his knees grew hard as a camel's, and who was put to death for refusing to deny the one he had once refused to believe. A summary in our words of Jerome's account and the traditions he preserves.

▪ Catechism Connection

- **CCC 639:** the historically verified manifestations of the resurrection, now including appearances to the unwilling.
- **CCC 642:** the community of believers is built on the witness of those chosen, "most especially" the apostolic witnesses; Paul insists on his own place in that chain (1 Cor 15:8-11).
- **CCC 647:** no evangelist describes the rising; keep this beside the Gospel of Peter tonight, where a legend does describe it.

▪ Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • leader only

Ledger. Two candidate lines tonight; the wording "attributed the change to seeing him alive" claims exactly what the sources claim and no more.

Thread 3. Jeremiah 1:5 behind Galatians 1:15.

Restraint marker. When the Gospel of Peter's flying cross gets its laugh, and it will, quietly note that the canonical silence about the rising itself (CCC 647) is the sound of testimony, not storytelling. That

contrast is the night's keepsake.

▪ Leading This Study Well

LEADING THIS STUDY WELL • leader only

Paul is your friend's natural ally. A skeptic often identifies with a man who thought the whole thing was dangerous nonsense. Introduce Saul as exactly that and let your friend narrate what it would take to turn him around. Do not answer for him.

Handle martyrdom honestly. He may say, rightly, that people die for false beliefs constantly. Agree at once, then draw the distinction that carries the whole argument: modern martyrs die for what they sincerely believe on others' word; these men died for what they claimed to have seen. Liars make poor martyrs. Sincerity is all the argument claims, and sincerity is all it needs, because sincere witnesses this early rule out legend, and their content ruled out grief.

The Gospel of Peter moment. Read it deadpan. The contrast does the work; commentary would spoil it.

▪ Session Goals

1. The group hears Paul's self-description as persecutor from his own letters and tallies what conversion cost him.
2. The group traces James from unbelief (John 7:5) to leadership (Gal 2:9; Acts 15) to death (Josephus).
3. The group discovers Jeremiah 1:5 behind Galatians 1:15.
4. The legend theory is steelmanned with a real legend on the table, then tested against the dated creed and canonical restraint.
5. Ledger lines proposed.

▪ Time Note

75 to 90 minutes. If you must cut: the Jeremiah hunt and Win question 2. Never cut the Josephus card or the Gospel of Peter contrast.

The Hostile Witnesses

Part 2 of 3: Discussion Guide

▪ Opening Prayer

Leader: Lord, you are said to have met men who were against you. If you are real, you know how to meet honest resistance; teach us to respect it too. Amen.

▪ Win

1. What is the biggest reversal of conviction you have ever watched in someone you know well? What did it cost them?
2. What would it take to convince you of something you currently oppose with your whole strength? Is there anything that could?

▪ Build

Read aloud: Galatians 1:13-24.

1. Build Saul's profile from his own words: what was he, what was he doing, and how far advanced was he (v. 14)? Why does his testimony about himself carry special weight?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

A rising star of Pharisaic Judaism, advanced beyond his peers, "extremely zealous," who "persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it." It is confession, not accusation: a man publicly indicting his own past in letters his enemies could exploit. The criterion of embarrassment again, now autobiographical. And note verses 22-23: the Judean churches knew him only by the report, "He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." The reversal was the headline in his own lifetime.

2. Read 2 Corinthians 11:23-28, Paul's ledger of what the change purchased him. Tally it. What did conversion gain Paul, in worldly terms, and what does that do to any theory that he invented or imagined his experience for advantage?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Labors, prisons, "countless beatings," five scourgings, three beatings with rods, a stoning, three shipwrecks, dangers from every side, hunger, cold, and daily anxiety; tradition adds execution under Nero, attested within one generation by St. Clement of Rome. The advantage theory has nothing to feed on. Deliberate fraud buys him this; hallucination lacks a griever; the man himself says simply, "he appeared also to me" (1 Cor 15:8). His sincerity is about as well purchased as sincerity can be.

3. Now James. Read John 7:5, then Galatians 2:9 and 1 Corinthians 15:7. Trace the arc in three verses. What happened in the middle?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

"Even his brothers did not believe in him" during the ministry, an admission the Church preserved against its own founder's family. Then: "then he appeared to James." Then: James a "pillar" of the Jerusalem church, its acknowledged head. The creed places the hinge exactly where the grief theories

cannot operate: an unbelieving brother is not longing for his sibling's messianic return; a dead brother is proof the messianic claim failed. Something moved James from the family's skepticism to the movement's leadership, and the earliest record names the something.

SOURCE CARD • read aloud at the table

Flavius Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews 20.200

Non-Christian Jewish historian, writing c. AD 93 about events of AD 62. Translation: William Whiston (1737), public domain. This passage, unlike the famous Testimonium, is accepted as authentic by virtually all scholars.

"...Ananus... assembled the sanhedrin of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned..."

4. What does a non-Christian historian, with no stake in the story, independently confirm here?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

That Jesus existed and was called Christ; that he had a brother named James; that James was prominent enough in Jerusalem for his execution to be a political scandal (Josephus goes on to report that fair-minded citizens protested and the high priest was deposed for it); and that James died by stoning in AD 62 rather than abandon the movement. The unbelieving brother of John 7:5 ends here, and an enemy's pen records it.

5. Discovery hunt: Paul says God "had set me apart before I was born" (Gal 1:15). Hunt the Old Testament for the voice he is echoing. (Try the call of Jeremiah.)

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Jeremiah 1:5: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." Paul narrates his reversal in the cadence of a prophet drafted against his will toward the nations. Whatever near Damascus did to him, he could only describe it with the scriptures. Thread 3 grows.

STEELMAN • The Legend Theory, at full strength

LEADER • do not read aloud. The co-investigator presents this; strengthen it freely.

READ ALOUD. Stories grow. Decades separate the events from the written Gospels; oral cultures embellish; the miracle-count rises visibly from earlier to later apocryphal writings. We can even produce the specimen: the second-century Gospel of Peter describes the resurrection itself, with soldiers watching two colossal angels escort a Jesus whose head overpasses the heavens out of the tomb, followed by a cross that walks and answers a voice from heaven. If legends like that grew within a century, why not the whole Easter story within a generation? Perhaps a revered teacher's memory, transfigured by devotion, simply accreted an empty tomb here, an appearance there, until history sank beneath the story.

PRESS TOGETHER • read or say in your own words. First, the clock. The creed the group dated in Session 4 is fixed within a handful of years, in Jerusalem, among living hostile eyewitnesses; the classicist A. N. Sherwin-White argued from Greco-Roman parallels that even two generations is too short for legend to displace a historical core, and here there are no generations at all. Second, the fingerprints. Set the Gospel of Peter beside the canonical accounts: real legend narrates the rising in technicolor; the canonical Gospels never narrate it at all, a restraint the Church herself points to (CCC 647). Real legend deletes embarrassments; the canonical record keeps the women, the flight, the denial, the doubt. Third, the direction of correction: the embarrassing details survive every retelling, which is the opposite of how embellishment behaves. The theory predicts fingerprints, and the fingerprints on the record belong to

testimony.

DIG DEEPER

How solid is the tradition that the apostles died for their witness? Be honest about gradations: strongest for Peter and Paul (St. Clement of Rome within one generation; Ignatius; the Neronian persecution context in Tacitus), explicit in Scripture for James the son of Zebedee (Acts 12:2), non-Christian for James the Just (tonight's Josephus card), and of varying strength in later tradition for the rest. The argument tonight needs no more than the strong cases, and claims no more. What no source anywhere records is a single witness recanting.

The Fact Ledger: Proposed Lines

- *Proposed:* The movement's two most consequential early converts were an active persecutor and a previously unbelieving member of Jesus's own family.
- *Proposed:* Both attributed the change to seeing him alive; both led the movement publicly in the cities that knew them; both died rather than retract, and no witness anywhere is recorded recanting.

▪ **Send**

1. Saul had every earthly reason to stay Saul. Which theory on our table so far can carry the weight of his reversal? Can any?
2. If you found yourself convinced against your will of something costly, what do you think you would do next?

▪ **Live It This Week**

- Read Acts 9:1-22 on your own: the same event from the outside. Note what the people around Saul could and could not perceive.
- Think of the most honest opponent of your own views you know. What would their conversion require, and what would it mean to you?

▪ **Closing Prayer**

Leader: Lord, you did not wait for Saul to warm to you. Meet each of us with the same initiative, and give us his honesty when we are met. Amen.

▪ **Scripture Memory Verse**

He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.
Galatians 1:23 (RSV2CE)

The Hostile Witnesses

Part 3 of 3: Leader Reference Card

▪ Every Passage Used Tonight

- Galatians 1:13-24 • read aloud (Saul's self-portrait; the report in Judea)
- 2 Corinthians 11:23-28 • read aloud (the cost)
- 1 Corinthians 15:7-8 • cited (appeared to James; to Paul)
- John 7:5 • read aloud (his brothers did not believe)
- Galatians 2:9 • cited (James the pillar)
- Acts 9:21; Acts 12:2; Acts 15 • leader background
- Jeremiah 1:5 • discovery hunt (behind Gal 1:15)
- Galatians 1:23 • memory verse
- CCC 639, 642, 647 • doctrine anchors

Source card tonight: Josephus, Antiquities 20.200. Contrast text: Gospel of Peter (second-century apocryphon), summarized in the steelman; it is not Scripture and not printed as a source card.

The Aftermath

Part 1 of 3: Leader Preparation Guide

■ Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group examines what happened next: proclamation in the checkable city within weeks, devout Jews moving their holy day, eyewitnesses accepting death rather than retraction, and Rome's own records of a movement that an execution failed to stop. The full external dossier is read at the table.

Catholic Touchstone. CCC 156: the Church's growth, holiness, and stability are among the motives of credibility; and CCC 2174: the Church worships on Sunday because Christ rose "on the first day of the week."

■ What You Need to Know

Tonight moves from the event to its wake, and the wake is evidence of a peculiar kind: public, datable, and conceded by enemies. First, geography and timing. The proclamation did not begin a safe distance away or a safe generation later; it began in Jerusalem, within weeks, at a pilgrimage festival, minutes' walk from the tomb (Acts 2). Peter's recorded argument even cites the checkable local landmark: David "both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day" (Acts 2:29), the pointed contrast being a second tomb nearby about which no such thing could be said. Preaching a bodily resurrection beside a occupied tomb is a strategy with a half-life of one afternoon. The movement's survival of its own falsifiability conditions, in the one city where they could be enforced, demands explanation.

Second, the sabbath. The witnesses were observant Jews for whom the seventh day was covenant identity, guarded for centuries at the cost of martyrdoms. Within the earliest documentary layer we find them gathering "on the first day of the week" (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2), and within two generations the practice is simply assumed: St. Ignatius describes believers of Jewish formation "no longer keeping the sabbath but living in accordance with the Lord's day, on which also our life arose," and Pliny's interrogations extract that Christians met "on a fixed day before dawn." Religious bodies do not casually relocate their axis of worship. Something anchored to a specific day of the week stands at the origin, and every early source names the same anchor: the resurrection (CCC 2174).

Third, the price. Handle the martyrdom argument with the precision Session 5 established: many die sincerely for false beliefs received secondhand; these men died for claims they were in a position to verify personally. The argument is not that martyrdom proves the resurrection; it is that martyrdom proves the witnesses' sincerity, and sincere witnesses this early, in these numbers, with this variety, eliminate conspiracy outright and leave only the theories already tested. Tonight's dossier adds Rome's perspective: Tacitus, unwillingly, records that the "superstition" was "checked for the moment" by the execution and then "again broke out"; Pliny, a governor begging the emperor for guidance, records ordinary people singing "to Christ as to a god" and refusing to curse him under threat of execution; and the Testimonium of Josephus, read critically in its minimal reconstruction, still attests the condemnation under Pilate and a tribe of Christians "not extinct at this day." Finally Gamaliel's principle from inside the Sanhedrin itself (Acts 5:38-39) and Augustine's dilemma from Session 1, now cashable: either the miracles happened, or the world was converted without them, which would be the greater miracle.

A fidelity note: keep CCC 597 at hand again tonight wherever the Jerusalem authorities appear, and keep the tone of the whole night wonder, not scorekeeping. The aftermath is not a gotcha; it is a fact the size of a civilization, sitting quietly behind every date your friend has ever written.

▪ Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Tonight's hunt starts from Peter's defense before the council: the builders' rejected stone become the head of the corner (Acts 4:11). The group hunts the source and finds Psalm 118:22, then reads two verses further: "This is the day which the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it" (Ps 118:24). The psalm the apostles reached for to explain the reversal sits two lines from the verse the Church has sung on Easter morning ever since, and the group will find the adjacency themselves. Thread 3 grows a Sunday branch.

▪ Voices of the Church

St. Ignatius of Antioch • *Letter to the Magnesians 9, c. AD 107*

"...no longer observing the sabbath, but living in the observance of the Lord's Day, on which also our life has sprung up again by Him and by His death." (Ante-Nicene Fathers translation, lightly abridged.) A bishop formed within living memory of the apostles describes the change of day as an accomplished fact needing no defense, and names its cause in passing: the day our life sprang up.

St. Justin Martyr • *First Apology 67, c. AD 155*

Justin, explaining Christian worship to the emperor, writes that on "the day called Sunday" all who live in city or country gather in one place for the memoirs of the apostles, the prophets, the prayers, and the bread and wine, "because it is the first day, on which God... made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead." (Ante-Nicene Fathers translation, abridged.) The reason attached to the day, in the earliest description of the Sunday assembly we possess, is the resurrection.

St. Polycarp of Smyrna • *The Martyrdom of Polycarp 9, c. AD 155*

Ordered to revile Christ and save his life, the aged bishop, a disciple of St. John the Apostle himself, answered: "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?" (Ante-Nicene Fathers translation.) One handshake from the eyewitnesses, the price was still being paid, and still being judged worth it.

▪ Catechism Connection

- **CCC 156:** the Church's growth, holiness, fruitfulness, and stability among "the most certain signs" of credibility, adapted to every mind.
- **CCC 2174:** "Jesus rose from the dead 'on the first day of the week'"; Sunday, the "Lord's Day," commemorates it as the new creation's first morning.
- **CCC 597:** repeated tonight wherever the events touch the Jerusalem leadership: no collective responsibility then, none now.

▪ Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • leader only

Ledger. Four candidate lines tonight, the study's largest harvest. After signing, tell the group plainly: the evidence phase is complete. Next week, the verdict.

Thread 3. Psalm 118:22-24 via Acts 4:11: the rejected stone and the day the LORD has made.

Housekeeping for Session 7. Confirm all three will attend; the verdict night does not work with two. Bring the sealed envelopes next week. Do not open them tonight, and say so with a smile if asked.

▪ **Leading This Study Well**

LEADING THIS STUDY WELL • leader only

The dossier belongs to him. Let your friend read the source cards aloud tonight; hostile and neutral voices land differently in a skeptic's own voice. Pause after each card and ask him first, before anyone else speaks, what it establishes and what it does not.

Concede the limits of each source cheerfully. Tacitus confirms execution and explosion, not resurrection. Pliny confirms worship, not warrant. The Testimonium is partly interpolated and the card says so. The dossier's power is convergence, and convergence only persuades a mind that has watched each strand weighed honestly.

Watch the temperature. This is the last evidence night, and the temptation to press for a conclusion is at its peak. Resist it completely. Next week has a structure for conclusions; tonight only gathers.

▪ **Session Goals**

1. The group weighs the Jerusalem factor: proclamation beside the tomb, within weeks.
2. The group discovers Psalm 118:22-24 behind Acts 4:11 and the Sunday shift behind Acts 20:7.
3. The full external dossier is read aloud: Tacitus, the Testimonium critically presented, Pliny, with Suetonius noted.
4. The martyrdom argument is stated with precision: sincerity, not truth, is what dying proves, and sincerity is what the case needs.
5. Ledger lines proposed; evidence phase closed.

▪ **Time Note**

75 to 90 minutes, and tonight runs long if unmanaged; the dossier is rich. If you must cut: the Suetonius note and Win question 2. Never cut Pliny or the Psalm 118 hunt.

The Aftermath

Part 2 of 3: Discussion Guide

▪ Opening Prayer

Leader: Lord, tonight we read what friends and enemies wrote after that morning. Let every voice be heard fairly, including the ones that despised you. Amen.

▪ Win

1. Can you think of a movement in history that grew *because* it was persecuted? What does suppression usually do to a false claim with living witnesses against it?
2. What is the oldest weekly habit in your own life? What would it take to move it permanently to a different day?

▪ Build

Read aloud: Acts 2:22-24, 29-33, then 2:36.

This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses.

Acts 2:32 (RSV2CE)

1. Locate this speech in space and time: what city, how long after the crucifixion, before what audience? Peter even points at a tomb in verse 29. Why does the geography matter as much as the content?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Jerusalem, at Pentecost, roughly seven weeks after the execution, before festival crowds including residents who had witnessed it. Peter's own argument leans on a checkable tomb: David's "is with us to this day," the unstated contrast being the nearby tomb of which that could not be said. Every listener could walk to the site before supper. A movement that begins its public life beside its own falsification point, and survives, has either verified itself or benefited from an enemy blunder no ancient enemy ever explains. The counter-story we read in Session 3 conceded the tomb was empty; tonight shows why they needed a counter-story at all.

2. Read Acts 4:13-20. The council can flog and threaten; what is the one thing the record never shows them doing? And what do Peter and John say they cannot do?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

The council never produces a body or disputes the emptiness of the tomb; they work entirely on suppression: "speak no more to any one in this name." The apostles' answer is testimony language: "we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (4:20). Not what we hope, what we deduced, or what we were told: what we have seen. That claim, in that city, before that bench, is either true or suicidal.

3. Discovery hunt: in Acts 4:11 Peter calls Jesus "the stone which was rejected by you builders." Hunt the psalm he is quoting, then read two verses past it. What do you find sitting next door?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Psalm 118:22, then, two lines on: "This is the day which the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it" (118:24). The psalm the apostles used to interpret the great reversal carries, in its very next breath, the

verse the Church has sung on Easter morning ever since. The group has just walked the same two verses the first believers walked. Thread 3 grows a branch: the scriptures did not only predict a vindication; they supplied its morning song.

4. Read Acts 20:7 and 1 Corinthians 16:2. What day are the believers, most of them observant Jews, now gathering and collecting on? Rank how strange that is.

ANSWER • share after the discussion

“The first day of the week.” For men whose people had died rather than break the sabbath, relocating the axis of the week is close to relocating their identity, and the sources treat it as already routine, needing no argument. Institutions do not drift off their founding day; they are knocked off by events. Every early explanation on record, from Ignatius to Justin (Voices tonight), names the same event, and the Church still names it (CCC 2174). Sunday is the resurrection’s footprint in the calendar, visible on your friend’s phone this minute.

The External Dossier

Your friend reads each card aloud. After each: what does this establish, and what does it not?

SOURCE CARD • read aloud at the table

Tacitus, Annals 15.44 (fuller excerpt)

Roman senator and historian, c. AD 116, explaining whom Nero blamed for the fire of Rome. Translation: Church and Brodribb (1876), public domain.

“Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome...”

Establishes, from a contemptuous pen: the execution under Pilate; a movement “checked” by it that inexplicably “again broke out” in Judea first; Christians in Rome in numbers worth scapegoating within about thirty years. Does not establish: anything about a resurrection. Tacitus records the effect and shrugs at the cause.

SOURCE CARD • read aloud at the table

Flavius Josephus, Antiquities 18.63-64 (the Testimonium Flavianum), read critically

Jewish historian, c. AD 93. Translation: William Whiston (1737), public domain. Printed with its problem stated.

“Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man... a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure... And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him... And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.”

The received text also contains overtly Christian phrases (“if it be lawful to call him a man,” “He was the Christ,” a resurrection report) that most scholars judge later Christian interpolation into an authentic core; we have omitted them above in line with widely used critical reconstructions such as John P. Meier’s. Even the pruned core establishes: Jesus, the condemnation under Pilate at the instance of some leaders (remember CCC 597), continuing devoted followers, and Christians persisting sixty years on. It does not establish the resurrection, and honest use of this source never claims it does.

SOURCE CARD • read aloud at the table

Pliny the Younger, Letters 10.96, to the Emperor Trajan

Roman governor of Bithynia, c. AD 112, asking how to handle Christians in his courts. Standard public domain translation, abridged.

Pliny reports that those denounced as Christians were given three chances to recant, offering incense to Caesar's image and cursing Christ, "none of which things, it is said, those who are really Christians can be forced into performing." The genuine ones affirmed that their whole fault was meeting "on a fixed day before dawn" to "sing responsively a hymn to Christ, as to a god," and to bind themselves by oath against theft, adultery, and fraud. He notes the "contagion" had spread through cities, villages, and farms, emptying the temples, and that he executed those who would not recant. A close summary with brief quotation.

Establishes: within eighty years, ordinary provincials of every rank worshiping Christ as divine on a fixed day, and choosing death over a pinch of incense. Does not establish: what happened in AD 30. It establishes what the people nearest to it were willing to die about, under a neutral magistrate's own seal. (A note also for completeness: Suetonius, Life of Claudius 25, mentions Rome's Jews rioting "at the instigation of Chrestus," probably a garbled reference to Christ disputes in Rome by the 40s; it is disputed, and we hang nothing on it.)

5. Read Acts 5:34-39, the counsel of Gamaliel, Paul's own teacher, from inside the council. State his test in your own words. Then recall St. Augustine's dilemma from Session 1. Two thousand years on, how does the test read?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Gamaliel: failed messiahs' movements scatter when the man dies, as Theudas's and Judas the Galilean's did; "if this plan or this undertaking is of men, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them." Every comparison movement he named is a footnote; this one outlived the council, the Temple, and the empire that crucified its founder. Augustine's fork sharpens the point: either the attested signs were real, or the world was won without them, by fishermen, against every power, which would be the stranger miracle. Neither prong is comfortable for the theories on our table. That is the whole argument of the aftermath, and the ledger will now carry only its facts, not its conclusion; the conclusion is next week's work.

DIG DEEPER

On dying for a lie: state the argument's precise shape once more, because it is often stated badly and then rightly rejected. Martyrdom never proves a belief true; Muslims, Buddhists, and atheists have all died bravely for their convictions, and modern martyrs die for what they received on testimony. What martyrdom proves is that the martyr is not lying. The apostles were not later believers dying for received testimony; they were the alleged eyewitnesses themselves, dying for what they claimed to have seen and touched, with every opportunity to save themselves by a word. Their deaths therefore eliminate exactly one theory: deliberate fraud. The sincere-error theories (swoon, wrong tomb, hallucination, legend) have already stood their trials on other evidence.

The Fact Ledger: Proposed Lines

- *Proposed:* The proclamation that Jesus had risen began in Jerusalem within weeks of the crucifixion, where its central claim could be checked.
- *Proposed:* Within living memory of the events, observant Jews were worshiping on the first day of the week, and every early explanation of the change names the resurrection.
- *Proposed:* Hostile and neutral Roman-era sources independently confirm the execution, the movement's survival and explosive spread, and believers' willingness to die rather than curse Christ.

- *Proposed:* The eyewitness generation accepted persecution and death rather than retract, and no recantation by any witness is recorded anywhere.

▪ **Send**

1. The evidence phase is now complete. Looking at the whole ledger, which single line surprises you most to have signed?
2. Before next week: is there any line you want to reopen, any evidence you feel we skipped, any card you want recheck? Name it now and we will bring it.

▪ **Live It This Week**

- Read the whole Fact Ledger once on your own (photograph it tonight). Sit with it for ten quiet minutes and write one sentence: what does this list *feel* like it adds up to? Bring the sentence unshared.
- Notice one Sunday this week, anywhere in the world, and remember what you now know about why that day.

▪ **Closing Prayer**

Leader: Lord, the evidence is gathered. Whatever verdicts we bring next week, keep the three of us honest, and keep us friends. Amen.

▪ **Scripture Memory Verse**

for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.

Acts 4:20 (RSV2CE)

The Aftermath

Part 3 of 3: Leader Reference Card

▪ Every Passage Used Tonight

- Acts 2:22-24, 29-33, 36 • read aloud (Pentecost; 2:32 read from the card)
- Acts 4:11 • read aloud (the rejected stone)
- Psalm 118:22-24 • discovery hunt (the stone; the day)
- Acts 4:13-20 • read aloud (we cannot but speak)
- Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2 • read aloud (the first day)
- Acts 5:34-39 • read aloud (Gamaliel)
- Acts 4:20 • memory verse
- CCC 156, 2174, 597 • doctrine anchors

Source cards tonight: Tacitus, Annals 15.44 (fuller excerpt); Josephus, Antiquities 18.63-64 with critical note; Pliny, Letters 10.96 with Suetonius note. Remind all three: bring the sealed envelopes and the ledger next week.

The Verdict

Part 1 of 3: Leader Preparation Guide

■ Session Overview

Discovery Aim. No new evidence tonight. The group runs every candidate explanation against every line of their own signed ledger using the Verdict Grid, reaches whatever verdicts honesty permits, and opens the sealed cards, privately.

Catholic Touchstone. CCC 156-157: the motives of credibility make the assent of faith “by no means a blind impulse of the mind,” yet faith remains a free act, aided by grace, that no grid can compel. Tonight the study practices exactly what the Church teaches about how evidence and faith meet.

■ What You Need to Know

Tonight’s method is the historian’s ordinary tool for singular past events: inference to the best explanation. Explanations are compared on standard criteria: explanatory scope (how many of the agreed facts does it cover?), explanatory power (does it make those facts likely, or merely possible?), plausibility, and freedom from ad hoc rescue (how many unevidenced helper assumptions must be bolted on?). Historians and philosophers of history use these criteria on every contested question; scholars such as Michael Licona have applied them formally to this one. The group does not need the vocabulary; the Verdict Grid embodies it. Your job is to referee fairly, which means letting weak marks stand against the resurrection hypothesis wherever the group honestly puts them, and letting weak marks stand against the naturalistic theories with equal calm.

Anticipate the combination move, because thoughtful skeptics make it: perhaps no single theory works, but a combination does; say, the women went to the wrong tomb and Peter hallucinated and legend polished the rest. Treat it respectfully and then note two things. First, combinations inherit every difficulty of each component in the domain where that component operates; the hallucination piece still cannot produce group meals, the wrong-tomb piece still dies on Joseph’s known tomb, the legend piece still has no time to work. Second, apply the ad hoc test fairly and to both sides: a combination is legitimate exactly insofar as each component carries independent historical warrant. The question to press is not anyone’s motive but the evidence’s support: is each part suggested by evidence of its own, or introduced primarily to rescue another part from difficulty? Parts of the second kind multiply improbability without adding explanation, and an honest skeptic can be invited to run that test on his own construction just as the group runs it on “God raised him.”

Be equally honest about what the argument delivers. If the grid falls the way the evidence has been trending, the group will conclude that “God raised him” explains their signed facts better than any rival. That is a rational verdict, and it is not yet faith. The Church herself teaches that the assent of faith, while supported by converging signs “adapted to the intelligence of all” (CCC 156), is a free act moved by grace, not the mechanical output of an argument (CCC 157, 179). St. John Henry Newman called the way an honest mind actually reaches certainty a convergence of independent probabilities, each resistible alone, together pointing like spokes to a hub. Tell your friend the truth: a verdict of “best explanation” leaves him room to stand still, and only he decides whether to walk. Session 8 is about what is on the other side of the door if he does; it presses nothing.

The sealed cards: return each envelope to its writer unopened. Each person reads only his own, silently. Then the leader asks one question: “Would anyone like to say whether tonight’s verdict matches the card, or how it moved?” If anyone shares, the leader shares first, honestly, including any real doubts he

wrote seven weeks ago. If no one shares, the night is complete anyway; the instrument worked in each conscience, where it was aimed.

▪ Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Tonight's Scripture is Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35), the Gospel's own scene of evidence weighed in despair. Note carefully: Luke says "two of them"; only Cleopas is named, and the second disciple is never identified, so do not assume both were men (an old tradition even suggests Cleopas's wife). Their conversation is the study in miniature: the facts recited (mighty prophet, condemned, crucified, third day, women's report, empty tomb verified), hope buried ("we had hoped"), and then the stranger "beginning with Moses and all the prophets" interpreting "in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (24:27). Thread 3 nears its resolution: the scriptures were not a proof-text quarry but a single story with a shape, and the shape was cruciform and third-day. Full resolution comes next week in the upper room (Luke 24:44-47).

▪ Voices of the Church

St. John Henry Newman • *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870)

Newman studied how real people rightly become certain of concrete truths: rarely by one knockdown proof, usually by the convergence of many independent probabilities, each of which could be resisted alone, which together support one another like the stones of an arch. Certitude reached this way, he argued in substance, is not a defect of reason but its ordinary, legitimate operation, in history, in law, and in faith. The Fact Ledger is a Newman instrument: no line proves Easter; the question is what the whole arch holds up. A summary in our words.

St. Thomas Aquinas • *Summa Theologiae II-II, q. 2, a. 9*

St. Thomas teaches in substance that the act of faith is meritorious precisely because it is free: the believer has sufficient signs to make believing reasonable (miracles, prophecy, the Church's witness), yet the evidence does not compel the way a geometry proof compels, and in that space freedom and love operate. An investigation like ours can clear the ground and show the reasonableness; the final step is an act of the whole person, assisted by grace. A summary in our words.

St. Augustine of Hippo • *Confessions, Book VI, Chapter 5*

Augustine, remembering his own long approach to faith, observes in substance that he came to see how much of what he firmly held he had never seen: events of history, facts about distant places, even the identity of his own parents, all believed on testimony, and reasonably so; and that this opened him to consider the testimony of the scriptures with seriousness rather than scorn. Trust in credible witnesses, he learned, is not the opposite of reason; it is most of how reason lives. A summary in our words.

▪ Catechism Connection

- **CCC 156-157:** faith is supported by converging external signs; the assent is "by no means a blind impulse of the mind," and faith is more certain than human knowledge because it rests on God's own word.
- **CCC 158-159:** faith seeks understanding; there can be no real conflict between faith and reason, since the same God gives both.
- **CCC 647:** recalled at the grid: the rising itself transcends history; our verdict concerns its manifestations and their best explanation.

▪ Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • leader only

Thread 1 resolves tonight. The ledger is read in full, aloud, before the grid is run. It is the group's own document; every signature on it belongs to one of the three of you.

Thread 2 resolves tonight. Sealed cards returned, read privately, sharing optional, leader first.

Thread 3 nearly resolves. Emmaus: "beginning with Moses and all the prophets." The upper room completes it next week.

Thread 4 is deliberately still open. If the verdict lands anywhere near "he rose," the immediate next question is "rose how, into what?" That question is Session 8, and you may say exactly that.

▪ Leading This Study Well

LEADING THIS STUDY WELL • leader only

This is the most delicate night of the study. No new arguments, no closing speeches, no glances at your friend while the grid is marked. Referee, do not advocate. The evidence has had six weeks to speak; tonight the three of you only listen to it.

Silence is a legitimate verdict. If your friend marks the grid honestly and says nothing about his card, the study has succeeded. Do not fish. The card was addressed to his conscience, not to you.

If he shares movement in either direction, receive it identically. "Thank you for telling us" fits both "I think he rose" and "I still can't get there." The friendship is the constant; say so if it helps, and mean it.

If he asks the two of you point blank what you wrote, answer with complete honesty, including any doubts you sealed in week one. Nothing you could say tonight is more persuasive than a believer being visibly truthful about his own interior.

▪ Session Goals

1. The full ledger is read aloud from the sheet, unhurried.
2. All five naturalistic theories plus the resurrection are run against every ledger line on the Verdict Grid.
3. Combination theories are addressed honestly.
4. The group states, in its own words, what the argument delivers and what only freedom and grace can add (CCC 156-157).
5. Sealed verdicts returned and read privately; optional sharing, leader first.

▪ Time Note

75 to 90 minutes. The grid is the night; give it no less than thirty minutes. If you must cut: shorten the Emmaus discussion to the reading plus one question. Never cut the private reading of the cards, and never let the night run so long that the cards are rushed.

The Verdict

Part 2 of 3: Discussion Guide

▪ Opening Prayer

Leader: Lord, seven weeks ago we promised to follow the evidence. Tonight we keep the promise. Give each of us an honest verdict and the courage to own it. Amen.

▪ Win

1. In your work or your life, how do you make a big judgment call when no single piece of evidence settles it? What does “weighing” actually feel like from the inside?

▪ Build

First: read the entire Fact Ledger aloud, slowly, one line at a time. Every line on it carries three signatures, and one of them is yours.

1. Before any theories: hearing your own ledger read whole for the first time, what strikes you about it as a body of evidence?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Let all three answer; there is no planted answer here. Common honest observations: the facts are more numerous than expected; they come from hostile as well as friendly sources; almost none of them, taken alone, is extraordinary; and they point in a strangely consistent direction. That combination, ordinary facts with an extraordinary convergence, is exactly the situation Newman described, and exactly what the grid now tests.

The Verdict Grid

Bring out the grid (page 2 of the Fact Ledger sheet). Across the top: the five theories the study steelmanned, plus the witnesses' own claim. Down the side: your ledger lines. For each cell ask: does this theory explain this fact (mark E), merely tolerate it with strain (mark S), or fail against it (mark F)? Work theory by theory. Argue; that is the point. The grid is finished when all three of you can live with every mark.

- **Survival (swoon):** test it especially against the death certification lines, the Strauss problem (a convalescent founding a victory faith), and the missing second death.
- **Wrong tomb:** test it against the known owner, the women who watched the burial, the authorities' silence, and everything after the tomb.
- **Theft:** test it against the guards' story conceding emptiness, the cloths, the psychology, and men dying for a body they buried.
- **Hallucination:** test it against group appearances, meals, the empty tomb it cannot touch, the missing category, and the two hostile witnesses.
- **Legend:** test it against the dated creed, the Jerusalem venue, the preserved embarrassments, and the canonical restraint beside the Gospel of Peter.
- **“God raised him”:** test it with the same severity. Ask honestly: which lines does it strain against? The group may name the prior improbability of miracle itself; write S there if that is the honest mark, and note what Session 1 agreed: whether experience is uniform here is the very question.

2. Now the combination move, and give it real effort: build the best combination theory you can (for example: wrong tomb plus hallucination plus legend). Where does each part still fail, and what holds the parts together?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Each component still meets its own wall in its own territory: the hallucination part still cannot seat five hundred at one meal, the tomb part still collides with a known owner and silent authorities, the legend part still has no time. Then run the fair test on every joint: does this component have independent historical warrant, or is it introduced primarily to rescue another component from difficulty? A combination is legitimate exactly to the degree its parts are independently evidenced; rescue-parts multiply improbability without adding explanation. Run the same test on “God raised him” and mark honestly. As in every other historical question, prefer the explanation that covers the facts in one piece without rescue clauses.

3. Look at the finished grid. Which column carries the most E marks and the fewest F marks? Say the result out loud, each of you, in one sentence of your own.

ANSWER • share after the discussion

No scripted answer; the grid the three of you marked is the answer. If the resurrection column stands, let its stand be stated plainly and without triumph: “On the facts we ourselves signed, the best available explanation is that God raised him.” If someone cannot say that sentence, the next question is the honest one: which mark on the grid would have to change, and what evidence would change it?

What the Argument Delivers, and What It Cannot

Read aloud CCC 156 and 157 (printed on tonight’s Take-Home).

4. The Church herself says the assent of faith is supported by converging signs yet remains free, “by no means a blind impulse of the mind” and also not a forced conclusion. In your own words: what has our investigation delivered, and what is left that no investigation can deliver?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Delivered: that believing the resurrection is not wishful thinking; on the group’s own signed facts it is the explanation that best survives testing. Not deliverable: the step from “best explanation” to “my Lord” (the step Thomas took in one breath). That step involves the will and, the Church says plainly, grace. An argument can walk a person to a door and show him the hinges work. It cannot walk through for him, and it should not try. St. Thomas Aquinas locates human freedom exactly in that doorway, and tonight we respect it.

Read aloud: Luke 24:13-35.

5. Two disciples, one named Cleopas, the other never identified, walk away from Jerusalem rehearsing the very facts on our ledger, and say “we had hoped.” What does the stranger do with their evidence, and what happens at the table?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

He does not add new facts; they already had the facts, including the empty tomb, verified. “Beginning with Moses and all the prophets,” he gives the facts their frame (Thread 3: the scriptures were one story with a cruciform, third-day shape all along), and their hearts burn. Then he is known “in the breaking of the bread,” Luke’s unmistakably Eucharistic phrase, and they run back to Jerusalem through the dark. Evidence, then meaning, then encounter, then mission: the study’s whole arc, walked by two people on one afternoon. Note what the group may notice: recognition came at a meal to which the stranger let

himself be invited. He does not force doors; he accepts invitations (hold that thought one more week).

The Sealed Verdicts

Return each envelope to its writer, unopened. Each person opens and reads only his own card, silently. Sit with it for a full quiet minute.

Then the leader asks, once: "Would anyone like to say whether tonight's verdict matches your card, or how it moved?" If anyone shares, the leader shares first, with complete honesty. If no one shares, close the moment with thanks; the cards did their work where they were meant to.

▪ **Send**

1. Whatever your verdict tonight: what would you want to do about it? (There is no assigned answer. Next week looks at what the witnesses said rose, and what it would mean if it is true. Come for that whatever you concluded tonight.)

▪ **Live It This Week**

- Keep your verdict card somewhere private. Once this week, read it again and ask: is this still my verdict? Amend it freely; it is yours.
- Read Luke 24:13-35 once more on your own, at walking pace.

▪ **Closing Prayer**

Leader: Lord, if you rose, you are alive tonight and know each verdict at this table better than we do. Deal gently with all three of us, and stay on the road with us. Amen.

▪ **Scripture Memory Verse**

Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?

Luke 24:32 (RSV2CE)

The Verdict

Part 3 of 3: Leader Reference Card

▪ Every Passage Used Tonight

- The Fact Ledger • read aloud in full (Thread 1 resolves)
- The Verdict Grid • marked together (page 2 of the ledger sheet)
- CCC 156-157 • read aloud (what argument delivers; what freedom and grace add)
- Luke 24:13-35 • read aloud (Emmaus; “two of them,” only Cleopas named)
- Luke 24:32 • memory verse
- CCC 158-159, 647 • doctrine anchors

Materials tonight: the completed Fact Ledger and Verdict Grid sheet, the three sealed envelopes (returned unopened to their writers), pens. No new sources. Sharing after the cards is optional; leader always shares first if anyone does.

What Rose

Part 1 of 3: Leader Preparation Guide

■ Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group examines what the witnesses actually said rose: not a resuscitated corpse and not a ghost, but a transformed, glorified body, the firstfruits of a new creation; the remaining threads resolve; and the study ends with an open door, not a closed sale.

Catholic Touchstone. CCC 645-646 and 999: the risen body is the same body, truly touchable, bearing the wounds, yet glorified, “not limited by space and time”; and CCC 655: Christ’s resurrection is “the principle and source of our future resurrection.”

■ What You Need to Know

Session 2 planted Thread 4 with a single sentence: the witnesses knew the difference. Tonight it resolves. Lazarus came back to ordinary mortal life, still bound in grave clothes, and later died; the widow’s son and Jairus’s daughter likewise (CCC 646). What the witnesses claimed for Jesus was another category: the same Jesus, emphatically bodily (“flesh and bones,” wounds available to Thomas’s finger, fish eaten, breakfast cooked), yet no longer bound by the conditions of mortal bodies: appearing among them though “the doors were shut” (John 20:19), unrecognized and then known, vanishing at Emmaus, and, decisively, beyond death’s reach forever: “Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him” (Rom 6:9). The grave clothes left folded in the tomb, which the theft theory could not explain, quietly preach the same point: Lazarus came out wearing his wrappings because he would need them again; Jesus left his behind.

Paul’s vocabulary for this is *sōma pneumatikon*, a “spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:44), which means a body wholly animated by the Spirit, not a body made of vapor; the same chapter insists on continuity (“this mortal nature must put on immortality,” 15:53) and calls the risen Christ “the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep” (15:20). First fruits are the front edge of one harvest: what happened to him is, on the witnesses’ claim, the preview of what will happen to those who are his (CCC 655, 988-991, 1002-1003). This is why the resurrection was never, for the first Christians, merely a stunning fact about the past; it was the future arriving early.

John frames it as new creation, and tonight the garden seed from Session 3 finally blooms. The tomb was in a garden (John 19:41); on “the first day of the week” Mary Magdalene, weeping, takes the risen Lord for “the gardener” (John 20:15). John does not wink at his readers; he simply lets a man stand in a garden at dawn on creation’s first day and be mistaken, correctly, for the gardener, the role Adam abandoned. Genesis opened with God planting a garden and walking in it with man; the Gospel answers with a garden, a new first morning, and the second Adam at work. The group should be allowed to discover this; it is the study’s most beautiful find, and it belongs to them.

Then the ending, which must be handled with reverence for your friend’s freedom. The study closes where the risen Christ closes: not with an argument but with invitations accepted and extended: a meal at Emmaus, breakfast at the shore, “come and have breakfast” (John 21:12). The final page offers your friend Rev 3:20, Christ’s own image of himself at the door that only opens from the inside, and names concrete next steps without pressure: keep meeting, read a Gospel together slowly, come and stand in the back at Mass some Sunday (the day whose origin he now knows) and watch. If his verdict last week was still no or not yet, tonight is not a second trial; it is the assurance that the door has no lock on Christ’s side and no deadline, and that the friendship at this table was never contingent on his

conclusion. Say that last part in your own words, and mean it; it may be the most Christian evidence he has seen in eight weeks.

▪ Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Thread 3 resolves in the upper room: “everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures (Luke 24:44-45): the whole threefold Hebrew Bible, read as one story whose shape was always death-and-third-day (the group’s own finds: Psalm 16, Hosea 6, Jonah, Isaiah 53, Psalm 118, Zechariah 12). Add tonight the garden of Genesis 2-3 behind John 20:15, and Ezekiel’s dry bones (Ezek 37:12-14: “I will open your graves”) behind the harvest of 1 Corinthians 15. The study’s claim is Luke’s claim: the scriptures were not decorated with predictions; they were aimed.

▪ Voices of the Church

St. Athanasius of Alexandria • *On the Incarnation, chapters 27-29, c. AD 318*

Athanasius points to a public, observable change as his evidence that death has died: in substance, that before Christ death was the terror of terrors, and now Christians, even children and young women, trample it, mocking what once mastered mankind; a tyrant visibly bound is a tyrant visibly beaten, and the daily courage of ordinary believers is the resurrection’s living proof. A summary in our words.

St. Leo the Great • *Sermons on the Resurrection (Sermon 71)*

Leo preaches in substance that the forty days of eating, touching, and conversing were designed mercy: the Lord delayed his ascension so that the reality of his risen flesh would be fixed beyond doubt in the witnesses, and through them in us; our faith rests not on a rumor of glory but on handled evidence. A summary in our words.

St. Gregory of Nyssa • *Catechetical Oration, on the defeat of death*

Gregory teaches in substance that in the resurrection God did not merely rescue one man from death but broke death from the inside: life entered death’s domain as light enters darkness, and the principle of mortality itself was ruptured, so that the resurrection of Christ is the beginning of the undoing of death for the whole race. A summary in our words.

▪ Catechism Connection

- **CCC 645-646:** the same body, truly touchable, bearing the marks of the Passion, yet possessing “the new properties of a glorious body,” present how and where he wills.
- **CCC 647:** one last time: the rising itself, no one saw; what rose, the witnesses handled.
- **CCC 655:** Christ’s resurrection is the principle and source of our own; the firstfruits logic of 1 Corinthians 15.
- **CCC 988-991, 999-1001:** “We believe in the resurrection of the body”: what God did for Christ he will do for those who are his.

▪ Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH • leader only

Thread 3 resolves. Luke 24:44-47 in the upper room: Moses, prophets, psalms, one aimed story. Recap the group’s own finds as the resolution; they earned each one.

Thread 4 resolves. Lazarus versus Jesus: resuscitation versus resurrection, CCC 646 read aloud, the folded

grave clothes as the quiet emblem.

The ledger retires. Suggest each of the three photograph or copy it; it is a shared document of a shared road. If the group wants to keep meeting, the final page names paths.

▪ **Leading This Study Well**

LEADING THIS STUDY WELL • leader only

Tonight is gift, not argument. The case closed last week. If your friend re-litigates, gently offer to take it up over coffee any week he likes, and return to the text. Tonight shows what the claim means, which is itself information a verdict needs.

The invitation must be real and pressure-free. Offer concrete doors (keep meeting; a Gospel read slowly together; standing in the back at Mass) and make explicit that the friendship is not contingent. If he says “not yet,” the correct answer is “then not yet, and we’re still on for whatever ordinary thing you do together.”

Let him find the gardener. The John 20:15 discovery is the night’s treasure. Set up the hunt and keep silent until someone sees it.

▪ **Session Goals**

1. Thread 4 resolves: the group articulates resurrection versus resuscitation from Luke 24, John 20, Romans 6:9, and CCC 646.
2. The group works through 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 and 42-49: firstfruits and the *sōma pneumatikon* rightly understood.
3. The group discovers the garden and the gardener (Gen 2-3; John 19:41; 20:15).
4. Thread 3 resolves in the upper room (Luke 24:44-47).
5. The study closes with a real, pressure-free invitation and named next steps.

▪ **Time Note**

75 to 90 minutes. If you must cut: compress the 1 Corinthians 15 section to verses 20-23 and 42-44. Never cut the gardener discovery or the closing invitation, and do not let the invitation be rushed; end early rather than end pressed.

What Rose

Part 2 of 3: Discussion Guide

▪ Opening Prayer

Leader: Lord, we have spent seven weeks asking whether you rose. Tonight we ask what rose, and what it means for the three of us. Speak, and give us ears. Amen.

▪ Win

1. If you learned beyond doubt that death was not the end of you, what is the first thing in your life that would change?
2. What is the best meal you have ever been invited to, and what made the invitation matter?

▪ Build

Read aloud: Luke 24:36-49.

1. List what the risen Jesus does in this scene to establish what he is, and notice what he is establishing *against*: what did they think he was (v. 37)? And what does he do with the scriptures (vv. 44-47)?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Against “a spirit”: he shows hands and feet, invites touch (“flesh and bones”), and eats broiled fish before them. Against a mere resuscitation, the rest of the evidence of the week testifies: doors shut, unrecognized then known, vanishing at Emmaus. Then Thread 3 resolves in his own voice: “everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled,” and “he opened their minds to understand the scriptures.” Every text the group hunted these eight weeks (Psalm 16, Hosea 6, Jonah, Isaiah 53, Zechariah 12, Psalm 118) was a piece of the one aimed story he is naming here.

2. Thread 4, planted in Session 2, resolves now. Read CCC 646 (on tonight’s Take-Home) and Romans 6:9. Put the difference between Lazarus and Jesus in one sentence each of your own.

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Lazarus was returned to this mortal life, wrappings and all, to age and die again: resuscitation. Jesus was raised beyond death’s jurisdiction entirely, “death no longer has dominion over him”: resurrection. One is a reprieve; the other is a conquest. The witnesses had seen both categories with their own eyes, which is precisely why their insistence on the second cannot be waved off as confusion about the first. Note the quiet emblem the group met in Session 3: Lazarus came out wearing his grave clothes; Jesus left his folded in the tomb. He was done with them.

Read aloud: 1 Corinthians 15:20-26, then 15:42-44 and 15:53.

3. “First fruits” is harvest language: the first sheaf brought in from a single crop. What is Paul claiming the resurrection is the first installment of? And what does his phrase “spiritual body” mean, given verse 53?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Of one harvest that includes “those who belong to Christ” (15:23): his rising is presented not as an exception to human destiny but as the beginning of it, “the principle and source of our future

resurrection” (CCC 655). “Spiritual body” (sōma pneumatikon) means a body wholly alive with the Spirit, not a phantom; verse 53 nails the continuity: “this mortal nature must put on immortality.” The same body, transformed; sown perishable, raised imperishable. If the verdict of Session 7 stands, this is what it purchased: not a religious idea, but a preview of the future of matter, including the matter sitting at this table.

4. Discovery hunt, the study’s last. Read John 19:41, then John 20:11-16, then Genesis 2:8 and 3:8-9. Where is the tomb? On what day of the week does the scene open? And whom does Mary Magdalene suppose Jesus to be? What is John showing you?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

The tomb is in a garden; the scene opens on “the first day of the week,” creation’s first morning; and Mary, weeping, takes the risen Lord for “the gardener.” Genesis began with God planting a garden and walking in it with man, and man losing it; John answers with a garden at dawn on a new first day, and a man mistaken, correctly, for the gardener. Her mistake is the Gospel’s deepest joke and truest caption: the second Adam is back at his work, and the new creation has begun in the middle of the old one. Thread 3’s final gift: the story did not just end where the scriptures aimed; it starts over where they started.

Read aloud: John 21:1-14.

5. Look at what the risen Lord of the universe is doing at dawn on that beach, and what he says in verse 12. After eight weeks of evidence, what kind of ending is this?

ANSWER • share after the discussion

Cooking breakfast for friends who abandoned him, and saying “Come and have breakfast.” Not a lecture, not a tribunal, an invitation to a meal, and “none of the disciples dared ask him, ‘Who are you?’ They knew it was the Lord.” The pattern held from Emmaus to the shore: he lets himself be invited, and he invites. The evidence of this study walked each of us to a door. The door, it turns out, has a table behind it.

The Open Door

Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

Revelation 3:20 (RSV2CE)

This is Christ’s own picture of how this ends: he knocks; the handle is on the inside; and what he proposes, characteristically, is a meal. There is no deadline in the verse and no lock on his side of the door. Whatever each of us concluded in Session 7, this table is where the study lays down its work.

Concrete doors, all genuinely optional:

- Keep this table: same three people, once a month, any book or question we choose.
- Read one Gospel together, slowly (Mark takes an hour and a half aloud; ask the leader about *What Do You Seek?*, a companion study built for exactly this next step).
- Stand in the back at Mass some Sunday and watch what two thousand years of Session 6 looks like from the inside. No one will make you do anything; you now know why it is Sunday.
- Or simply keep the friendship, which was never contingent on any of this. That offer is permanent, and it is the point.

- **Send**

1. Eight weeks ago each of us wrote what we thought happened that Sunday morning. Tonight, in one sentence, spoken or kept: what do you think now, and what do you want to do about it?

- **Live It This Week**

- Read John 20:1-18 one more time, slowly, watching for the garden.
- Whatever your verdict, tell one trusted person one thing you learned in these eight weeks that you did not know before.

- **Closing Prayer**

Leader: Lord Jesus, if you are risen, you are here, and you have heard every question these eight weeks with more patience than we had. Thank you for this table and these friends. Stand at each of our doors and knock as long as it takes, and let none of us be afraid of the sound. Amen.

- **Scripture Memory Verse**

For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.

Romans 6:9 (RSV2CE)

What Rose

Part 3 of 3: Leader Reference Card

▪ Every Passage Used Tonight

- Luke 24:36-49 • read aloud (flesh and bones; Thread 3 resolves at vv. 44-47)
- Romans 6:9 • read aloud (Thread 4 resolves); also memory verse
- 1 Corinthians 15:20-26, 42-44, 53 • read aloud (firstfruits; spiritual body)
- John 19:41; John 20:11-16 • discovery hunt (the garden; the gardener)
- Genesis 2:8; 3:8-9 • discovery hunt (the first garden)
- John 21:1-14 • read aloud (breakfast on the shore)
- Revelation 3:20 • read aloud (the open door)
- Ezekiel 37:12-14 • leader background (I will open your graves)
- CCC 645-646, 647, 655, 988-991, 999-1001 • doctrine anchors; 646 read aloud

Materials tonight: the retired Fact Ledger (for photographing), Take-Home 8. Next-step pointer: the companion study What Do You Seek? for a group that wants to keep reading. Tonight ends early rather than pressed.

The Fact Ledger

One copy on the table, all eight weeks

The rules, agreed in Session 1: a fact enters this ledger only when all three investigators sign it. Anyone may decline any line, without explanation, and no one argues with a decline. Any line may be reopened later by anyone. Only what is written here, in your own three hands, goes to the verdict in Session 7.

#	Fact (entered only by unanimous agreement)	Initials	Initials	Initials
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				
9				
10				
11				
12				
13				
14				
15				
16				
17				
18				

Held lines (proposed but not unanimous; any of the three may reopen one at any session):

The Verdict Grid

Run every theory against every fact you signed

For each cell ask: does this theory explain the fact (E), merely tolerate it with strain (S), or fail against it (F)? Mark nothing until all three of you can live with the mark. Test the last column with the same severity as the first five.

Ledger line	Survival	Wrong tomb	Theft	Hallucination	Legend	God raised him
Line 1						
Line 2						
Line 3						
Line 4						
Line 5						
Line 6						
Line 7						
Line 8						
Line 9						
Line 10						
Line 11						
Line 12						
Line 13						
Line 14						
Line 15						
Line 16						
Line 17						
Line 18						

Totals: count E, S, and F down each column. Then each investigator completes, aloud or privately: “On the facts we ourselves signed, the explanation that best survives testing is...”