

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.